



The unknown girl

Director: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne
Country: Belgium
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A review by David Rooney for *The Hollywood Reporter*:

Early in *The Unknown Girl*, the tenth feature from masters of European realism Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the young medic played with affecting sobriety and deeply internalized focus by Adele Haenel chides her rattled intern, telling him, "A good doctor has to control his emotions." While Haenel's character, Jenny Davin, never forgets that rule, this quiet drama is powered by the ways in which her professionalism expands to accommodate personal investment, accountability and atonement after an unwitting action — or rather, inaction — on her part leads to tragic consequences.

The Dardennes' early work was populated by unknown casts, among them a few key faces that have gone on to become permanent fixtures, most notably Jeremie Renier and Olivier Gourmet, both making strong impressions here in secondary roles. But this is the Belgian brothers' third consecutive film to center on an established actress. Haenel, a Cesar winner for best actress in 2014 for *Love at First Fight*, follows Cecile de France in *The Kid With a Bike* and Marion Cotillard in *Two Days, One Night*.



Like those performances, Haenel's work here is a seamless fit within a cinematic universe of micro-portraiture defined by its dramatic restraint and integrity, compassionate insight and psychological credibility. Dr. Davin in that sense joins a group of memorably ordinary Dardenne screen women that began with Emilie Dequenne in *Rosetta*, which won the brothers their first Palme d'Or, in 1999. (Their second was for *The Child* in 2005.)

If *The Unknown Girl* doesn't rank among the top tier of the writer-directors' work, it evinces enough of their signature strengths to connect with their loyal international art house audience. By the Dardennes' minimalist standards, it's quite heavily plotted, and while it has not the faintest trace of genre conventions, the movie could almost be considered an ultra-low-key procedural mystery. However, it's also entirely coherent with the filmmakers' thematic concerns of social engagement within working-class environments in which economic imbalance, unemployment and immigrant unease are an ever-present part of the social fabric. Jenny's decision early on to reject the ambition and financial reward of a major career opportunity in favor of running a no-frills medical practice built on individual attention to low-income patients is driven in part by guilt. But it also mirrors the Dardennes' own resolute commitment to stories about real people on the disadvantaged margins.

The event that sets this story in motion is a frantic buzzing on the intercom after hours one night at the Liege clinic where Jenny has been filling in for three months for Dr. Habran (Yves Larec), who is now retiring for health reasons. Jenny is a fair but exacting boss with her intern Julien (Olivier Bonnaud), who failed to meet professional standards earlier in the day when he froze during a kid's life-threatening seizure

in the waiting room. When Julien tries to admit the person buzzing at the door, Jenny stops him, saying that an over-tired doctor taxed by inconsiderate patients at the end of a long day is more likely to make mistakes. In one of a handful of superbly played scenes between Haenel and Bonnaud, Jenny later confesses she was being high-handed, which caused Julien to bolt from the office in distress and abandon his plans to become a doctor after five years of study. The evolving interactions of these two characters form a lovely capsule drama within the larger story.

Via security video of the clinic's entrance, detectives learn that a young African immigrant found dead with no identification papers on the opposite side of the freeway, on the bank of an industrial stretch of the Meuse River, was the woman at the doctor's door the previous night. "If I'd opened the door she'd still be alive," says a stunned Jenny.

Unwilling to accept that the victim might be buried without a name and without her family's knowledge, Jenny becomes determined to trace her identity, asking patients if they recognize the dead woman from a photo she keeps on her cellphone, or following clues like a professional investigator. This latter thread demands tauter plotting than the Dardennes' elliptical style always provides. But in the writing and in Haenel's quietly driven performance, Jenny's obsessive mission is rooted in authentic feeling. We learn nothing about her private life or family, and when she starts sleeping at the clinic, even her home is removed from the picture, making her no less unknown than the dead girl who has taken up residence in her head.



While Jenny doesn't quite go door-to-door in her quest, like Cotillard's character in *Two Days, One Night*, the sense of urgency is very similar. And though the outcome provides answers to the central mystery, the filmmakers are less interested in closing the case than in the various ways in which people touched by the unknown girl's death — Jenny chief among them — acknowledge responsibility, whether real or indirect.

Sacrifice has often been a key point on the Dardennes' thematic spectrum, and that applies to Jenny, as she steps away from a prestigious medical center position on a research team, for which she topped a highly competitive field of candidates. The gentle moment when she informs the dedicated Dr. Habran of her decision to take over his practice is typical of the understated glimpses of warmth and profound human connection that make the Dardennes' films so emotionally satisfying.

Some of the most acute pleasures here are in the doctor-patient exchanges, depicting with a rigorous absence of fuss or sentiment a relationship that's as much intimate as professional. The lines of extreme vulnerability that separate physical pain from emotional nakedness are drawn with exquisite delicacy. Little kindnesses that spring from that bond are given touching illustration — such as two boys singing a song they wrote for the doc, or an old woman calling after her to take the gift of a panettone that she forgot. For audiences in America, in particular, where the obstinate refusal to grasp the essential basic right of affordable healthcare remains baffling to anyone raised outside the country, scenes depicting house calls or efficient lines of communication between doctors and social services will be as foreign as science fiction.

The Dardennes' early work was characterized by its visual rawness, with mostly unfettered handheld camerawork, frequently trailing behind the subject. Shot by longtime cinematographer Alain Marcoen, their films have gradually embraced more graceful movement. Though nothing here distracts from the simple directness of the filmmakers' empathetic gaze, or its penetrating access to individual lives. As with the majority of their work, no music is used. The Dardennes occupy a unique, oft-imitated place between the kitchen-sink Brits and the Italian neo-realists, and like all their films, the minor-key *Unknown Girl* offers melancholy reflections alongside subtle rewards to be savored.

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