

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It's a cliché, but like many other directors, I once wanted to be an actor. I was often allowed to participate in the school play, but with my braces and nerdy glasses I always had to play the hunchbacked old man, or the drunkard. I was never chosen to play a young blonde Greek god.

Years later, with *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN*, we make a film about children who are excluded due to their appearance. Excluding minorities is a very sensitive issue. Apparently ugly children are too, because there was an immediate response online: "IS THIS A SILLY JOKE?", "WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?" and "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS UGLY CHILDREN!" I can refer everyone to my high school photos as proof that the latter is not true. And also the children who auditioned for the film knew very well what they didn't like about themselves. The one had a birthmark, the other a weird finger, and they had no qualms talking about it during the audition. In the end, everyone is sometimes nervous about what he or she looks like.

Our goal was to make a film that will both immerse you in an exciting adventure, and make you think at the same time. Those responses online suggest that people are already giving it thought. I hope that they also go to the cinema to be carried along in the story of Paul the Untouchable. To disappear into a special world for a moment, and to discover that *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN* is actually a badge of pride. An honorary title for a group of children who dare to stand up against the injustice of the dictatorial regime in which they live.

Keep it clean!
Jonathan Elbers

INTERVIEW

Director Jonathan Elbers

You and screenwriter Jeroen Margry already made a short film of the book *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN* in 2012. Why did you want to return to this story?

Jeroen and I graduated from the Film Academy in 2012 with the short version of *Club*, and we immediately had big ambitions: a feature film version. We then spent years perfecting the script, while in the meantime a lot had changed in the world. Weird men rose to power and *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN* became increasingly topical. The reality caught up with us and many crazy things we had come up with suddenly became reality. I think that current events have made this version more political, and also harsher. The short film was still friendly. Now it has become a really exciting movie that everyone will watch with their buttocks squeezed together.

What are the big differences with the short version of 2012?

In 2012 we just wanted to create a beautifully styled world, and now the entire style supports the story. Occasionally I felt like a design dictator. Then I'd run across the set to shout: "Isimo would never allow it this way!" The great thing about the long version is that

you really get the time to sympathize with the characters. That's much more difficult in 25 minutes. We have also drawn it closer to the present, making it more recognizable. The film is set in a regime where there is no room for individuality. There is framing, manipulation and continuous indoctrination. Residents must look the way President Isimo wants them to, a different appearance will not be tolerated. That message is communicated through folk songs, billboards and social media. That's something that children in our world experience on a daily basis via YouTube and Instagram and in the classroom.

And there's also the popular book by writer Koos Meinderts.

Koos is amazing! He came by on the set and we talked about the script a few times. He is always uplifting and cooperative. His book from 1987 is a clear metaphor for the Second World War; children are taken by bus to a camp, people go into hiding in secret spaces behind a cupboard and ugly children receive a garment that makes them recognizable. To realize this is now repeating itself in America at the Mexican border, is a grim sensation. But even if you don't get all the references, the story is still exciting and fun. Koos himself notices this for years, when he does readings of the book at schools: every age gets something different from the book and the metaphor offers room for that.

What kind of Netherlands is it where President Isimo is in charge?

The film is set in a fantasy world, where a beautiful, clean and rich country has gradually given up personal freedom in exchange for prosperity and efficiency. President Isimo's party wants to be in control of everything. Everyone must wear the same suit and has the same hairstyle, exactly according to his instructions. That makes this world gray, boring and sleek, what we also captured in the style. For the Isimo speeches, we were inspired by existing speeches from presidents or dictators about minorities, in which we replaced some words with "beautiful" or "ugly." Isimo has rammed all individuality out of society. Adults do not dare to rebel against this, but the children cannot be stopped. They rise up against the regime in their own way and with cheerful colors and crazy faces.

'Ugliness' is forbidden in President Isimo's regime. Isn't that a very elastic term?

Yes, because beautiful or ugly is different for everyone. For example, most parents always find their children the most beautiful and those of the neighbors always uglier. The film is about excluding people based on their appearance, and what that does to you. It can be anything: a girl who is not allowed to join in with a group of boys, someone with a scar or from another country. The metaphor goes beyond just beautiful or ugly. After all these years, our slogan is still: everyone is ugly in their own way. What we want to say about that, is that you can love yourself and be happy with who you are, exactly as you are!

