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## ADAM'S SAKE

A film by Laura Wandel  
with Léa Drucker, Anamaria Vartolomei



75 min | Belgium - France

*Lucy works in an understaffed pediatric ward. When 4-year-old Adam is placed in her care, Lucy is confronted with his mother Rebecca's refusal to leave his side, despite a judge's restriction against her. For the sake of Adam, Lucy will do everything in her power to help this mother in distress.*

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## INTERVIEW - LAURA WANDEL

### **What inspired you to set your second feature in a hospital paediatric ward?**

In writing, my inspiration always comes from a place. I was interested in hospitals as places where many lives overlap. People from all walks of life are there – a real cross section of society. The idea of filming day-to-day life in a paediatric ward stems from my interest in childhood. Admittedly, I didn't know very much about paediatric wards beforehand. I just imagined them to be complex worlds with multiple interlocking layers. I started my research by speaking to my paediatrician, now retired, and he sent me to Saint-Pierre hospital in Brussels, a public hospital with a focus on social services – and well known in Belgium for that.

### **How much time was spent on research for the film?**

I started with a three-week immersion at Saint-Pierre during the summer of 2020, and it was an amazing opportunity to observe the goings-on... The head of the paediatric ward suggested telling people I was an intern!

That allowed me to attend both staff meetings and patient consultations, which gave me an insider's view of the system, the hierarchy between doctors and nurses, and to measure the impact parents had on their child's healing. I was able to see just how interconnected the medical, social, and legal aspects are; and how much the well-being of the children is, in fact, inseparable from their relationship with their parents. The parent/child relationship touched me profoundly.

Due to this, the days were so jam-packed as far as what I was learning and so emotionally intense that, by the end, I was exhausted. Of course, I had signed a non-disclosure agreement in advance: I was not allowed to take pictures on site, much less to film. That said, I did take plenty of notes from which I developed the plot of the film, this time in the style of a drama.

We can say that those three weeks were my source of inspiration. I also learned a lot about the social policy aspects of putting children into care, for example, in cases of abuse. I spoke at length with one a delegate, the Belgian equivalent of a social worker, and I also met a judge from a youth court. Both read my script. I'm extremely grateful to all these people who helped me! All in all, this preliminary research took about two years.

### **To which you add the time to write the script for what we can say is a very well-researched drama...**

Yes, I'd say the writing process represented about four years of work, including note taking and then the actual screenwriting. I wrote so many draughts! I wrote alone, but I received valuable feedback from several consultants like Luc Dardenne, who co-produced the film; Iris Kaltenböck, whose film *The Rapture* I adored; and even Razvan Radulescu, the scriptwriter of *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, a film which really blew me away!

Initially, I wanted to tell the story through the head paediatrician; but then I opted for a nurse's perspective because it seemed pertinent to see through the eyes of a female, who, not being at the top of the hierarchy, had limited possibilities in terms of what she could do and how she could intervene. And then one of the paediatricians told me a story of a child hospitalized for malnutrition: his mother fed him nothing but seeds and fruit. That anecdote particularly struck me: how could you get to that point? Everything kind of fell into place little by little.

Gradually, the idea of nutrition came to fore, and that sparked a train of thought in me about motherhood. Because allow me to make it clear that Adam's Sake is not about malnutrition! In fact, I am intentionally vague in the film about what Adam's mother Rebecca gives him to eat. It's not at all about stigmatizing vegans, or vegetarians, or anyone else for that matter. That's completely beside the point.

**Exactly, isn't the issue explored in this film more about domination in relationships ... like in your first feature film Playground, but treated differently?**

More than domination, I think it's hierarchal relationships that I was wanted to explore in this film. I also wanted to show how perspectives can differ depending on who you are in the field, whether working directly with the children like Lucy, my protagonist head nurse; or more externally, as can be the judicial system. In the end, by showing different hierarchies – that between doctors and nurses or that between medical and administrative staff – I'm portraying systemic violence. An accumulation of violence that, in the end, puts children on the very bottom rung of the ladder because they are powerless to decide for themselves...

**Thus, the title of the film, Adam's Sake, placing the focus back on a child?**

From the very beginning, I had intended that to be the title. Of course, the film shows that everyone has their own point of view of the child's best interest; and that everyone, deep down, uses it as a pretext to defend something that reflects on themselves – be they a doctor, a delegate, or a judge. I also chose the name Adam because it was the name of the first human in the Old Testament. Not that I'm especially religious. But I have never forgotten something director Laszlo Nemes (Son of Saul) once said to me and that has stayed with me ever since: all stories, in a certain way, come from the Bible. In this instance, what is in Adam's interest is in the interest of humanity. That is where I want to place the focus.

