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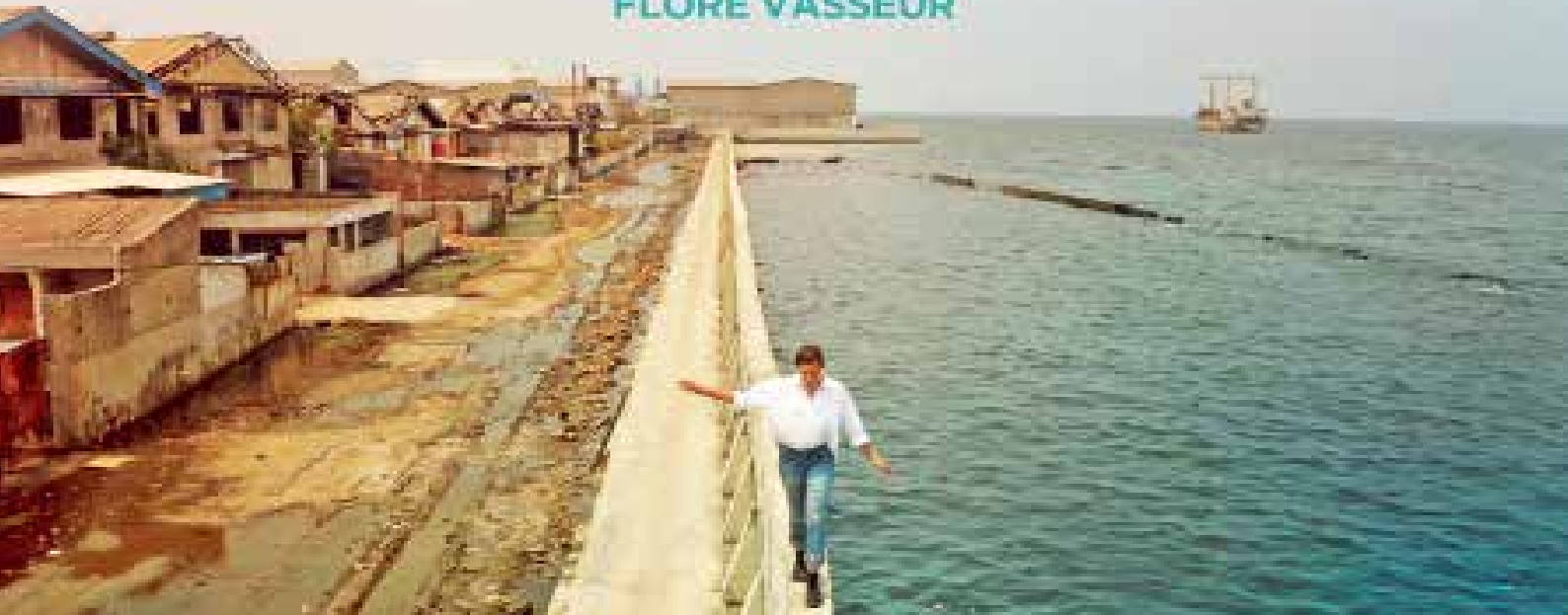
IT ALL STARTS WITH YOU



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION

BIGGER THAN US

A FILM BY
FLORE VASSEUR



BIGGER THAN US

EEN FILM VAN FLORE VASSEUR



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2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION



Documentaire - 2021 - Frankrijk - 96 minuten

Bioscooprelease: 2 juni 2022

Meer over de film: [Cineart.nl/films/bigger-than-us](https://www.cineart.nl/films/bigger-than-us)

Persmaterialen: [Cineart.nl/pers/bigger-than-us](https://www.cineart.nl/pers/bigger-than-us)

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SYNOPSIS

De Nederlands-Indonesische Melati Wijsen (20) komt al jaren in actie tegen plasticvervuiling en met groot succes; op jonge leeftijd is ze erin geslaagd het eiland Bali vrij te maken van plastic tasjes. Samen met Melati staat er een krachtige generatie op die als doel heeft de wereld te herstellen.