So you want to hold up a mirror to children?

I think it's important to realize that everyone judges each other, even if you don't intend to. We start the film with a scene at school in which passport photos are made. An awkward moment, everyone still remembers how you were always nervous for the school photographer in primary school. They were never nice photos either. During the test view with children, the scene got an immediate response: the first few photos were laughed at. In other words, you began watching the film less than a minute ago, and you have already assessed someone on their appearance. Children are no different from adults in this regard,

maybe they are even harsher. I think it's great that this happens at the beginning of the film. As they are watching, they learn that there is more behind those "ugly" children.

Social media play an important role in the film.

True, children can't live without social media anymore. If you are with 200 kids on the set, you see that they are almost even more concerned with their online lives than their real lives, and that the two do not always match. One of my favorite moments from the film is when Paul wakes up at home and opens an Instagram collage of children posting what a beautiful day it's going to be. They continue their daily routine as if nothing happened, while a lot of children have just been picked up. You saw that the uprisings of the Arab Spring were mainly driven by social media. And kids really don't come out the door if there's no social media event, so we thought it was important to add this to the book from 1987. The online world where the protest starts and the kids show that they are ugly in their own way.

Children could submit their own auditions. Has that paid off?

There is so much talent in the Netherlands! The online castings were very fruitful, many children in the film came from those. Some with acting experience, and others with none at all. We asked everyone to play a movie scene, plus something they liked to do best. That could be dancing or singing, or just making a funny face. That worked very well because you could see exactly what someone was capable of. It did also mean that I had to watch hours of visual material, but it was often very charming because those children really went for it. They would have recreated a bus in their garden and the entire family would play the passengers: grandpa, grandma, nephew and niece, someone with a dinner plate as a steering wheel and the child acting in the middle. Really great to see. A lot of kids have shared their audition on YouTube and they respond very positive to each other's videos!

Jeroen van Koningsbrugge does not exactly play the father of the year.

For the role of father Filidoor we were looking for an actor who could play both drama as well as comedy. Jeroen can do that like no other. Filidoor de Wit is a difficult role, because he apparently does not choose for his family, and as a result quickly becomes unsympathetic. From the audition on, with his comic talent Jeroen was able to play a father who loves his family, but does not know how to express it. Filidoor reads the autocue for TV channel ITV and suddenly he has to make choices that go far beyond his capacities. The news changes more to the state news, and for the first time in his life he has to choose what his political preference is, and whether he is heroic enough to revolt. One of the things we have done to make Filidoor easier to understand is to add the character Secretia, a role of Katja Schuurman. She manages the media for Isimo like a modern Joseph Goebbels and puts Filidoor under great pressure. First he must announce the president, then he must accuse his wife and daughter and finally call his son a terrorist. His limit shifts further and driven by fear and ignorance he keeps making the wrong choices. This is all pretty heavy stuff, so we cast actors who can add lightheartedness to the family. Without Jeroen, Jelka and Maan it would have been much more serious. They make you laugh about it too, that breaks the family open.

Singer Maan has her acting debut in The Club and she goes full throttle straight away.

Yes, isn't she great? I was immediately in love after the first audition with Maan. We did an exercise with her and she immediately gave it all. The first scene we shot with her was when

she speaks to a large group of protesting children with a megaphone. Imagine being asked to do that on your first shooting day ever, without any acting experience. And she just did it. When she gives it her all, you have no doubt she is fighting for her little brother. She initially teases him, but don't you dare touch him! In a hug or a stunt, you are not sure about your life next to Maan, haha. I would not hesitate for a moment to cast her again. She understands the job, works hard for it and splashes off the screen.

What can you tell about the look of the film?

I like films that take place in an extraordinarily shaped world. We wanted to create a non-existent place with hard colors. A world where there's no more nuance, where you cannot feel at home and where everyone wants to escape. We traveled throughout the Netherlands in search of sleek gray buildings to create our own metropolis. All the buildings were then stripped from all their coziness, and with visual effects more gray buildings were added. This is how the bare, harsh world of the film came into being. Slowly more color shines through. First with Sara in her room, where we see photos in all colors. You can only buy gray, black and red in the paint store, but you can paint in every color you want in the secret basement. This is where the uprising against the gray regime arises.

