# The Brand New Testament

**Director:** Jaco Van Dormael
**Country:** Belgium
**Date:** 2015

**A review by Peter Debruge for *Variety*:**

This irreverent, idea-filled satire asks what if everything the Bible says is wrong, and God's daughter came down to earth to set the record straight.

In the beginning, things went a bit differently than the Good Book would have us believe — or at least, that's the playful conceit behind Jaco Van Dormael's "The Brand New Testament," an irreverent but otherwise harmless ontological satire that puts a cartoonish spin on the Christian origin story. Incidentally, Van Dormael has volunteered an alternate creation myth of some kind in all four of his features (which also include "Toto the Hero," "The Eighth Day" and "Mr. Nobody"), only this time, the Belgian idea-meister goes as far as to target God directly, "outing" Him as kind of a jerk who lives in Brussels and sits at His personal computer, conjuring natural disasters as a way of staving off boredom. When his daughter rebels and decides to simultaneously enlighten everyone on earth, all hell breaks loose, and the narrative starts to lose its thread, unspooling zany consequences that ought to convert skeptical distributors worldwide.

Gone is the traditional, vaguely Zeus-like notion of God as an old man with white beard and flowing robes. This divinity is more the Archie Bunker variety, played by "Man Bites Dog's" Benoit Poelvoorde as a domineering white-trash shlub in a wife-beater T-shirt and ratty bathrobe. Cooped up in what looks like a middle-class home, God's wife (Yolande Moreau) and shy daughter Ea (Pili Groyne) cower in fear of His outbursts, unable to experience many of the simple pleasures that God granted to humans, but no less susceptible to His wrath. (No wonder JC took off, leaving the right-hand seat at God's table open.)

Over the course of the wildly inventive first act, Ea resolves to set the record straight on how Genesis really went down, narrating the film's revisionist version of events. Instead of the Garden of Eden, it turns out God began by building Belgium's capital, which He populated with all manner of animals, from giraffes to ostriches — who look plenty surreal in the streets and supermarkets of the otherwise deserted city. Humans came later, their loins covered with the 21st-century equivalent of a Renaissance artist's prudishly placed fig leaf. After all that Old Testament "begatting," the race grew plentiful enough that God started inventing silly laws to complicate their lives: not gravity and physics, but sadistic ones, dictating that a fallen piece of toast always lands jam-side-down, and so on.

For Ea, it's the capricious hurricanes and plane crashes that push her over the edge, compelling God's indignant daughter to hack His computer and publish its most classified file. "Deathgate," the TV newscasters call it (though "Revelation" might have been more apt), reporting on the wide range of reactions after everybody suddenly learns, via unsolicited text message, the date of his or her death. While the ultra-clever first act stockpiles sufficient admiration from audiences to sustain the film, the bulk of "The Brand New Testament" concerns itself with Van Dormael's most persistent preoccupation: the tug-of-war between fate and free will.

Upon discovering their expiration dates, some take it better than others. There are those who carry on as usual, and those who resolve to make the most of the time they have left. One contingent foolishly tries to avert its own demise (watch for Van Dormael as the driver with seconds to live), while another insists on testing its own mortality (a kid named Kevin makes suicidal stunt videos jumping off bridges, etc.). With tongue in cheek, Van Dormael is clearly posing the same question to audiences: What would you do if you had X days to live?

Alas, that's where the film hiccups, miscalculating the sheer number of ideas one can squeeze into such an escapist offering. Van Dormael and co-writer Thomas Gunzig (a collaborator on the helmer's recent finger-puppet theater piece "Kiss & Cry," which explains the dancing hand scene) pile on the notion that Ea must recruit six more apostles. When grouped with JC's dozen, her team will finally fill the gaps around the table in Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" portrait.

Crawling down to Earth via a secret passage in God's laundry room, Ea seeks out six potential apostles drawn at random from the files of her Father, who art in deep sleep on the couch back home. They are a head-turner named Aurelie (Laura Verlinden), who lost her hand in a freak subway accident; Jean-Claude (Didier De Neck), an adventurer who traded it in for a desk job, but now quits herd living to follow a flock of birds; Marc (Serge Lariviere), a sex maniac still fixated on his first summer crush; Francois (Francois Damiens), a life-insurance salesman turned serial killer; Martine (Catherine Deneuve), a loveless housewife pushed to ditch her husband for her new soulmate, who just so happens to be a gorilla; and Willy (Romain Gelin), whose dying wish is to become a girl.

Willy's desire recalls Belgian arthouse hit "Ma vie en rose," while Martine's story may as well have been stolen directly from Nagisa Oshima's similarly absurdist human-simian romance "Max mon amour." Scenes in which Marc imagines the women around him naked were shoplifted from Sean Ellis' Oscar-nominated short "Cashback," and Francois' bun in the oven borrows from French farce "A Slightly Pregnant Man" — and so on. When Van Dormael isn't recycling ideas from other movies, he's borrowing from himself, not that viewers will notice, since few of the aforementioned films have been widely seen, a condition that unfortunately extends to Van Dormael's hyper-creative oeuvre. ("Toto the Hero," which directly inspired "Amelie," has long been out of print in the States.)

In "The Eighth Day," Van Dormael speculated on how God followed His weeklong creation bender. Now we know for sure, thanks to Ea, who enlists a hobo to transcribe the gospels according to each of her new apostles. With a massive assist from editor Herve de Luze, the helmer does his best to corral all the helmer's ideas into a coherent narrative without alienating true believers. God bless freedom of speech, as there are some religions whose extremists might take such good-natured ribbing as sufficient cause to retaliate, a la Charlie Hebdo tragedy. In terms of actual offense, however, Van Dormael is no more blasphemous than one of those Monty Python animations designed by Terry Gilliam, in which a giant foot descends from the heavens to stomp on what little happiness Man can find.

Recent years have been rough on the director, whose magnum opus "Mr. Nobody" flopped hard. Van Dormael's composer brother Pierre passed away during the making of that film, and this one asks, with humor rather than outrage, how God could allow such a thing. Without his collaboration, it minimizes the use of new score in favor of pre-existing music, including an inside-joke use of Camille Saint-Saens' "Le Carnaval des animaux" — the theme music to the Cannes Film Festival, which smote Van Dormael's last pic, a lot like the erratic deity depicted here. This time around, the Cannes programmers surveyed his work and saw that it was good.

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