



## URBAN ODYSSEY

In 2003 multimedia directors Bart Baele, Yves Degryse and Caroline Rochlitz embarked on an ambitious project aimed at capturing some of the world's most fascinating towns and cities. The three city hoppers talked to Melanie Goodfellow about the work-in-progress.

'At a certain point we realised that the residents of Bonanza didn't necessarily get along that well. It's not that we were particularly looking for connections between Bonanza and Jerusalem but on some level the way the residents of Bonanza talked to one another, the arguments they had were similar' **YVES DEGRYSE.**

What do the divided city of Jerusalem, the Inuit capital of Iqaluit in northern Canada, the abandoned mining town of Bonanza in the Rocky Mountains and the Russian capital of Moscow have in common?

They are the first four cities to feature in an intriguing series of films by Antwerp-based multimedia directors Bart Baele, Yves Degryse and Caroline Rochlitz who work under the joint name of Berlin.

The trio came together after actress Rochlitz and cameraman Baele met while working on a production in The Hague. Baele then introduced Rochlitz to childhood friend Degryse.

'We each have our functions within the group. Caroline does a lot of the interviews and the basic production stuff, I tend to focus on the writing side and Bart does a lot of the more technical stuff, for example. But the key decisions depend on all three of us,' says Degryse.

'When we started Berlin in 2003 the idea was to create a cycle revolving around a series of cities or regions. The idea was to visit one place a year. Each segment combines film with some other type of medium which is dictated by the characteristics of the city,' explains Degryse.

'We took the name of Berlin because it is one of our favourite cities. It has a fascinating history but is also a place that looks very much to the future.' But, he adds, 'It can be complicated when we fill in film festival entry forms and put the name Berlin under director's name but that's the way it is – we're a three-way collaboration under the name Berlin – we can't put anything else.'

### JERUSALEM CHAOS

Their decision to visit Jerusalem first was instinctive, say the trio. 'I think we were drawn there by intuition,' says Rochlitz. 'We were all fascinated by the place. It's a place I'd heard about as a child from the bible and now see it all the time in the news. It's the centre of the Middle-East – it's where the problems in the region converge.'

Backed by a small € 15,000 grant from the Flanders Community, the trio spent six weeks shooting in the city in May 2004.

'We'd done an initial one-week exploratory trip beforehand. Our

aim was to get as many different opinions on Jerusalem into the film as possible. It wasn't too difficult finding people to talk to us. As one of the journalists we spoke to commented, the problem in Jerusalem isn't so much getting people to talk to you but rather getting them to shut up,' says Rochlitz.

'It was an incredibly hectic place to shoot. I didn't feel any pressure or sense of danger from the conflict except one time when we were at the market in West Jerusalem and there was an explosion in East Jerusalem at Damascus Gate. Our taxi driver started getting worried and said we had to get back to the hotel – it turned out to be a gas explosion,' says Degryse.

'We were staying in an hotel in the Old City. When we'd get back from shooting in the evening, I'd be glad of its thick walls. Not from a safety point of view but rather for the protection they gave from the chaos outside. I would wallow in the silence.'

The resulting work was a sort of big screen triptych featuring interviews with Christian monks and priests, Orthodox Jews, journalists, refugees, devout Muslims, pilgrims and Israeli and Palestinian academics against the backdrop of the Wailing Wall, the Old City Gates, a refugee camp and the checkpoints around the city.

### INUIT CAPITAL

After the chaos of Jerusalem, the trio decided it wanted to focus on somewhere a little more peaceful.

'Jerusalem had been so hectic that I wanted calm, silence, whiteness. We did some research and hit upon the idea of the new Inuit capital of Iqaluit in Canada,' says Rochlitz.

Iqaluit is the capital of the autonomous Inuit territory of Nunavut in northern Canada, an Arctic region roughly the size of continental Europe with a population of just 27,000. The isolated city, officially founded in 1999 on the site of an old US air force air base, is home to 6,000 people.

'It's an amazing place. Most of the year you can only get there by plane and the boat service in the summer is only for freight,' says Rochlitz. 'The Inuits are keen to make it work but if you don't work for the government, there's not much else to do. Old nomadic traditions have died out. Only a few wealthy Inuit can



↑ Iqaluit



↑ Jerusalem

Bonanza ↓ →



afford to go hunting and they tend to travel by snow mobile rather than the old-style dog sledges.'