What was the idea behind the clothing?

We also wanted to give the clothing a look from which all individuality was removed. A school uniform was a logical option. The shirt has a zipper which makes it look strange, because you never see that. For the main characters we gave the clothing a red line or something else striking. High-ranking characters in the regime wear a pin of a golden shovel. By bringing all these elements together you have suddenly created another world. And by sticking to those gray colors it feels like a total regime, that is eventually broken open by wild colors.

The final takes place in a very spectacular setting.

We did that in the Landschaftspark Duisburg-Nord. We found it on the internet, an area full of abandoned industrial complexes across the border near Venlo. Due to that location, we had to adjust the scenario a bit, that's how special we thought it was. I think it's a nice fact that in this tight world there is a factory that is no longer looked at because it was heavily polluting and therefore does not fit in with the clean reality. Isimo sends the unwanted children there when he wants to "remove" them. It was a playground for the stunt team, a little less for me, but we did so many stunts here that I (temporarily) got rid of my fear of heights.

What are your expectations for THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN?

It is a mix of a classic adventure film such as E.T. and the gloomy world of The Handmaid's Tale. We really wanted to make a seriously exciting youth film for kids from the age of eight. There is more need for films where you can sit back and relax, but where you can see more if you give it some thought. We hope it will be just as classic as Alfred Jodocus Kwak en de Kraaienpartij.

The short film already provoked a lot of discussion. In France it is included in a school program, and Movies That Matter also uses it for educational programs and as a viewing assignment for the Cito test. For them it is a perfect starting point to start discussions about our society. Hopefully the new Club of Ugly Children will also head in that direction. When

you are eleven years old you already start to better understand the symbolism. And when you are eight you just see a very exciting film.

CAST

Sem Hulsmann (Paul de Wit)

It is a different, strange world in which Paul lives, a sort of continuation of the Second World War in which everything is gray and gloomy. What the film tries to tell is that everyone is equal and that things like racism and discrimination make no sense. I don't think anyone is really ugly. I had to be on the set extra early every day and then the floppy ears were put on my head. They were made from real rubber by Rob van Rob's Prop Shop. He had a special glue with which they were fixed and then it was finished with a kind of paint. Rob did make some children a bit uglier with makeup, by giving them scars.

Filming is hard work because you really have to concentrate. Before the camera rolls, I think about how I am going to do it, which can vary per take. We don't do everything in the right order, so you are anxious or sad in one scene and then very brave in the other. There were a few things to look out for, such as not looking into the camera. The most difficult was doing things on command. Then the director said: now you cry, or now you laugh out loud. People may underestimate how difficult that is. Jeroen taught me a lot about acting during rehearsals, he was like a second director. For example, if you have to look at people and you don't want to laugh, look between their eyes and not in their eyes. That worked.

I was surprised that the actors are so well cared for. I had to jump into water at one point, which was pretty cold. Afterwards there were three people with blankets to warm me up again. I wanted to do everything myself in terms of stunts, but if I had broken a leg they would not have been able to use me. So a stunt double was used for the most intense stunt scenes. I had the most shooting days of everyone, sometimes well into the night, but I liked it. You get so much adrenaline from all that acting. I felt very sad when it ended.

Faye Kimmijser (Sara Simons)

I previously did a short film, where I met the wife of line producer Niek Teunissen. She suggested that I should audition for the role of Sara. I did, and then I got the role! I had already seen the earlier version of THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN when I was still in primary school. I remember that I thought it was scary at the time. That gray atmosphere, that made an impression on me.

On the first day of shooting I was really nervous. My mother brought me to the set and I had a stomachache. But she said: "You can do it Faye, they didn't pick you for no reason. Go and do your thing, it will be alright." On the first take, I had to do it over a few times, because I was so nervous. But the crew put me at ease and then I really started to like it. I was even happy when I had to go in front of the camera again.