BIGGER THAN US toont de intrigerende en ontroerende reis van Melati waarbij ze andere jonge changemakers ontmoet die hun leven wijden aan een betere toekomst. Zij zetten zich in voor onder meer mensenrechten, het klimaat, vrijheid van meningsuiting en toegang tot onderwijs en voedsel. Van de favela's van Rio tot afgelegen dorpen in Malawi, op geïmproviseerde boten aan de kust van het eiland Lesbos tot Indiaanse ceremonies in de bergen van Colorado. In een tijd waarin alles uit elkaar lijkt te vallen, laten deze jonge changemakers op inspirerende wijze zien dat iedereen een verschil kan maken voor een betere wereld.

BIGGER THAN US van regisseur Flore Vasseur werd mede geproduceerd door Marion Cotillard en werd geselecteerd voor het Filmfestival van Cannes in een speciaal klimaat-programma.



FLORE VASSEUR

NOVELIST, DIRECTOR & PRODUCER

An entrepreneur in New York at the age of 24, Flore Vasseur lived through the Internet bubble, September 11 and a capitalist system that was cracking on all sides. Since then, she has written books, articles and television documentaries to understand the end of one world and the emergence of another.

With her four frighteningly lucid novels, she attacks the grip of finance and the madness of a world based on technology. She questions our relationship to power, the elite in panic mode and asks the question: who governs?

Alongside this approach of deciphering and sometimes denouncing, she undertakes a long-term work on the trail of rights defenders and whistleblowers. In Moscow, she directed MEETING SNOWDEN about the former NSA contractor. Her latest book, *What Remains of Our Dreams*, is an investigative novel about the little-known real-life story of Aaron Swartz, the child prodigy of code who wanted us to be free, persecuted by the Obama administration.

A logical continuation of her fifteen years of investigation and writing, BIGGER THAN US is her first documentary film. Basically, her work is about free will, commitment and courage. The desire to live and to be worthy.

FILMS

- 2021 BIGGER THAN US (DOCUMENTARY)
- 2017 MEETING SNOWDEN (DOCUMENTARY)



INTERVIEW WITH FLORE VASSEUR

Where did you meet Marion Cotillard, co-producer of the film?

We all know that Marion is very committed, but we are less aware of what this implies and what it can trigger. We met during a weekend that brought together social entrepreneurs, activists and filmmakers around the Indian activist Satish Kumar. Marion had come with her baby, whom she was looking after between work sessions. I found myself watching her several times, moved by the gestures and the love she had for her baby. I recognised myself in the way she talked to her, dressed her, put her to sleep, in the way she was a mother. In her way of being a mother. And *BIGGER THAN US*, I think, is also a mommy project. I went to see her with the fear of disturbing her, I almost didn't do it. Marion is over-solicited by people who think they have the Grail. But something rang true and she wanted to know more about my film project. We met again the next day in Paris, and then we never left each other's side. From a film about mothers, it became a film about sisters. Marion was there at every stage, through all the hard times.

What did she bring in concrete terms?

The most important thing: faith. How many times has she put me back in the saddle, when I was tired or discouraged, ready for a concession, an easy way out. Marion has an extraordinary presence. When she is with you, you can lift mountains.

As producer, she also brought a key person to the project, Christophe Offenstein, the director of photography. He is extremely experienced, extremely calm and has a heart of gold, and he was totally committed to the project and its purpose. He also put a camera in my hands and told me to make my images so that the film would be as close as possible to what I had in mind. And in fact, we used it a lot. That's how I really got into the film... Marion is also in all the meetings. Of course, she helped us to open the right doors. And she didn't let anything slip through the cracks. No easy ways.

You talk about a 'sister film', so the youngest is Melati Wijzen. When did you meet?