**Let's talk specifically about the character Adam, the youngest of the three protagonists in the film. Obviously, he's only four years old, but he speaks noticeably little, even though he appears in many scenes...**

Yes, but that's because he's caught up in a dreadful conflict of loyalty with regards to his mother. It's also because anything he says is dismissed. In fact, for the entire first part of the film, Adam just wants to support his mother's choices – until they fall when she tries to run away with him. That's when he feels he could be in danger with her. And in fact, shortly after, he finally manages to express his torment and distress: he wants to stay with his mother, but he doesn't want to die. And, in the end, that is what enables Rebecca to let go: Adam is only one who could flip that switch of awareness in her.

**What were you trying to say through Rebecca, this young single mother, who is deep down quite lost? She's a very strong personality, very troubling, and also very vulnerable...**

First of all – and this is important – I had no desire whatsoever to pass judgement on her in any way. To me, she is simply a woman in distress. Her desire for control, in this case over Adam's food, should be interpreted as a way of reassuring herself because she's in a very precarious situation. She's lost her self-confidence, first as a mother, and then with regards to the medical staff. At the same time, she can't admit she's not coping. When I look around, I see how much is imposed on mothers and how quick people are to judge them. Maybe her attitude is a cry for help? As for her age, I put Rebecca in her twenties so I could talk about today's youth, who are little lost.

**Faced with this very troubling mother/son duo, you needed a strong heroine like Lucy, the head nurse of the paediatric ward, as a counterweight. She's deeply committed to her profession and is a guiding light throughout the long tense night. The film clearly follows her point of view, right?**

Yes! However, while I was writing the script, I wondered if I shouldn't take Adam's point of view, instead. Like I did in *Playground*: I filmed the whole story from a child's perspective. But I felt that I needed to take a step back this time, and that it would be more interesting to adopt Lucy's point of view. Actually, this role has always existed. It's a woman who carries the whole system on her shoulders, a system that is supposed to take care, regenerate, and repair, but which ends up destroying those it is supposed to be helping from being undermined by a lack of funding that has pushed it to the brink. Nurses are the ones in closest contact with the children, and yet they are the least empowered to make decisions about their care. It's insane!

What's more, they work under terrible conditions. They've also been left to languish. That's why I wanted to portray Lucy at this specific time in her life: she's become completely appalled by the system and she realizes that it is no longer acceptable. This is what allows the bond to form between her and Rebecca. I think that Adam's mother stirs something deeply personal in Lucy, and this in turn makes Lucy want to help her. The question is: how do you help someone else? And not only that ... what is the 'right' boundary, the one we mustn't overstep when the other person refuses our help? The film questions not only the boundaries within institutions such as hospitals or courts, but also the boundaries of our moral conscience, our ethics. In any case, we sense a rift in Lucy, and this secret is what allows viewers to identify with her.

**Although Adam, Rebecca, and Lucy are emblematic characters – each experiencing a moral dilemma – they are still very human. Your way of filming with a hand-held camera, immersed in breathing and movement, so close to bodies, was not by accident ... not to mention the condensed format of the film: everything is said and done in an hour and 13 minutes!**

Directing this film, I really wanted to convey the frenetic pace of the medical staff. To the point that viewers would feel as exhausted as Lucy! She's constantly moving; she barely has time to think. And in fact, the very thing she is after, for herself and for Rebecca, is just a little time! As for the duration of the film, it wasn't intentional; that's just how it came

together. It's important to me for my films to become what they want to be, not what I want them to be. I try to keep that in mind.

**Your way of following Lucy from behind as she moves around incessantly strongly recalls the Dardenne brothers' *Rosetta*, another heroine at the end of her tether. Should we see a homage here?**

I learned a lot from the Dardenne brothers, so yes, of course, I thought of *Rosetta* when I was filming Lucy. I wanted to follow her down the hospital corridors with all of those rooms, but also on her path, in her struggle... How could I film her any other way? Sometimes, I have the impression that we feel more watching her from behind than when facing her, right?

And then there's her chignon, perfectly in place until it isn't... The inspiration for that came from a scene in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, one of my all-time favourites. Everything is perfect and impeccable in Jeanne Dielman's life, right up to the moment when she buttons up her cardigan incorrectly. From that point on, things start to unravel... Well, it's kind of the same thing for me with Lucy's chignon!

**Another characteristic of your story is that you never give in to explanation. The plot, the characters, the stakes ... these are all things we discover little by little, through an immersion as complete as it is radical...**

The more you explain, the less you give viewers the opportunity to access the characters. Trust is the greatest gift we can give to viewers, in my opinion. What's more, the circumstances I portray in my film are very complex, as they would be in real life. Which is why I didn't want to explain anything, in any event. True, this made it a particularly hard film to write! What do I say? What do I show? It was a real challenge.