It was really a big production, everything was rented for us, they even filmed with helicopters. That was an impressive sight. The days in Germany were extra special. That industrial park was very impressive and because it was such a beautiful place you become even more aware of your role. That really gave it something special.

Everything in the world of THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN has to be perfect, exactly as President Isimo wants it to be. If you are fat, or have red hair or big ears, it quickly becomes 'not beautiful.' I think that's nonsense. If you are more plump than someone else, it doesn't matter. As long as you are happy with yourself. No one is the same, everyone is different in

character or appearance. The Netherlands is of course a country where everyone can go wherever they want. But a world like in THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN can always happen again if we don't pay attention. You can also see that a bit at school. Children who do pre-university education are looked at differently than children with a lower education such as pre-vocational secondary education. You are still seen as an inferior person, while you do your equal best. I think that's a shame.

I have now made three films in one year, and I noticed that I really enjoy acting. I also understand that it doesn't simply just happen, but I would find it very cool if I could continue doing this. You meet so many people and it is always different, never the same.

Narek Awanesyán (Kai Rigo)

Kai also belongs to the ugly children because he has a scar. He does not fit to the standards set by President Isimo. In the beginning of the film there is tension between Kai and Paul. Kai is tough and wants to be the center of attention and Paul is more shy. Kai bullies Paul because of his ears. Kai has a big mouth, but when it comes down to it, he often doesn't dare to do something. Only when Paul and Sarah go into hiding at the Kais parents' company, they become friends.

My character is not literally in the book, but it is a nice role to play. Kai is cheeky and you can laugh with him: he's a real joker. But he is also shy because he does not know how to deal with his scar. That scar is special make-up, which takes 25 minutes to apply. The scar itself is neutral in color, which they stick to my cheek with special glue. But then it has to be colored so that it matches my skin color exactly, that takes time. Rob Hillenbrink does that very well. He also did Paul's ears, and freckles, red spots and large teeth on other children.

I like it when I receive feedback from the director after a take. We are young actors and I like how Jonathan takes that into account. He does rehearsals before we start shooting, then we do breathing exercises. In fact, he taught which facial expression, which posture and which respiration goes with each emotion. If you are angry, breathe briefly and quickly, if you are shocked, hold your breath. If you then release your breath you are relieved because something is over. It is very useful to know, because on the set things aren't shot in chronological order. So you have to be able to switch emotions quickly.

I really have a warm feeling about this film. It didn't even stop for me, because I was one of the actors from the film who also got to play in the television series.

The days with Sem and Faye were my favorites, because the three of us had so much fun. That was also nice about shooting in Germany. We were there for a week, so you're in that bubble all the time. You go to the hotel together, and in the morning you come back on the set together. If you're with nice people then that's really great.

Roeland Fernhout (President Isimo)

President Isimo is no sweetheart. He has become a dictator because he likes things to be exactly as he wants, without opposition from others. The world he dreams of is clean, orderly, gray, unloving and boring. And dangerous. Especially for children who he thinks are ugly. Why did he become that way? The end of the film provides an answer to that. Everyone can be ugly in their own way, and I'm talking about character and personality. The appearance cannot be ugly because beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. What is ugly for one person is beautiful for another.

In this era of Instagram and social media, children feel an enormous pressure to be 'beautiful', generally beautiful. There's no such thing. Children filter themselves thinner, longer, paler, browner and plump lipped and can become insecure because they want to meet something that does not exist. I would like it if that nonsense is debunked a little. That is why I wanted to participate in this film. Ugly does not exist. Everyone is precious.

In the preparation I looked at how other dictators present themselves. So a bit of Gaddafi, a bit of Trump, a bit of Imelda Marcos, a bit of Hitler and a little bit of a not to be named Dutch gossip journalist.

Me, I'm afraid of heights. Too bad, I just had to get it over with. It had to be done anyway. Running fast, like in the Ruhr area, you can't think about anything anymore. Not even your fears. And as a reward, I got to fly over that beautiful building in a helicopter. So all in all it was a fantastic experience. Plus the fact that Sem was allowed to do some stunts there that would not look out of place in a James Bond. I was quite a bit impressed...

