

When Bodies Collide: *Rosetta*

by Rhys Graham

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Emily Dequenne as Rosetta

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Rosetta* (1999) begins with a violent, visually fracturing scene that launches the viewer into a cinematic experience as raw and beautiful as it is brutal. In a frenzy of handheld camera movement and aggressive performance, the Dardennes enter the world of Rosetta (Emily Dequenne) - an 18-year-old Belgian girl who has been fired from a job that she is desperate to hold. It is some time before we see more than a frantic glimpse of Rosetta's whirlwind body as it hurls itself onto the man that has fired her, onto a group of workers who try to restrain her, onto the floor, the walls, and anything else that comes into her furious path. From this first moment, *Rosetta* is charged with a visceral energy that makes the act of viewing less a visual and emotional experience than a forceful physical sensation. It is immediately remarkable that such an intense involvement is made possible within a cinematic realm that is, on first appearance, stark and simple, devoid of music, and stripped to a skeletal framework of essential dialogue. Yet it is apparent that the visceral quality of the film is the result of a specific approach to narrative and to performance that is concerned with an intimate exploration of the body, its physical articulations, and the limits of its endurance. *Rosetta* is about what happens when bodies collide. About the simple reality that in order to feel human we must put our bodies to use in some meaningful way. With its recurrent images of hardship, bodily endurance

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and manual labour, *Rosetta*, more than any film I can recall seeing, is deeply, often painfully, felt through the body.

Rosetta is a woman enduring severe circumstances, excluded from her hopes for a 'normal' life through abject poverty. Rather than endowing her with clumsy characteristics - a heart of gold, or dreams of romance and success - the Dardennes give Rosetta one simple desire that she clings to as the only hope for improving her lot: a job. Any job. This desire never leads the pragmatic Rosetta into escapism or fantasy, but makes her, quite simply, desperate to work. Given the current climate of unemployment and increasing poverty in Western Europe, this narrative makes *Rosetta* an implicitly political film. It is so relentlessly intimate, however, that the social and political context is almost irrelevant as we accompany Rosetta on her path from unemployment to employment and back, forever desperate to escape the 'rut'.

The details provided about Rosetta and her journey are so scarce that they are more portraiture than plot. She lives in a caravan on the outskirts of the small town of Seraing with her hardened and hopeless mother (Anne Yernaux). The mother, who is never named, spends her days drunk and, in her few sober moments, exchanges grim sexual favours for booze and money. Meanwhile, Rosetta labours away at minute tasks that keep her focused toward improving her life. Her day is dominated by small rituals: checking the makeshift fishing lines that she hangs in the muddied lake; carefully changing her 'town' shoes for a pair of gumboots that she hides near the edge of the rundown caravan park; sneaking in and out of a fence at the park's rear to avoid being seen coming and going. In the absence of work, these vital details remind us that Rosetta is, at all times, waging a campaign of war against the world. A modern day warrior. In this sense, the performance of first time actor Emily Dequenne as this rigorous, furious spirit is nothing less than incredible. The Dardenne's rehearsal method was apparently to provide the actor with no further details about this young woman than what we see on screen. What they did, instead, was to spend two months putting Dequenne through endless repetitions of the physical mechanics of her performance. The result is a character so intensely believable that the frustrations and pain she endures are difficult to bear.

The harshness of this shared experience is strengthened by the constantly active camera that, at all times, follows Rosetta from behind, desperately trying to keep up with her pace, or lingering on her expressionless face when she finally stops moving. For this reason, the film could never have succeeded without a performance of the calibre of Dequenne's. There is never a moment when the camera captures anything other than Rosetta or the world through which she storms. The only other characters are those that in some way infringe on her emotionally barricaded world. Riquet, played gently by Fabrizio Rongione, is a young man who works from a van in town selling waffles. Rosetta encounters him in her daily travels and he comes to represent a very specific desire. That is, rather than placing Rosetta in a position of seeking love from Riquet, instead we see her watching him work, repeating menial tasks, her gaze and that of the camera fixed on his labouring in a fetishized manner. Later, we see her watch other men in the same fashion, hiding around corners or behind doors, but Riquet is close to her in age and status and so he is both kin and competition. A wary friendship forms between them after Riquet actively pursues Rosetta and, through him she finally finds another job. Her work is to prepare batter for the waffles sold by Riquet, and she dutifully learns everything she can from the paternal figure known only as 'The Boss' (Olivier Gourmet).