At the screenings of the film, mainly in theatres around Flanders, the trio combined a portrait of life in Iqaluit with a live telephone conversation between Caroline on stage and an Inuit actor calling from the Arctic city.

'The conversation was fictitious. We got writer Ivo Michiels to put together a short script taking inspiration from the fascination young children have for Eskimos – but the actual call was for real. We would talk to the actor live every time by Skype,' says Rochlitz. 'The only thing was that no-one in the audience ever believed it was live, they were convinced it was a recording – however we tried to present it.'

#### BONANZA RIVALRY

The trio were attracted to Bonanza, the latest addition to the cycle, by the fact that it is the smallest municipality in the US state of Colorado. This former (gold and silver rush) boomtown was founded in 1881 after silver ore was found in the surrounding hills and mountains. At the height of its prosperity, it boasted smelters, mills, hotels, saloons, schools, a brothel, a stage-coach service and even a baseball team.

'At the height of the mining boom some 40,000 people lived there but after the last mine closed in the 1970s the place was virtually

abandoned. About 22 people are registered as resident but just seven people live in Bonanza all year round,' says Rochlitz.

The trio first heard about Bonanza from Nico Leunen, the sought after Flanders film editor whose recent credits include Belgium's Foreign-language Oscar entry *Someone Else's Happiness* and the award-winning feature *Khadak*. He put them in contact with one of the permanent residents called Mark.

'Mark agreed to let us stay with him during the shoot. He was the only one who knew we were coming. Once we got there, we went from neighbour to neighbour introducing ourselves and amazingly they all agreed to cooperate on the film,' says Rochlitz.

It was not long before the directors discovered that Bonanza was a hotbed of neighbourly rivalry, historic disputes and misunderstandings on a par with what they had seen in Jerusalem.

'At a certain point we realised that the residents of Bonanza didn't necessarily get along that well. It's not that we were particularly looking for connections between Bonanza and Jerusalem but on some level the way the residents of Bonanza talked to one another, the arguments they had were similar,' says Degryse.

'We discovered there were several long-running disputes going back 20-odd years. It's this beautiful place in the middle of the Rocky Mountains, far from the stresses of modern life, but in the end it suffered from some of the same problems as Jerusalem,' he adds. Local tensions escalate after some of the permanent



residents decide to challenge the fact that the local mayor does not live fulltime in the town but rather in the nearest city of Pueblo, some 300 kilometres away.

'She spent a lot of her childhood there and has strong connections with the town. Many of her immediate family are buried in its cemetery – her roots are there – but she doesn't live in Bonanza full time. The two protestors ran for office as town councillors and failed to get in. They don't see why someone who doesn't live in Bonanza should have a say about what goes on – in truth there's not much to decide there – it's a strange situation,' explains Degryse.

#### MULTIPLE EDIT

The piece is due to go on tour of 23 theatres across Benelux in 2007. It will be one of their most ambitious multimedia pieces to date featuring a scale model of Bonanza and five screens representing each of the permanently inhabited houses.

'The audience will sit on the stage directly in front of the model. They'll be able to see the whole of Bonanza close up – where everyone lives, how their properties are spaced out. They'll see daybreak and nightfall over the town – lights will come on in the houses when the light begins to fade.'

At the same time a line of five screens over the model will play interviews with the inhabitants, footage of everyday activities, as

well as cutaways of the scenery and houses. Baele, is responsible for the multiple edit alongside Leunen.

'The audience won't be expected to follow all five screens at once. Bart is editing our material in such a way that only one or two screens are likely to capture their attention at any one time,' explains Degryse.

'There won't be any blank screens, life will always be going on – even if there is only minimal activity. I'll use sound and subtitles to get the audience's attention,' explains Baele, who spent nearly a year pulling the material together.

Even as Bonanza starts touring, the trio are already researching their next city of choice: Moscow.

'We've already started contacting people – usually we find that once you get in contact with one person, it snowballs,' comments Degryse. 'It will probably take us a year and a half to pull it together.'

Other plans include a separate cycle of films about rivers as well as a combined screening of all the city projects to date in a travelling circus big top.

And what about Berlin? Will they ever get round to making a tribute to their namesake city? 'Hopefully sometime in the future,' says Degryse.

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