Jeroen van Koningsbrugge (Filidoor de Wit)

Director Jonathan Elbers' statement is: everyone is ugly in his own way. I would like to add: everyone is beautiful and ugly at the same time. What matters is what you do with it. Do you show the beautiful or the ugly? Father Filidoor de Wit is so conditioned by the government and the dictator that he became blind to what people call 'normal'. He always takes his betrayal one step further, because that's how it works in totalitarian regimes. The dictator ensures that his subjects become complicit in his wrongdoing and can therefore do nothing but cooperate.

It's nice how that also affects the look of the film. The clothing was designed with a subtle reference to fascism from 1939. The influence and social pressure of opinions and the need of people to stick their noses in everything is very current again.

This all sounds very serious, but you can also laugh at THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN. For example, I wanted to make Filidoor both clumsy and sympathetic, and portray him as someone who would rather avoid conflict. And when I work with young actors, I use the following rule: during the scenes we are concentrated, before and after the scenes we have a lot of fun.

Katja Schuurman (Secretia)

The first THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN was already incredibly fun to work on, and the result was fantastic. Together with my daughter I watched that version many times. Now there is this full-grown feature film and it adds a lot more to its predecessor! There's so much excitement, humor and action in it! And it became a stylistic feat. Jonathan is a great talent. It's Secretia's job to correctly convey Isimo's message to the people. She has to ensure that everyone fully agrees with everything the great leader says. As in any dictatorship, propaganda is very important here. You only provide the information that you want people to base their opinion on. The truth is withheld. Secretia therefore has a super important job. In the interpretation I did think of Cruella de Vil from 101 Dalmatians, although of course that is a completely different character.

Jonathan has specially conceived the role of Secretia to put pressure on father Filidoor, which of course was wonderful to do. Jeroen van Koningsbrugge is very cheerful to work with, so we laughed a lot while we were playing.

Regarding the theme of the film: everyone is beautiful in their own way! Perfection is uninteresting. My sweetheart thinks my floppy ear is the nicest thing about me. You can't start warning kids for a dictatorship early enough. But even if you are too young to get that message, there is more than enough to experience at *The Club of Ugly Children*. I'd say: see you in the cinema!

Maan (Joy de Wit)

It was super fun to play the leader of the children's uprising. I did have to practice a lot on the scene in which I have to address the children. You have to radiate authority at such a moment, and that requires a completely different facial expression and way of using your voice. When it was time to do the scene, there were hundreds of children in front of me. I climbed on a wall and had to start saying very loudly that the kids had to stop. That was successful, because they all froze. That was a lot of fun, it is always fun when children go against adults and get to be rebels.

With Jelka van Houten I had very funny scenes, such as a kind of silent protest with a very large banner in front of the president's house. I had to look seriously and Jelka tapped my hand with a croissant. As if she was saying: don't forget to eat, dear. Jelka can keep a very serious expression, that's so funny. I really couldn't watch her because I nearly exploded with laughter.

If I say yes to something, I do so because I think it's super fun. Acting was something I had never really done before, except in the school musical. I really wanted to do it, it really was a dream of mine. Even though I sometimes found it a bit scary, I enjoyed every second. I wanted to develop myself in a different area and so I absorbed everything that was said to me. I really wanted to do my best and gave it my all.

BIOGRAPHIES

Umami Media

The Club of Ugly Children is produced by Casper Eskes, Wim Boven and Niek Teunissen. Umami Media is a young film- and television production company and previously (co-)produced films such as *De Dirigent*, *Pijnstillers*, *Kappen* and *Guilty Movie*, the fiction series *De Staatsgreep* and the television programs *Beauforten* *The Amsterdam Project* (TV Beeld, 'best format' and 'best reality' and nominated for the Silver Nipkowschijf).

Jonathan Elbers

Director Jonathan Elbers (1988) graduates from the Dutch Film Academy in 2012. From his first films on you see a love for imaginative worlds. With a keen eye for detail and many comic elements, he shapes those worlds in his own unique way, often referring to contemporary society.

He won a Young Director Award for his graduation commercial *Hoe Kom Je Erop*. A longtake, in which a woman tries to escape from an out-of-control film set. He then made more comic commercials for LG, Holland Casino and Skoda, among others.