During this period Rosetta lets her defences down and goes with Riquet to his tiny, squalid

flat. A glimmer of the film's underlying tenderness emerges in a funny and fragile scene in which the pair unknowingly outdo each other with their social misjudgements. Riquet tries to impress her by doing handstands against the wall ("that's the only thing I do nearly well.") and playing a tape of his drum practise. She, in turn, stuns him when she accepts a beer and downs it in one hit. The possibility of intimacy arises after an awkward attempt at dancing but Rosetta runs away. Then, at night's end, she relents and returns to the flat, taking up Riquet's offer of a mattress on the floor. What follows is a moment of quiet transcendence when Rosetta lies her head down on the pillow, visibly relieved at being away from the caravan, and utters words that sound like a mantra: "Your name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You've got a friend. I've got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall in a rut. I won't fall in a rut. Goodnight. Goodnight."

This is a key moment in the film. At first, these words seem to be a conversation that Rosetta is having with herself. Yet, in this verbal split between the 1st and 3rd person Rosetta is also illuminating a vital element of what makes this film so deeply and powerfully affecting. The 'you' of the conversation represents the voice of the world that Rosetta wants so deeply to belong to. But, more importantly, this 'you' is the viewer that has been one step behind Rosetta in every step of her journey. Because the Dardennes' never allow a moment's respite, 'we' the audience, have just found a job. 'We' have got a friend. For one moment, the very real misery the Dardennes' have captured in the underbelly of contemporary Europe recedes and we share Rosetta's relief. This respite is short lived, however, and soon after, when Rosetta is fired yet again, things take a distressing turn for the worse and 'we' are entangled and implicated every step of the way.

It is a hard, cold world as seen through the lens of the Dardenne brothers and cinematographer Alain Marcoen. Rosetta is always struggling through the winter cold, her only warmth delivered from a hairdryer used to soothe the mysterious stomach pains that affect her throughout. And like Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999), the icy water that lies at the edge of the campsite appears in these bleak surrounds not as freedom but as a threat. When Riquet falls into the water while helping Rosetta retrieve her fishing lines, she sits back watching emotionlessly, only coming to his assistance when he is on the verge of drowning. Later, when she betrays Riquet to get his job and evade the 'rut', we understand that in her desperation for work, Rosetta was fighting the urge to let him disappear beneath the water. If he had died, she would lose her only friend but gain a job. And in Rosetta's world, only one choice will lead to a 'normal' life. As things turn from bad to worse for Rosetta her actions raise moral questions that make our complicity in her experience troubling. In our world, as in Rosetta's, humane ideals suffer under the weight of economic survival. Riquet's decency and ethical code have not been eroded to the degree experienced by Rosetta. This makes her betrayal of him seem like an act of violence committed on an innocent. Yet in Rosetta's mind, emancipation means economic freedom. Morality is a luxury. She must survive at all costs, her body fighting on, or dying in the struggle. There is a Bressonian purity to the path of *Rosetta*, but the Dardenne's vision of her final, profound moral choice is far from the austere simplicity of *Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1966). Instead, it is an entangling and disorienting experience that disallows the viewer any space for Catholic reflection. It transports us into her world, enabling Rosetta's desperate and hopelessly cruel experiences to play out inside the heart and across the surface of the skin.