In 2016. It's all connected to a very special moment in my life as a mother, and that moment started it all. At the time, my son was seven years old, and one lunchtime he looked at me and said, "What does that mean, the planet is going to die?" My daughter, who is three years older, looks at me with her big eyes: "What's going on here?" I say to myself that there are two options: either I answer "No, my kitten, that will never happen, eat your minced steak", or I speak out openly. So I say, "Look, what this means is that we're in a moment where maybe a mass extinction has started, but there have been five or six of them already, and life has always started again...". I see myself explaining this to him in such a clumsy way! I see two pairs of eyes looking at me, I have their attention like never before. My son interrupts me: "OK, but how do I not die?" I think fast and he goes faster than I do: "Well, if I understand correctly, Mum, as you said it's because of the pollution and everything else, I'm going to lock myself in the house. That way I won't die." I tell him: "You see, you can't stay locked up in a house because there is furniture on which there is...". I'm totally misguided. He thinks, and fortunately he thinks better than I do: "Well, I'll go to the top of the mountain, where the pollution doesn't go up, so I can live". "Yes, but what are you going to do at the top of your mountain? It's a bit sad, isn't it?" He replies: "Yes, you're right. Well then, I could be President of the Republic, and I'd stop all the factories!" As he hates school, I add another layer: "Yes, but to be president, you have to work on History, French, know how to write very well..." "So if not, I could be a cosmonaut, so that you, dad and my sister could go to another planet!" I say: "Yeah, you're right, but you have to work on your maths!" A little reassured, he then says to me: "And what do you do? What are you doing so that the planet doesn't die, Mum?" I tell him I write books and films about corruption, about hidden agendas and so on, but there's nothing I can do: "No, but seriously, Mum, what do you do?" "Well, you see, we take the train, we don't have a car, we eat organic food...". Third time: "Mom, what are you doing?" "Well listen, probably not enough..."

How does one go from a conversation at the dinner table between a mother and her son to such an ambitious documentary film project?

My son knew that I didn't have a specific idea for my next film, so he kept telling me: "But Mum, you've never made a film about pollution! Isn't that what you should be doing?" And then that afternoon, in a nice synchronicity, I finally watched the TED Talk by Melati and Isabel Wijsen sent by Bruno Giussani, one of my best friends who knows that I'm looking for a topic. They explain their fight against the plastic that pollutes and condemns their island, Bali. My son comes home from school and says to me: "So, Mum, have you found a solution for your film?" And then it hits me. I go back to see the video of Melati and Isabel, so young, so brave, and there I burst into tears, because everything is there, in front of my eyes: my subject, her subject. I called Arte, and three weeks later, we were off to Indonesia... I owe this theme and this choice to work with Melati to my son, who put me on the path... Then to Melati and her sister, whom I find astonishing. At that moment, I crossed paths with the genius of childhood. We adults usually miss it. I love this phrase, which has guided me a lot, from the Polish paediatrician Janusz Korczak: "To be at the level of a child, you have to stand on your toes."

How did you approach the first trip for the film?

The very first shoot was in Lebanon, in April 2019. We left with a bit of a head start, without really knowing what we were going to do. It's always like that in a documentary: there's a shoot that serves as a pilot, or more precisely as a crash test. And it was perfect as a crash test, because this country itself is in a crash, totally on the ground - more so now than when we shot there, but it was underlying. And then it's inherent in this population and the people we worked with, who are both incredibly cheerful and generous, but also have a palpable feverishness, linked to the fact of living on a powder keg... We arrived a bit like amateurs. With the technical team, we didn't know each other at all. We spent a lot of time sniffing each other out. There are questions of legitimacy for everyone, including me; and I really didn't know how I was going to handle the shooting. I had some intuitions, and above all I wanted to rely on Melati as much as possible, but what was her deep desire for this film? What involvement did she want to put into it? What passion or appetite did she have for the "other"?

Melati Wijsen is the central character of the film: in the picture, she is the one who goes to meet the actors of change, in Uganda, Brazil, Malawi... Was there a risk of making her a film heroine?

Melati, I adore her, I find her remarkable, I am very impressed by her commitment, her strength. But there was something that didn't suit me for this film, and for the story I wanted to capture and let live: it's the ultra-performing side she can have. In Asia, she is really the local Greta Thunberg: she is very used to filming, very used to delivering the same message, with a lot of automatism, a lot of ease in front of the camera. It's very impressive but completely counterproductive. We wanted to look for something below the surface - and Melati has a perfect surface. We wanted something much stronger. Non-negotiable. But Melati was losing its childlike spirit through training and reporting for CNN. But this is precisely what we were looking for, it is this part of us that needs to be awakened today, universal and a-generational.



