

KINO LORBER

THE WORST ONES

Written & Directed by Lise Akoka & Romane Gueret

****WINNER****

Un Certain Regard, Cannes International Film Festival 2022



2022 | France | In French with English Subtitles | Color | 99 mins

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SYNOPSIS

Set in the suburbs of Boulogne-Sur-Mer in northern France, *The Worst Ones* captures a film within a film as it follows the production of a feature whose director turns to the local Cité Picasso housing project for casting. Eager to capture performances of gritty authenticity, the director selects four working class teenagers to act in the film to the surprise and consternation of the local community, who question the director's choice of "the worst ones." As the director and crew audition, rehearse, film, and interact with their hand-picked cast, jealousies are stoked, lines are crossed, and ethical questions arise, with thought-provoking and at times darkly funny results. Winner of the top prize in the Un Certain Regard section of the 2022 Cannes Film Festival, *The Worst Ones* announces directors Lise Akoka and Romane Gueret as exciting new voices in French cinema.

Interview with LISE AKOKA & ROMANE GUERET

Interview by Anne-Claire Cieutat

The worst ones is very much informed by your short film entitled *Chasse Royale*, which already staged an open casting call.

Indeed, *The worst ones* follows in the footsteps of *Chasse Royale*, although in the short our focus was on the casting process, whereas the feature film also shows the ensuing shooting. We stumbled into the cinema world notably through open casting, by working on film projects as casting directors and acting coaches for children, and then we did *Chasse Royale*, which was about our respective experiences. In order to make *The worst ones*, we returned to the north of France, and what we wanted to do was to generate a conversation involving two social milieus which seem to be complete opposites at first glance: youths from a disadvantaged area and adults working in films. But really, at the root of our work, what you find is a shared passion for the world of childhood, with a keen eye for those disturbed childhoods that personally resonate with the two of us.

How were the characters in *The worst ones* born?

There have been several steps to the writing process. First of all, there was a long immersion phase with our co-writer Eléonore Gurrey, when we met with hundreds of children. We proceeded pretty much like for an open casting call, only that as opposed to a traditional casting, we got to meet our characters at a time when specific roles hadn't been written yet. We had long conversations with each one of them, and we had them improvise scenes. We were permeated by their language, we met kids with great personalities and collected stories from which we built the script. Thus were born our four young

heroes, who have been shaped to emulate features that had stricken us the most. *The worst ones* was devised out of this constant to-and-froing between fiction and real life. A character may stem from various encounters.

Ultimately, how did you pick your actors and actresses?

It took us a full three years to put the film together, and the children we had met in the first immersion phase had grown up by then and did not fit the story anymore. It was really heart-breaking for us not to have them onboard. But luckily, we had not made them any promises, which would have been a mistake.

So, for a year we launched another open casting process. We travelled across northern France with our casting director Marlène Serour and her team. We went to schools, high schools, children's homes, neighbourhood centres, rehabilitation centres for minors, you name it. Our goal was to meet with as many children and teens fitting the age category of our characters. Then we organised work sessions with those that were our uncontested favourites.

We massively casted in social and educational institutions, where kids are in difficulty. We were fully aware of our own responsibilities when we came to see them. These children more than any others must be cared for and protected. The words we told them about the film were meticulously chosen.

We met Timeo (who plays Ryan) and Loïc (who plays Jessy) in a children's home. Mélina and Mallory, who respectively play Maylis and Lily, we actually met at their school gate. Ryan's sister is played by Angélique Gernez,

who was already the leading actress in *Chasse Royale*.

What strikes you right from the start in *The worst ones* is how beautiful faces are, and just how intense the actors and actresses are.

This is what makes open casting so great, and this was pivotal to our project. It's a peculiar type of effort, really, one in which you're on the lookout for small miracles. For to find these faces, these gazes that catch your gaze, these voices that keep you in thrall, to do all this requires great patience and a real faith in the process itself. *The worst ones* was about placing spectators in our shoes, as if they were searching for children that were able to catch our attention. This is why the film starts with sequences of interviews with kids facing the camera, of the kind we had carried out when casting for the film. We are lucky to have met Mallory, Timéo, Loïc, Mélina and the others. All have fascinating faces and gazes, and it was our job to enhance this through our directing and our work with Éric Dumont, our cinematographer.