For over two decades, brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne have been prolific documentary makers in and around their hometown of Seraing, in which *Rosetta* takes place. Although this is their fourth feature film - *La Promesse* (1996) is widely acclaimed while the earlier works *Je Pense à Vous* (1992) and *Falsch* (1986) have been self-consciously suppressed - their earliest films were direct action works arising out of an involvement in community politics. This has given them a hardened perspective on social realities but it does not mean that *Rosetta* is in any way polemical. More significantly, their background has made them keen observers of human nature, human movement and the familiar run down districts of their town. At times *Rosetta* is like an observational documentary of a fictional character. It is, at all times, relentlessly 'real', and perhaps it is the authenticity of this representation that makes the film the rare masterwork that it is. Throughout, the film appears freed from the visible restraints of direction, or the technical means of production. This appearance belies the reality that the brothers meticulously shot over 60 hours of film, performing countless takes of simple actions to attain a sense of purity or that dangerous notion - 'truth' - in every screen moment. Instead, Emily Dequenne's body, her taut 'physicality' as Rosetta, is like the engine of camera movement and framing. It is as though the Dardennes have handed the reins over to this heavy-breathing whirlwind whose explosive movements create and become the limits of the visual frame. There is not a single moment in which Dequenne seems to have been placed in cinematic space by direction. Instead, the overwhelming impression is of Rosetta - both a physical and emotional force - driving the narrative and the form of the film. Both the filmmakers and audience chase behind her, following breathlessly to see what journey she will take. This is a cinematic approach that can be related to a loose, fluid style emerging on several fronts and visible in the work of Lars von Trier, Erick Zonca, Larry Clark and Michael Winterbottom. It is a bodily approach to cinematic form that allows performance to dictate the realm of what we experience on screen. This style has had a tendency to emerge within humanist filmmaking and, for want of a better description, is like a neo-realist performance of Cassavetes' exuberant physical cinema.

Realism in cinema is a tradition that is often plagued by intellectual distance and the curse of the mid-shot. Our encounter with cinema about 'real' experiences, 'real' characters and 'real' situations is frequently constructed so that the audience is led to act as a witness to an apparently objective rendering of 'reality'. The staging and photographing of action is often expository in nature allowing events to appear to unfold on screen, usually unencumbered by the fact that every moment is a fiction constructed through a complex cinematic process. It is a 'respectful realism' - a term, inspired by the work of English filmmaker Ken Loach and articulated recently by Australian filmmaker Vince Giarrusso - that suggests an observational distance to the characters and narrative that is intended to be non-judgmental and lacking in visual or stylistic interference. It is a distance that apparently respects the representations of the characters portrayed, and respects the gravity of the content. Interestingly, this approach, with its static and mid-distance approach to visuals, and the absence of any visceral or visual audience involvement in the movement and emotions of the characters often does quite the opposite. It creates a viewing experience that is both detached and potentially judgmental.

In a film such as *Rosetta*, the camera is very much attached to the action and the characters. The film is structured like a pursuit, a frantic document of a constantly active subject. The outcome of this intensively dynamic involvement between the character of Rosetta and the audience - mediated by the camera that constantly hovers around her body - is to implicate the viewer at all times. Perhaps such an approach would have been unthinkable without the weathering effects that the reality-TV handcam aesthetic has had

on contemporary audiences. Regardless, *Rosetta* is very much part of a realist cinema, but one which does not permit the luxury of distance, of intellect or of reason. This is a realism that is impulsive and experiential. And for this very reason, the realist approach favoured by filmmakers like the Dardenne brothers speaks potently and persuasively about both the fictional world rendered on screen and the world that we live in. *Rosetta* acts upon us like a real world experience. There is no directorial light to guide us toward sensation or comprehension. There is only stimulation and the outcome of events. It is for us alone to make sense of the experience and to create a context of meaning within our own lives. For this reason, *Rosetta*, as hopelessly optimistic as it may be to say, is the kind of cinema with the potential to change lives.

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