To do this, we had to get her out of her comfort zone. It wasn't easy because it put me in a questioning situation of the type: "But who am I to tell her what she should or should not do? Who am I to tell her that she has the right or wrong attitude?" This sort of omnipotence of the director is something I am really wary of. You have the camera, you have the questions, you surprise the people you are interviewing: there is a completely totalitarian side. And at the same time, she's a tough one, Melati, she's like a stallion: if you put a muzzle on her, she goes away. But I needed her: and I didn't want to deprive myself of this interaction from "young to young" which is the mechanics of the film. I didn't want a film in which the adult leans over in an almost condescending gesture. I didn't want to make them into theatre or circus characters. I wanted to listen to them. To see them get along and organise themselves. To be surprised and open. And to give them all the room in the world at a time when only the same experts, coming from the same mould and repeating the same ideas for decades, have the right to speak. Solutions and genius are everywhere. If you pay attention. Consideration.

When we see the film, we discover that she is very accurate, very human, and we feel a great harmony between you, one in front of the camera, the other behind it.

That is the grace of the shooting, and particularly of this first shoot in Lebanon. Melati had never been to a country at war, she was 18 years old, and here she is, thousands of kilometres away from her home in Bali where everyone seems perfectly at peace and occupied with the beauty of the world and her own. But Beirut is a powder keg. I was very moved to see her arrive at the airport, with her little bag, that was a crazy commitment. Melati is a great adventurer in fact - she grew up on a boat, that must help. But still, this country blows up in our faces. It's a mess, it's chaos, there are police everywhere for checks. Melati is hallucinating, glued to the window of the truck that transports us. But from the outside, she is confident, professional, available, like "I'm ready. Let's see what happens. I changed the law in my country, I know everything about plastic, I have been an activist for six years, I am not afraid of anything." And then we have an appointment with Mohamad, and there is a huge incident right away. Our character, who has found asylum in Sweden, is supposed to join us to start shooting, and in fact at the airport in Sweden, he is refused access to the plane because he is inadmissible in Lebanon. For our filming, this is a huge blow. We tell Melati that Mohamad is not coming. That she will be alone for this shoot in a country she does not know. That Mohamad is not free to travel because he doesn't have the right passport. This young girl has the heart of an angel, and of course she bursts into tears, and of course she takes in her face all the violence and all the horror, all the injustice, all the difficulties and the absurdity of the refugee status.

Finally, Dorothée Martin, who assisted me in the filming, manages to get Mohamad on a plane. He takes a crazy risk to come and tell us his story, which is enormous: Mohamad is a young man who fled the war in Syria, landed on the Lebanese-Syrian border, was bored to death, and in order not to sink, built, at the age of twelve, a school for the children of the camps, like himself. Today, 200 children go there every day. Mohamad runs the school from a distance, from Sweden, far from his mother, his sister, because everyone has found refuge in different places on the planet. And he tells us this without any pathos, with incredible aplomb and pride. And at the same time, as soon as he stops talking, you see the death on his face. Melati felt that too... In fact, Mohamad set the bar so high that Melati immediately understood that she would gain a lot by dropping the armour and letting herself be surprised. That the film was an adventure for us of course, but also for her. We had to leave the ego, everything we knew, or thought we knew, at the door.

Most of your books and films have been about characters who fight against something stronger than themselves. Is this a conscious thing for you?

It's a deep desire to meet courageous people, yes. I look for them, in fact. People who doubt, denounce and above all act, reassure me and help me to live. That's why my job is essentially to share their struggles and stories. I strongly hope that people will be touched in turn and that things will change. But so far, I have always encountered a kind of indifference, a "so what?". By filming Edward Snowden in Moscow, beyond the gift of his words and the miracle of this meeting, I had the impression that I was reaching the end of what I could do, like the ultimate story. And it didn't change a thing. The people, the adults for whom this documentary for Arte was intended, said to me: "Of course, he's a giant, but what do you want me to do, I'm not Snowden?"

Then I thought of my emotion when I discovered Melati and her sister Isabel, all this lucidity and wisdom encapsulated in the bodies of two very young girls; I thought of my son's questions, which were haunting me: what must I do so that I do not die? I realised that it was precisely the part of childhood that was the most magical thing in us. This is the part that all activists and whistleblowers of all ages have, by the way. That sense of justice that moves you, gets you off your ass and into the streets. So we're not all Edward Snowden, but we were all children once.

And then I had the intuition that there was something more in this generation that is linked to a form of absolute urgency. From that first shoot, I knew that was what it would be. There was the side of the ridge, the side of the front line. With the best part of ourselves on that line: the part that doesn't give up. It's a question of our relationship with the world and once again with justice, with that part of us that doesn't give in to comfort and the gaze of others. When we filmed Mohamad, he was "only" 18 years old. The same goes for most of the characters in the film. In fact, I found myself facing very grown-up people. There is something in their eyes that is very serious, but also very wise.