But beyond the faces and gazes, what mattered the most in this long quest was their capacity to play, to render something from life. And this is miraculous, truly. Only few have that inexplicable talent. The rest is about work.

On set, were children and teens allowed to just improvise? How did you direct them to ultimately reach such authenticity in acting?

Once the script and dialogues were written, we remained faithful to them during shoot. So, no, on set, there was little space for impro. The children would learn their lines.

It was somewhat different during rehearsals, for we had to adjust to new personalities, new faces and new voices in front of us. Once we had picked our main actors, we worked on scenes with them during workshops, and

therefore we readapted some sequences to be fully in tune with them.

On set, we would direct them through earpieces, once they had gotten used to the device during the preliminary work on the film. We worked at some distance from the camera, with a monitor and a console with buttons linking us to each actor and to some technicians. We complement each other on set: Lise directs actors, she gives them indications and lines, which allows Romane to pay close attention to the monitor, from a distance, and to communicate with the cinematographer. We shot really long takes, with two cameras, sometimes up to 45 minutes a take.

The earpiece allows for greater surprise, and it generates huge concentration for actors, who must be present unto themselves and to us, for they have to actively engage with the rapid flow of information - some of which comes from what is taking place on set, some of which comes from what they hear in the earpieces. Therefore, they are in a state of constant look-out, their attention is acute and also selective, so that they may shift from one target to another. And because they have to share their attention, they are less in control of what they project, they look less at themselves. This emancipates them from mental constraints about what they may think about themselves, thus giving them access to some kind of let-go state offering them more freedom, more breadth in their acting.

Was it clear right from the start that Johan Heldenberg would play Gabriel?

For this role, we looked for an actor who would be very likeable straightaway, because this director-puppeteer character was complex and had been tough for us to write. We had to show, on the one hand, how ambivalent his actions are, and on the other hand, it was necessary



to reveal the genuine love he feels for the children and the utmost care he takes in bringing a specific vision to the film. Gabriel raises this pivotal question: how far can you go to devise an artistic object? We could not lay blame on him. We had to bring a sense of nuance, to humanize him without concealing the ambivalence of his actions. This window onto ambivalence stems from our repeated observation of directors' practises, and it reflects the concerns that inform our own work.

Once we met Johan, it was just obvious. We liked his imposing stature, which contrasted with the frail children around him. He is imbued with a sweet and yet volcanic quality. We are very grateful to him for accepting to be onboard the project because, on the face of it, it was really far from simple. Everybody knows how tricky it might be to shoot with children, and those in this film required our full attention. He told us: "I really like your script and I'd like to get on that crazy ride with you!" Johan was our accomplice at every single step of the shooting.

Tell us about Esther Archambault, who plays Gabriel's assistant and adds a farcical dimension to the film.

Esther was our assistant director on our series *Tu préfères*, and then our casting assistant on *The worst ones*. Seeing her work in these circumstances really inspired us for Judith's character when we wrote the script. So, when we suggested she auditioned for the part, the choice was really self-evident. We therefore had to navigate at the intersection of real life and cinema! Esther has this composure, this peculiarity and a unique pace that we find both touching and funny.

Indeed, it is fascinating how *The worst ones* walks a thin line between reality and fiction.

We are really keen on realism in film and always look for this porosity with real life. One of the starting points to *The worst ones* was that we wanted to find out why cinema is recurrently fascinated with children from the kind of neighbourhoods that we film.

As we already said, when you do an open casting, what you're looking for is the rare gem, one of those faces that will transform you for life, a person whose talent brings huge energy to a film. To be part of the blooming of a child who is dismissed as the worst pupil in his school or in his neighbourhood, and who proves to be the very best in his acting performance, is a wonderful thing indeed. No matter what his background or education may be, his innate gift transcends all social class dynamics.

The worst ones hopes for a possible meeting point, where cinema allows two worlds that were most unlikely to meet to finally intersect. This is what our title illuminates: the worst may well be the elect, the heroes, and we mean it as a tribute to all those children who have been given a very raw deal.

In the sequence at the local bar, you debunk the usual misconceptions you could have fallen prey to.

This scene is based on our own experience. After the first screenings of *Chasse Royale*, some of the folks locally would tell us that the film portrayed them as "deadbeats", casting a slur on their community. Some social workers also said that that kind of film was nowhere near promoting the image of the neighbourhood. It seemed to us on the contrary that we had to make these children visible, to give them a chance to speak, and we felt that we were only showing the truth. Such reactions were hard for us to take, but we certainly are able to comprehend them and find them interesting.