**This immersive aspect must not have made anything easier during shooting and editing...**

It's true that *Adam's Sake* was filmed almost entirely using sequence shots. In other words, it was really tough both in terms of the choreography of movement and the actors' acting. Speaking of cinematography, I would like to tip my cap to my director of photography Frédéric Noirhomme, with whom I previously worked on *Playground*. He did an incredible job. Our method was to experiment and rehearse in the morning, and to shoot in the afternoon.

I must have had 40 takes for every scene! But I must admit that something magic came from the exhaustion. I had the impression that I had to push that far for something unexpected to be revealed... Later, it did make the editing process a bit difficult. We even had to take an extra day to reshoot several scenes. I did that for *Playground*, too, and I'm fine with that, because it's only during the edit that you get a sense of what is missing. That said, I was very fortunate to be able to work with the same editor on both of my films, Nicolas Rimpl. We have the same sensibility. For him, as for me, pacing is important. It's the heartbeat of the film.

**The attention given to sound also contributes a great deal to the feeling of immersion...**

Yes, even more so as I often try to bring things to life, and to make them felt off-screen. That means sound is critical! Here again, I was thrilled to be able to work with a good part of the audio crew from Playground, particularly David Vranken and Matthieu Cox. This allowed me to work with blind trust.

**Your shooting style requires enormous investment from your actors. Is that why you chose Léa Drucker to play Lucy and Anamaria Vartolomei to play Rebecca? They're both very powerful actresses who also possess amazing fragility...**

I often work on impulse. I first saw Léa in Just Before Losing Everything, a short film by Xavier Legrand, and I was blown away. I really wrote the role of Lucy for her. At first glance, she seems hard, but then a deep fragility emerges. And in her eyes, you get a sense of something secret, as in this character. It's magnificent. On set, she gave me an even greater 'rift' than I had hoped for. She's a truly great actress.

As for Anamaria, I first saw her in Audrey Diwan's Happening. How could anyone not be deeply moved by such an exceptional performance? She also has something bellicose and vulnerable in her. I would even say she has something rare. It's no coincidence that I'm attracted to actors like Léa and Anamaria. Something in their lives overlaps with the lives of my characters... I also want to mention Jules Delsart, who plays Adam. I chose him because he had a way of looking adults in the eye, of holding their gaze, that is very impressive for a four-year-old. Despite never having acted before!

**To conclude, in light of its context and the issues running through Adam's Sake, could we say that this is an activist film, even a political one?**

Clearly, there's a critical aspect to my film, in that I depict what isn't working, either in hospitals or in the judiciary supposedly protecting minors. The lack of means for both institutions is striking, and I think there is an urgency to make these shortcomings known. Obviously, my vision is subjective, but it's based on a true, tangible reality. Beyond that, my job is to ask questions, not answer them; so rather than talking about a political film – a term that I'm wary of – I prefer to say that it's a wake-up call and, just maybe, the beginning of a dialogue? I believe cinema has the power to change things. Otherwise ... what good is it?

## LAURA WANDEL

Laura Wandel is a director from Brussels who studied filmmaking at l'Institut des Arts de Diffusion (IAD). She began her career in 2007 as a director with her graduation short film *Walls*, which was selected at multiple festivals, such as was her second short film *O négatif* (2011).

Her first feature film *Playground* was part of Cannes' Un Certain Regard in 2021 and received the Fipresci Prize, the Sutherland Trophy at the BFI London Film Festival and multiple Magritte Awards.

## ARTISTIC CREW

Lucy  
Rebecca  
Adam  
Naïm  
Daniel  
Nurse on call  
Andreï  
Social worker  
Selma  
Emergency nurse 1  
Emergency nurse  
Assistant Social worker  
Damien

Léa Drucker  
Anamaria Vartolomei  
Jules Delsart  
Alex Descas  
Laurent Capelluto  
Monia Douieb  
Timur Magomedgadzhiev  
Claire Bodson  
Charlotte De Bruyne  
Karim Chihab  
Yves-Marina Gnahoua  
Athena Poullos  
Max Robin

## TECHNICAL CREW

Director and Scriptwriter  
Cinematographer  
Editor  
Continuity Script Supervisor  
First Assistant Director  
Sound Engineer  
Sound Mixer  
Production Designer  
Costume Designer  
Production Manager  
Post-Production Manager  
Produced by

Executive Producers  
A co-production

With the support of

Co-financed by  
With the support  
With the participation

In association with

With the support of

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French Distribution

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Christelle Agnello  
Yolande Decarsin  
Mathieu Cox  
Paul Rouschop  
Khadija Zeggaï  
Ludovic Delbecq  
Cédric Ettouati  
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