A month after Lebanon, you went to Malawi, then to the United States, Greece, Brazil, Uganda... We can't go into the details of all these shoots, but can you tell us about some particularly memorable moments?

One of the things I'm most proud of is that the two trips to Malawi and then later to Uganda allowed us to highlight two absolutely incredible African women. And the film shows, I think, that it is women who will save this continent... Memory, who we met in Malawi, is 22 years old today. She told us a story, her own: having refused, at the age of puberty, to subscribe to a rite of passage common to most girls in Malawi, a forced stay in an initiation camp to which the girls go, pushed by the community, the village and the mothers. As this is their first period, they are prepared for what comes next: what to do when they are a wife and mother. On the last night, a man paid by the community rapes all the girls in the initiation camp. Devastated, sometimes pregnant from the age of eleven, the girls drop out of school and pass on the same rite without question. This is the horror of what a tradition can be, the way it condemns a person but also a whole people: deprived of education, women - at least half the population - have no chance of escaping poverty. The tradition creates what economists call a poverty trap. A place from which, in essence, reduced to the most extreme submission, you will never get out. But Memory refused to go into this camp and dared to defy tradition. This set her on an extraordinary and monstrously difficult path. It's an almost perfect story of commitment: you commit yourself because you are touched in your flesh: like Memory, you resist for yourself, you save your own skin, and then those of others, who join you. There's a snowball effect, you are spotted by adults or associations, who are fighting for the same thing, but because you come up with a particular energy or an extra story to tell, because you embody this fight, it gives incredible strength to others. And you end up changing the constitution - which Memory did, moving a whole country. What it tells is a huge story of sisterhood. And a truth: you never act alone. Here, it is a struggle of women, helped by other women, who at some point convince men that things must change. «I talk to 10 girls, and out of these 10 girls, 8 will talk to 10 more girls...», and it is a kind of chain of transformation that goes through one person each time. For Melati, the power of this women's movement was a huge shock.

How did you deal with the delays and expectations associated with the global pandemic? Ironically, this pandemic is a manifestation of the multiple dysfunctions that are at the heart of the film.

In a way, we found ourselves faced with one more episode to live through, an intimate episode that will eventually transform the film. This question of time, which has become so central and tangible, revealed us in our position as a balancing act and forced us to be humble.

The trigger for everything was Melati telling me in the spring of 2016, when she was just 16 years old and I was filming her for Arte: "There is no more time to change, to convince, to fix, to survive, etc." So a year later, when I introduce her with the concept of BIGGER THAN US and tell her that I would like to shoot it with her, she puts a lot of pressure on me to go fast. I understand her eagerness, but it also annoys me. But I follow her rhythm. I say to myself: «There must be something, this urgency is good». And indeed, we start quickly. We prepare, we develop, we find the funding, we launch the survey. That's what takes the longest. Then we tour ten countries in seven months, with the impression of being embarked on a crazy adventure.

We set ourselves a hell of a schedule: for each shoot, we only spend ten days on location, and then, as soon as we get back, we tell the audience what we've been through, and they come to see free presentations. You feel that you have to reinject the material straight away, that you don't have time to wait until the end of the shoot to start sharing what you've seen. It's great, and even vital. Both the team and I learn a lot from these public presentations, which, when we are editing, will help us a lot.

And there, then, a huge brake...

Yes, something "bigger than us"... Bigger than the film and our desire to go fast. For Melati, for me, for the producers, we have to manage this expectation. At the beginning, it's not a disaster at all. We shot very quickly, but above all we shot a lot. For me, it's my first film, and I'm not going to do it justice by giving editing instructions from a distance to a team that I'm going to see between two trains and two sandwiches, it's not possible. I, who have always travelled, who spend my time between two houses, two cities, Lyon and Paris, can no longer move. Something is happening to me - I'm a bit ashamed to say it - which is of the order of a very great opportunity. First of all for my personal life: I finally have to stop, I have to consider better the people around me, and this film, I also have to consider it.

So what this health crisis is telling us is that if we want to go too fast, to go by force, by rigidity, we will break our backs. Nobody can beat time. You have to deal with it. We have to bow to it.