What was your conversation about Gabriel's film entitled *To Kiss Against the Northern Winds* (itself inspired by a "ch'ti", i.e. Northern French aphorism, "To kiss against the northern winds, or to argue against your boss, will never get you anywhere")?

Well, we didn't want his film to seem too removed from ours. This idea of a film within the film is informed by a critical gaze on our own practices. Therefore, it was important for us to include this.

We also wanted to engage with this social realism in art films, those films that hire actors on the spots where the shooting happens. We had studied the clichés inherent to such films: a child being redeemed through contact with an animal -hence the sequence where doves are released-, the discovery of a passion, social and family violence -Lily's character gets pregnant at age 15, Jessy's is incarcerated-, violence within the home, alcoholism as a family scourge, etc.

What mattered to us was that the spectators wouldn't think of Gabriel as a talentless director making a pretty mediocre film. We wanted to make people feel that Gabriel could be a good director, good with actors, able to make them bloom, so that it was possible to think that each scene in his film would be a success at the end, but that sometimes to reach his goal he might have to go too far.

Cinema as a place where emotions are given free rein was already at the core of *Chasse Royale*. And, much like *Angélique* in your short film, Ryan claims he never cries.

The final scene differs from the other sequences shot by Gabriel, in that he and we capture the very same thing at this specific time. Our cameras are placed on the very same spot, thus bringing about a merging of his film and ours. This captures a moment of grace, where the

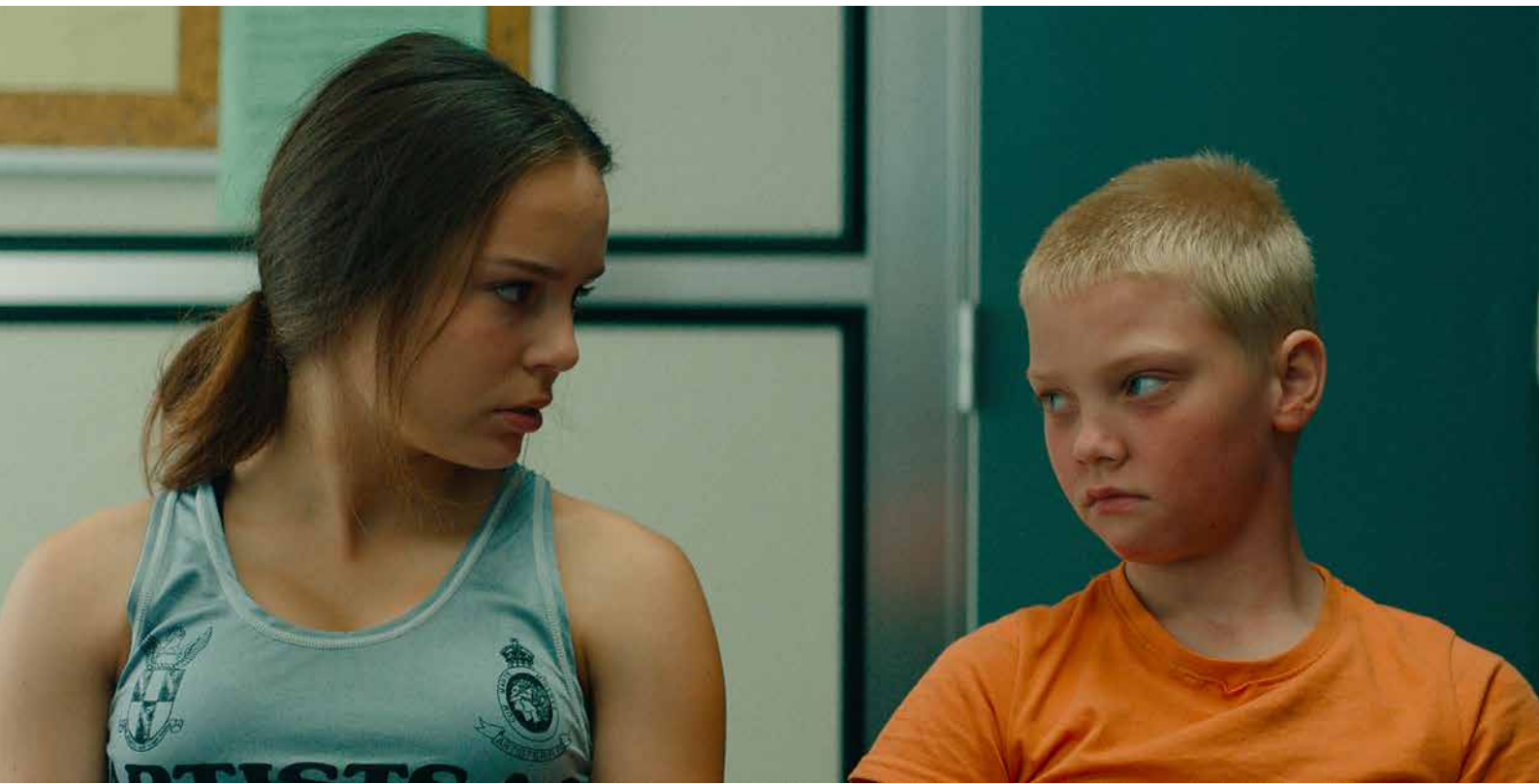
sublime emerges, a precious moment for the film as well as for the children. It is our hope that this culmination in front of the camera will resonate positively in their lives and open emotional doors within them.