For television, Jonathan directs among others at *Studio Snugger*. He made the NTR short *Lockbuster* and this fall is the premiere of his first fiction series: *De Staatsgreep*. His first film *Fashion Chicks* (2015) was a very colorful High School Film. For his second feature film *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN*, he delves into a completely gray dictatorship where nobody is allowed to be oneself.

Roeland Fernhout

Roeland Fernhout is one of the most in demand Dutch actors. He became known after the success of the internationally acclaimed film *Zusje*. He featured in films such as *Blind date*, *Phileine zegt sorry*, *Dummie de Mummie*, *Michiel de Ruyter* and *Brasserie Valentijn*. Roeland played with various theater companies and was affiliated with Toneelgroep Amsterdam (*Angels in America*, *Lange dagen naar de nacht*, *Scènes uit een huwelijk*, *Othello*, *Koningin Lear*) until 2015. In 2017 he played the title role in *Ivanov* under the direction of Nina Spijkers for Toneelschuur Producties. On television, Roeland played in, among others, *Zwarte Tulp*, *Meiden van plezier*, *Annie MG*, *Floor Faber*, *All Stars - the series* and in 2018 received a guest role in the international hit series *Killing Eve*. In 2019 he can be seen in the international production *A Certain Kind of Silence*, the family film *THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN* and on television in the series *Keizervrouwen*.

Jeroen van Koningsbrugge

Jeroen van Koningsbrugge is one of the most diverse actors of his generation, both in the field of film and television and theater. He is also a successful TV personality, comedian, writer, producer, director and singer / songwriter.

Jeroen has a versatile television career. He was a beloved 'Lama' in the *De Lama's* improvisation show, where he fully demonstrated his comic talents.

He became the permanent team captain of Linda de Mol's game show *Ik Hou van Holland*. He also played the role of Jack in *Iedereen is gek op Jack*, both broadcast by RTL. In 2010 and in 2011, he won the coveted Silver Television Star in the Best Television Personality category. Teamed up with good friend Dennis van de Ven, Jeroen conceived and wrote the successful comedy sketch show *Draadstaal* (also known as Neonletters), in which he and Dennis embody various characters.

Since 2014, Jeroen has played the lead role in the police series *Smeris*, for which he also wrote and directed several episodes. He is also a creative producer of the series produced by Pupkin. The fifth season of *Smeris* will be broadcast in 2020.

On the silver screen, Jeroen played the leading role in the art house film *Links* by director Froukje Tan, who won The Silver Meléliès at the Lund Fantastik Film Festival. For his performance in *Loft*, he won the prestigious Rembrandt Award for Best Actor. Leading roles followed in *Hemel op Aarde* (Pieter Kuijpers), *De Surprise* (Mike van Diem) and *Schone Handen* (Tjebbo Penning). For the role of Andries Riphagen in the film *Riphagen* (Pieter Kuijpers), Jeroen received the Zilveren Televizier Ster in the Best Actor category in 2017. This year Jeroen can be seen in two international feature films. He plays the role of Adolph Zuckor in *Why not Choose Love: A Mary Pickford Manifesto* (Jennifer DeLia) and a Dutch hooligan in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Jon Watts).

Maan

If one artist has grown enormously in recent years, it is Maan. Only three years after she won *The Voice of Holland*, the singer has built a career that is full of golden and platinum successes. And although she continues to look for her own sound, she gets a clearer image of it.

She just completed her third club tour. Unlike the first two, which revolved around her English-language AM/PM EPs, Maan this time brought a different repertoire. "I have chosen, at least for the time being, to sing in Dutch", the singer explains. "I feel good about it, it is

believable and I think that Dutch-language music is almost more popular than ever." And that it worked, soon became apparent: all songs were sung along loudly. And that was exactly Maan's intention; she even reads her success on from the room's reaction. "If everyone is singing, cheering and jumping along, I feel that I have done well." She doesn't have to worry about success; four of the six rooms were sold out completely, the rest almost as good as.

The language was not the only change since her previous tours, Maan continues to build on her way of making music, together with her band. Where she previously went on the road with a keyboard player, bass player and drummer, now a guitar player has been added. "The music is more organic, it really gives that band feeling. We can jam as long as we want. So cool! "