In the film, you can feel that Mary's work and total commitment on the island of Lesbos in Greece has also affected both of you.

Mary is a young British woman of 22 who is involved in the rescue of migrants at sea, off Lesbos. She is emblematic of the European youth who, out of ideals, have decided to save lives rather than have a coffee and eat octopus on the terrace, pretending to ignore what is happening in the cove a few hundred metres away. This is Lesbos today. Its organisation welcomes a plethora of young people every year. And often, the big question for these young people is: «How do I get back to real life after having experienced what I have experienced here?»

This is one of the fascinating aspects revealed during the filming, this sort of disturbing gap between a Western youth that could be described as «deactivated», versus this youth, totally in life, totally committed. Mohamad, in Lebanon, spoke to us about it in very strong words, as did Xiuhtezcatl, the 18-year-old boy we went to meet in Colorado.

I believe that the challenge for young people today is to want to live, to achieve, to share the values and dreams of a group. Their tribe. And living is not a life on a drip, as we too often have in Europe, a life on a drip of screens, external stimuli, trainers to buy, this kind of dazzle that we have built around teenagers, like compensations, like cuddly toys... I think there is something else to tell them, and that is why I made this film. My wildest dream is that this film will make my children, my children's friends - and beyond that, in concentric circles, as many children as possible, but not only - want to become like Mohamad, like Memory, like Melati, like René, like Winnie or Xiuhtezcatl: anchored in, with, for life. To be part of this generation that rises up to repair the world not out of fear or guilt, but because they find joy and freedom in it. And I didn't expect that. There is this phrase from the Baghavad Gita: "I am fulfilled because I fulfill." Each member of the film team was transformed by this. Melati too. Sometimes we went to the ends of the earth, to places devastated by war, hunger, fear and hatred. And what we found were people who were very much alive and who, without giving us any lessons, told us how to live. These characters in the film are ahead of us. I finally have many answers to my son's question.

THE CHANGEMAKERS

MOHAMAD AL JOUNDE - LEBANON

At the age of 12, he built a school in a camp in El Marj, on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Because having fled the war in Syria with his family, he had lost everything, starting with school. Today, 200 Syrian refugee children attend the school created by Mohamad every day. The school is not only a place of learning. But a place of safety.

Mohamad believes in the incredible strength of refugees, especially children, and the transformative power of their stories. In Lebanon, 1 in 4 people are refugees. 54% of these refugees are children (UNHCR).



MARY FINN - GREECE

Since she was 18, she has been involved in sea rescue operations for migrants off the coast of Greece, Turkey or Libya, or in welcoming them in camps in Greece. She bears witness to the situation of refugees in Europe and its consequences on European politics.

Today, Mary is also training to be a midwife so that her emergency humanitarian aid work is even more relevant and beneficial. There are 80 million refugees today, of which only 16% live in Western countries. There will be 200 million by 2050 (UNHCR).

RENE SILVA - BRAZIL

At the age of 11, he created the first media to share information and stories about his favela written by and for the community, «Voz das Comunidades». He and his team of 16 journalists tell the story of their daily lives of poverty, inequality, racism and above all resilience.

Faced with an increasingly dictatorial state and explosive social inequalities, René believes in grassroots and resistance journalism and the power of communities. 397 activists and journalists were killed worldwide in 2020, 264 of them in Latin America (ISF and IFG).





MEMORY BANDA - MALAWI

She dared to challenge the tradition of institutionalised rape of young girls in dedicated initiation camps. Stopped the practice nationwide, and then got Malawi's Constitution changed to raise the legal age from 15 to 18 to protect girls from forced marriage.

Memory is now dedicated to empowering girls by securing their rights and keeping them in school. In Malawi, 42% of girls are married before the age of 18. Globally, this is 1 in 5 girls (Unicef).

WINNIE TUSHABE - UGANDA

Launched YICE, an initiative to teach the poorest people, refugees in Uganda, the basics of permaculture so that they can survive on lands destroyed by pesticides. Food security and the development of bartering and petty trade enable them to secure their children's access to school. Winnie looks after nearly 900 families and has created more than 50 jobs for young people and women. For Winnie, women, and in particular women farmers, will save Africa. 84% of the continent's soil is destroyed or severely damaged by pesticides (FAO).