Cinema is a place of catharsis, of self-searching, and acting really makes that possible. Cinema may sometimes offer that to children who prevent themselves from feeling any feelings. In no way do we claim that cinema will wholly change these children's lives. For it does not have this power, or only very rarely so. And yet, it creates a deviation in each person's itinerary, a shift which, however minute sometimes, does have a value in itself.

This final scene was the shooting's strongest moment for the both of us. Mallory and Timéo were so transcended by their parts and so full of these two months spent together that they would share love words about which nobody knew, not even themselves, whether they were addressed to themselves or to their characters. Real life and cinema came to merge at that stage. Mallory and Timéo, like Lilly and Ryan in the film, became actors. They were able to dig into their own emotions, wounds and personal stories in order to transcend them all. They used their own tears and offered them to us as gifts. Truly this was a magical moment.

In another key scene, Gabriel suggests an improvisation session to Jessy and Lily after confiding in them. How comfortable they are is striking.

In this scene, Lily plays just like she breathes. She is a natural-born actress, shining to the world. She scoffs Jessy at the canteen, dismissing him as an immature teen, yet she is also able to act like she is in love with him in a most natural way. We can see that Jessy is unsettled by Lily's performance. Hence his reaction, in a way,



during the love scene in the caravan, when he struggles to make sense of what is real and what is fiction. Jessy is always being a smartass when he is with his mates, but this time around, he finds himself in a situation of utter vulnerability, when facing Lily on set. However thick his personal shell, he is destabilised and overwhelmed by his emotions.

There is a quality of joy in your images. How did you work with hues and lights?

We certainly did not want to make a grey, sad film, we wanted energy and joy to stick out from images. Visually, we wanted the film to be filled with light, almost like a summer comedy or a teen movie. The children's energy had to be felt at every level, be it in costumes, settings, or lights. That neighbourhood is quite cinogenic, with those sharp-coloured buildings, and our actors have beautiful faces; it was crucial for us to magnify all that beauty. Not to mention that on the seaside, on the Côte d'Opale, the light is joyful. You can also hear the seagulls in the film!

The film's energy also comes from its editing, skilfully executed by Albertine Lastera. On a few occasions, you have the spectators enter sequences while they are being shot.

Albertine was already our editor on both *Chasse Royale* and *Tu préfères*, we operate according to a common grammar.

First the editing had to sweep any doubt away as to what was given to see: the film or the shooting? Early in the film we toy with this ambiguity and then we gradually give it up.

As the editing process wore on, the film was more and more shedding things. Such was the case with transitional scenes, sequences that were too aesthetically-charged or too artificial somehow, as well as wide shots for

instance. The three of us wanted to produce a material at once raw, immediate and impactful. In this respect, the editing is quite radical.

You also work on tone disruptions, sometimes within the same sequence.

The idea of not being constrained by a single genre is very dear to us. The worst ones wavers between drama and comedy. This was our challenge. It is also typical of life in general and childhood in particular, a time when laughter may quickly turn to tears. In the future we'd like to keep making films that tackle serious, even grave issues, but always with some degree of comedy and lightness.

