

## Film and Theatre

### The Golden Key to Happiness

#### Alex van Warmerdam's 'Borgman'

"A sly, insidious and intermittently hilarious domestic thriller that is likely to remain one of the most daring selections of this year's Cannes competition", raved the professional journal *Variety* with regard to *Borgman*, Alex van Warmerdam's eighth feature film. It was the first Dutch feature film for thirty-eight years considered to be good enough for the main competition at the most important film festival in the world. A historic moment, although the film failed to win an award.

What is *Borgman* about? Or better put, who is the main character that the film takes its name from? Vampire, vagabond, leader of a satanic sect or devil in disguise? A filthy messiah with unkempt hair, a passive-aggressive robber-chief, a shaman, alien, Rasputin, commander of a sect-like group of evil intruders? One could speculate forever, but there can be no doubt that Borgman is a manifestation of evil. "A sorcerer", says a child in the film. Satyr is maybe the closest: a bearded forest creature that follows its instincts, with a partiality for wine and anarchy; or (according to Borgman himself) the younger, vindictive brother of Jesus, a pain in the neck who's only concerned with himself, who has been sent to earth to instil some order into things.

Van Warmerdam begins his satirical miracle play with a quasi-biblical motto, redolent of the Apocalypse. "And they descended upon earth to strengthen their ranks." After that a priest starts the hunt for Camiel Borgman, aided by armed henchmen and an Alsatian. Like two of his assistants, Borgman hides in an underground hut in the woods. But Borgman – himself more hunter than quarry – escapes and looks for a fresh hiding-place in an affluent suburb. Under a false name he rings at the door of various villas asking if he can take a bath. When the somewhat short-fused, arrogant television producer, Richard, opens the door and beats the uninvited guest up after an exchange of words, his wife, Marina later offers him

shelter in their summerhouse, because she feels guilty – without her husband knowing anything about it. This provides Borgman with the opportunity to gradually and stealthily increase his hold on the inhabitants of the concrete grey, cubist villa, exploiting the nagging guilt feeling to the full, and "the [effortless] ability to bring out the malice lying dormant in the good citizens of suburbia", as *Screen Daily* wrote. In the process he turns their garden paradise into a cesspit of vice.

Actually, what's wrong with the paradise-like existence of the happy, well-heeled family? Surely they aren't lacking anything? Aren't they respectable people? Borgman definitely knows better. He tells the family's children a fairytale about a white child from the clouds. It was imprisoned at the bottom of a deep pond by a beast that guarded the golden key to happiness. While Borgman tells of failed attempts to rescue the child, one gets the feeling that it is very possibly the fair-skinned children themselves who are living at the bottom of this proverbial pool. With selfish parents who have handed the care of their children over to an au pair. Three grey cars are parked under the carport: a Jaguar for father, a Mini Cooper for mother, and a family car that is only used by the au pair for the children. Repressed tensions are denied to the outside world, uncontrolled emotions don't fit the picture.

But under the slick surface hides a disturbed emotional existence, which has its roots in guilt feelings about the way in which material prosperity is accumulated. However often people in the film take a bath, their conscience is never any cleaner. Relentlessly Van Warmerdam unmasks the polite, manicured life of the well-heeled family as false and pretentious. In *Borgman* evil is dressed in misleading, pure white. They are all wolves in sheep's clothing. "There's something around us", says Marina to her husband Richard. "Pleasantly warm, but bad. I feel so guilty. We are happy and happy people must be punished." Richard rejects the idea: "Nonsense. We live in the West. The West's affluent. We can't do anything about it."



Still from *Borgman*

In *Borgman* there are more fatal sacrifices than in any of Van Warmerdam's previous work. In an interview, Van Warmerdam himself analysed the film as "darker and tauter" than his earlier work. More abstract but also more explicit.

The sly complications that have mutual knock-on effects follow each other at a swift pace. With black humour and visual jokes, abetted by horror effects and conventions to do with good taste, *Borgman* is constantly balanced on the edge of where the viewer ceases to find it funny. The action is often silent, swift and sickeningly efficient. Dialogues are short and measured, and the clichés of everyday speech are given short shrift. There is nothing more deceptive than the young woman who says: "It'll all turn out alright madam." Surrealistic scenes, fantasies, horror, in *Borgman* anything goes. The tone swings between deadly serious, irony and gallows humour. This irresistible mix makes the film ineluctable in its allegory on the well-to-do middle classes.

The name of the main character Borgman contains a play on words. The Dutch word *borg* means security. Borgman is not a man who

provides 'security' in the sense of certainty and protection; he comes to collect caution money, the security demanded by a dissatisfied lender, be that God, the devil or Van Warmerdam himself. Significant in that respect is the scene in which the director, playing one of Borgman's accomplices, with a cool pair of sunglasses perched on his nose, drives an excavator that rips up the family's pond at a rate of knots.

International critics compared the film to the enigmatic unease in the dramas of Michael Haneke, Luis Buñuel's satires on the middle classes, the absurd humour of Roy Andersson, and Jean Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, a film made in 1932 in which a well-heeled family also take a tramp into their home. With their miracle-play the brothers Van Warmerdam (Alex the director and Marc the producer) have proved themselves to be the present day successors of the brothers Grimm.

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*Translated by Sheila M. Dale*