XIUTEZCATL MARTINEZ - USA

He took the state of Colorado and then the US state to court for not protecting future generations. Imposed a moratorium on shale gas development in Colorado. Banned the use of pesticides in children's parks.

Today, he uses his art, music and rap to bring his fight for environmental justice and to defend his heritage: the wisdom of the first peoples.



MELATI WIJSEN - INDONESIA

Since the age of 12, she and her sister Isabel, then 10, have been fighting plastic pollution with their Bye Bye Plastic Bags initiative. Together they mobilised thousands of children and tourists and obtained a decree banning the sale and distribution of plastic bags, packaging and straws on their island. Melati believes in the power of her generation and is now developing Youthtopia, an education and tool-sharing platform for young people who want to get involved.



INTERVIEW WITH MELATI WIJSEN

What image of Flore Vasseur comes immediately to mind when you think of her and your relationship?

When I met Flore for the first time, I had the feeling that I was talking to someone I already knew: the understanding was immediate, everything seemed simple, obvious. In April 2016, Flore had travelled to Bali to make a documentary about the fight to ban plastic bags that I was leading with my sister, and at that time, we were meeting film crews almost every week. But this particular shoot had a special flavour: for Flore, it was clearly not just another job. It was much more, and generally speaking, everything she does is 'much more'. There's something of a struggle in the way she goes about it. I must have been 15 years old when I met her for the first time, and it made a huge impression on me.

In what way and how was this feeling of immediate «closeness» between the two of you decisive for the rest of the adventure?

From that first time in Bali, I realised that Flore and I continued to talk long after the shoot, off camera, even though we had just spent two hours in front of the camera. In the street, in the café, we never stopped, we had so many subjects to talk about. It was this avalanche of crossed words that made me think we were going to become great friends.

Flore is obsessed with allowing your voice to be heard, and heard accurately. When she interviews a person, she takes a lot of time, comes back several times to points that you may not understand, and makes sure that you have really been able to express yourself as you wanted. To describe her presence in front of the person she is interviewing, I would call it «active listening». Her listening skills and expectations push you to be better in front of her. It is all the more galvanising because we are not of the same generation. For Flore to put so much energy into getting the word out to young activists all over the world is, for the 20-year-old me, very moving.

You weren't used to this quality of listening?

When the first shoot for BIGGER THAN US took place, in the spring of 2019, I was in the midst of a period of discouragement, frustration, and probably a form of burn out. It had been two years since our first meeting, and this period of total militant investment had left me drained. And all the more so because, in my fight to ban plastics in Indonesia, I had the feeling that things weren't moving fast enough... By offering me the chance to be part of BIGGER THAN US, Flore awakened something in me, she gave me back my faith and my energy. The shooting of the film and all those trips to the other side of the world were a response to a feeling of solitude that I felt growing inside me. Suddenly, it was no longer just about me, my frustrations, my impatience, my fatigue, but about something universal, a collective impulse, something to be made together, to be told together.

The film's purpose and its title are very clear: for each participant, it is a question of being part of something «bigger»...

Exactly. The film is bigger than us, it goes beyond us, it is part of a movement. I remember a few moments during filming when I would stand back, for example during a lunch break. From a distance, I would observe Flore, the team of technicians, and also these remarkable young people who are Winnie, Rene, Xiuhtezcatl, the «characters» of the film. And then I said to myself, a little unsettled: why me? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do among all these people? But the answer was simple and brought me back to a lot of modesty: I just had to stay focused on «the bigger picture», that is to say the human project of this film, which is a choral film, and never put any ego in my way of positioning myself.

During the shootings, Flore and I walked and progressed together. We have a very honest and direct relationship, made possible by a deep mutual respect. We tell each other everything in a very frank manner, and we have even had some arguments. But that's lucky: not many people are able to do that, to be so honest in the way they say things to each other, even in a disagreement. We have two strong personalities, but they have blended into this project and this collective impetus that is bigger than us.

When you went to each of the countries where the filming took place, was your state of mind always the same?