How did you devise the camerawork?

We had worked on the film's cutting before the shooting with Éric Dumont, our cinematographer, but we remained flexible for we knew that a whole lot of things would be radically changed on set. We adjusted a lot to our actors. Eric trusts his instinct. He shoots at face level, often with a hand-held camera.

And what about the music?

We fell for Rémy a few years back, when he appeared on Planète Rap. As a rapper, he is a deeply moving artist, we believe. His texts are sharp, with an anger that is peculiar to rap, and yet his voice and the musical instruments are melodious and informed by a melancholy feeling, something even lyrical sometimes. By and large, we aimed at a quite sparse soundtrack, which is why there is little extradiegetic music. Most music you hear is in fact the music characters are listening to.

What sort of pulse did you aim at for the film?

In our eyes, the film starts from a raw block, almost like a documentary, and then slowly unfolds by giving way to fiction, as though it were shifting from real life to cinema. We wanted a pace and movement that would give the film more and more emotion and breadth, thus transcending the shooting story in order to, we hope, reach for the universal.

Romane Gueret, after studying cinema at the Sorbonne, took her first steps towards directing, as an assistant director, casting assistant or cameraman.

Lise Akoka completed a university course in Psychology and a professional training in acting (Les Ateliers du Sud and the Studio-théâtre d'Asnières). She then discovers, in casting and coaching children for the cinema, a way of bringing together her two interests.

In 2014, Romane and Lise met during the casting of a feature film, for which they auditioned more than 4000 young non-professional actors for several months.

In 2015, they co-directed the short film Chasse Royale, awarded in several festivals and which won the Illy Prize at Cannes Directors 'Fortnight in 2016. The film was nominated a year later at the César for Best Short film.

In 2018, they co-directed the documentary Allez garçon! for the Hobbies collection, which was broadcast in 2019 on Canal+.

In 2020, their web series Tu préfères, 10 episodes of 7 minutes, is broadcast on Arte and then selected at the Sundance Festival.

In summer of 2021, they made their first feature film, The worst ones, shot in Boulogne-sur-Mer and selected at Un Certain Regard at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival.



LISTE ARTISTIQUE

Lily	MALLORY WANECQUE
Ryan	TIMÉO MAHAUT
Gabriel	JOHAN HELDENBERGH
Jessy	LOÏC PECH
Maylis	MÉLINA VANDERPLANCKE
Judith	ESTHER ARCHAMBAULT
Victor	MATTHIAS JACQUIN
Mélodie	ANGÉLIQUE GERNEZ
Grand-mère de Ryan	DOMINIQUE FROT
Rémy	RÉMY CAMUS

LISTE TECHNIQUE

Réalisatrices	LISE AKOKA & ROMANE GUERET
Scénario	LISE AKOKA, ROMANE GUERET & ÉLÉONORE GURREY
Casting	MARLÈNE SEROUR - ARDA
Image	ERIC DUMONT - AFC
Montage	ALBERTINE LASTERA
Ingénieur du son	JEAN UMANSKY
Assistant mise-en-scène	BENOÎT SEILLER - AFAR
Décors	LAURENT BAUDE
Costumes	EDGAR FICHET
Maquillage	FANNY JAKUBOWICZ
Scripte	VIRGINIE CHEVAL
Régisseur général	LAURENT WEITMANN
Montage son	BORIS CHAPELLE & FLORENT KLOCKENBRING
Mixage	MARC DOISNE
Etalonnage	MATHIEU CAPLANNE
Direction de production	PIERRE DELAUNAY
En coproduction avec	FRANCE 3 CINÉMA, PICTANOVO
En association avec	CINÉVENTURE 7, CINÉIMAGE 16
Avec le soutien de	CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE, LA RÉGION HAUTS-DE-FRANCE EN PARTENARIAT AVEC LE CNC, CICLIC-RÉGION CENTRE-VAL DE LOIRE EN PARTENARIAT AVEC LE CNC
Avec la participation de	CANAL +, CINÉ +, FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS
Production	LES FILMS VELVET, MARINE ALARIC & FRÉDÉRIC JOUVE
Productrice associée	MARIE LECOQ
Distribution France	PYRAMIDE
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