I got a huge kick out of the first shoot in Lebanon. I had high expectations, and I already felt, without having met him, a great complicity with Mohamad. But just after we arrived, we learned that Mohamad was stuck in Sweden: they wouldn't let him come to Lebanon because of a visa problem - a problem that was later solved. When I realised that his Syrian refugee status prevented him from travelling as freely as I did, I fell apart. I had flown for hours, I was there, happy, free... and he wasn't. It was a terrible shock. Suddenly, all these questions of nationality, passport and identity blew up in my face, and this experience burst the little bubble of comfort in which I was floating... Finally, we were able to shoot with Mohamad, and I found in him a kind of soul mate. On the way back to Bali, I couldn't sleep on the plane, I wrote down pages of notebooks - which I also did later on, when I came back from each trip.

After that first experience in Lebanon, my approach to these trips changed. On the plane to Brazil, to Uganda, to Greece, I always tried to empty my mind. To organise my thoughts so that I had no expectations. I would read the notes and documentation that the production gave me, but towards the end of the flight I would close my eyes and let the emptiness and the feeling of the unknown take over.

In which country did you feel the most «far away from everything», far from home, far from what you know?

In Malawi, in the company of Memory, who is a young woman with amazing courage in an environment where women's voices are so undermined. I think this sequence in the film shows my admiration and emotion for what she is doing. She exudes a lot of power. I remember a car ride with her on the way to the Malawi parliament. As she was wearing heels for the occasion, she took them off and drove barefoot. That simple little moment had such an impact on me... On another note, meeting Mary, the young American woman who helps migrants on the island of Lesbos, also changed me. She is the most people-oriented person I know, selfishness is totally foreign to her, and that made me grow. I learned so much during these trips: step by step, I was won over by subjects that I hadn't had time to grasp in my life, the issue of migration, access to education, the fight for women's emancipation, food, extreme poverty...

In addition to a more intimate knowledge of the crucial, universal subjects addressed in the film, what did the film bring you?

It gave me a renewed sense of deep dialogue, of meeting people in the most human, most complete sense. I received an education in which these values were central: taking the time to go towards the other, taking the time to listen to someone who does not have the same experience as you. But this appetite for knowledge faded a little as my activist work in Indonesia took over. The film brought me back to that, to that pleasure and necessity. *BIGGER THAN US* has an impact on me every day. The pandemic could have forced us to cloister ourselves, to withdraw, but with Youthtopia, the organisation in which I am active in Indonesia, we have done exactly the opposite, multiplying the spaces of speech, the online seminars, the conferences via screens. It's obviously not ideal, but it's still a way forward.

When will the film be a success in your eyes?

It will be a success if we see that people who see it feel empowered. If they say to themselves that they too can act, that they have a role to play, however modest, and that it is up to them to get moving. The film says that, it tells us that everyone should be inspired by these young people full of life and courage that Flore and her team went to meet. These boys and girls, on whom fear seems to have no hold, have set themselves in motion at a very young age, because they know that time is running out. I hope that they will be a source of inspiration for as many people as possible.

Interview by Emmanuel Tellier



PRODUCERS

DENIS CAROT

I created Elzévir Films in 1993 with my partner Marie Masmonteil. Since then, we have produced more than 50 films for cinema and television, such as Live and become (Radu Mihaileanu, 2005), Home (Yann Arthus-Bertrand, 2009), The Source (Radu Mihaileanu, 2011) Leadership (Christian Rouaud, 2011), Party girl (Marie Amachoukeli, Claire Burger and Samuel Theis, 2014), etc. many of them dealing with environmental and social issues.

When discovering what Melati and her peers were capable of in their own communities, it was clear for me that I should participate in this movement in the making, and do my best to give this documentary the wider impact possible.

MARION COTILLARD

For more than 20 years I have been involved in environmental and social causes, trying to raise awareness for a more equitable world. Becoming a mum, I felt right away that my kids had so much to teach me. The new generation, they are choosing life and dignity. And they are showing us the way.

This is why I have decided to produce this film, and help Flore to shine a light on Melati and all these young activists who want to make a difference.



CAST

Melati Wijzen
Mary Finn
Memory Banda
Rene Silva
Mohamad Al Jounde
Xiuhtezcatl Martinez
Winnie Tushabe

CREW

Director FLORE VASSEUR
Writing credits FLORE VASSEUR
Produced by DENIS CAROT
MARION COTILLARD
LUDOVIC DARDENAY
FLORE VASSEUR
Music RÉMI BOUBAL
Cinematography CHRISTOPHE OFFENSTEIN
Editing AURÉLIE JOURDAN