



“Balthazar has...created a tale of mythic proportions, elevating his character to hero status.” – **Film Focus**

Directed by Nic Balthazar



**The Netherlands/Belgium/ 2007/ Drama/ In Dutch/ with English subtitles/ 93 min.**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Ben is different and his life is a universe all unto itself. He has Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism that prevents normal communication, and while he is a courageous hero—BEN X—in the fantasy on-line gaming world that consumes him, in his daily life Ben is tormented by bullies and ignored by apathetic teachers. As the bullies' relentless attacks push him over the edge and out of control, his on-line dream girl, Scarlite, appears to him and helps him devise a perfect plan to confront the bullies and make them pay for their torment. Director Nic Balthazar's dazzling debut blends fantasy and harsh social realism. Based on a true story, Balthazar brings us an utterly original and important film.

## **FESTIVALS AND AWARDS**

WINNER – Grand Prize, Audience Award for Most Popular Film, and Ecumenical Jury Prize for exploration of ethical and social values – **Montreal World FF**

WINNER – FIPRESCI Award – **Istanbul International Film Festival**

WINNER – Audience Award and Director's Choice Award **Sedona International Film Festival**

WINNER – Heineken Red Star Award, **Palm Springs International Film Festival**

OFFICIAL SELECTION – **Berlin International Film Festival**  
**Seattle International Film Festival**  
**Cleveland International Film Festival**  
**Santa Barbara International Film Festival**  
**Cleveland International Film Festival**  
**Wisconsin Film Festival**

OFFICIAL SUBMISSION – Belgium's entry for the **Academy Awards**

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

Nic Balthazar: "It is sometimes said you do not find a story, the story finds you. This may well have been the case here. One sunny afternoon in Brussels I was asked whether I would like to write a book. 'For youngsters who do not read', they said. 'How convenient', I said. 'Because I am a writer who does not write'. Around the same time a boy of 17 leaped to his death from Gravensteen castle in Ghent. It turned out that the boy had a mild form of autism and had virtually been harassed and tormented to death. 'I will never get over this', said his mother in an interview. The same night I started writing a story. A book which, although it would not give her any real comfort, would nevertheless provide her with a measure of sympathy and understanding. It would be a story about the harassment and torture of those who are unable to defend themselves. I typed out the title, 'Niets Was Alles Wat Hij Zei,' in English: 'Nothing Was All He Said.' It had to be a book full of suspense, with an element of surprise, a kind of thriller. Something like a movie, I thought. Everyone likes a movie."

# THE BACKGROUND OF *BEN X*

## Belgian teen's death shaped *Ben X*

By Ken Eisner

Belgium's Nic Balthazar was a movie critic before he became a novelist and movie director—a rather unusual progression, he is the first to admit.

"It's very strange to be on the other side of the process," says the first-timer, in English, and with almost no accent. He's in Toronto to promote *BEN X*. That sobriquet is the screen name of the hero of his affecting movie about a picked-upon Flemish teenager. When said quickly, *Ben X* also sounds like "I am nothing" in the film's main language, Dutch. The kid in question suffers from Asperger's syndrome, a fairly high-functioning form of autism, and he says most things quickly or not at all.

The movie actually began when a government agency asked Balthazar, a well-known TV personality on the Flemish side of the country, if he would write a book about bullying, to be aimed at hard-to-reach young people.

"I always say I was a writer who didn't write," he puts forth with a chuckle, "doing things for readers who don't read. The ministry of education was looking for this, and I would say that a lot of real writers probably declined before they got to me."

Actually, he was already heading toward filmmaking, and beginning his own, unrelated screenplay, when approached for this project. He initially struggled with how to respond to the request when, the same day, he heard news of a local teen who jumped to his death from a castle near Ghent. Balthazar learned that the boy was mildly autistic and was the subject of persistent school torment. And so he had found the core of his story.

"I am religiously convinced that you should say yes to everything you are offered. I have been doing that for 40 years. Almost the whole time, I was a frustrated, very mediocre actor who dreamt about doing theatre and making films."

Remarkably, the left-field book offer led to both doors being opened, in sequence. "I wrote it so quickly, in the space of one vacation. I thought of the book more as a screenplay, with a kind of *Sixth Sense* sensibility, so it would be a page turner. And I quickly learned what they always say about fiction: you invent these characters and they will do crazy things beyond your control."

And crazy things kept happening to Balthazar. The novel was an instant smash in Belgium. Then he got a call from established actor Roel Vanderstukken (whom the author calls "the George Clooney of the North Countries"), who wanted to adapt the thing into a solo performance on-stage. They worked on the production together, mixing new-media elements with monologues from inside the troubled boy's head.

"There were film loops and video games, and we tried to piece [them] together with the script to make stories out of this visual soup." That worked out so well, Balthazar was next contacted by the small country's biggest production

house, MMG, which wanted to turn the book and play into a feature film. Greg Timmermans stepped into the demanding role of the anxious high schooler. And the Code master's electronic-game company agreed to help integrate the live-action material with the real game *ArchLord*, with which Ben is obsessed.

"I wanted to show two sides of technology without moralizing. On the one hand, Ben is subjected to all this cyber-bullying, where everything is filmed and used to torment kids. But at the same time, the video game is his refuge from all that."

Of course, only a portion of the tale would deal with such digital concerns. More would require the old-fashioned virtues (and flaws) of using flesh-and-blood actors—in this case with varying degrees of experience, in life and on-screen. "This is another area where my career, if you can call it that, has paid off," says the 44-year-old neophyte. "I'd have to say that Ken Loach and Mike Leigh are my heroes, and I borrowed a lot from their method of encouraging actors to improvise and develop their characters in rehearsals before shooting. And we needed that, because we only had 25 days to make this."

The film—not a tragedy, its director is quick to point out—has also been a phenomenon at home. It has already helped open discussions in a country where 10 percent of teens admit that they have attempted suicide at some point. Roughly the same number now say, they are afraid to open e-mails because they don't know what torture awaits them.

"This is all part of what I call the fascism of cool. There's a widespread distrust of not just anyone different but anyone perceived as being intelligent. What did Bush's people do to Al Gore in 2000? They portrayed him as a nerd and bullied him out of the race. I, for one, think there should be a lot more nerds."

## **DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

### **Nicholas Balthazar**

Born in Ghent in Belgium on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1964, he appeared in a Broadway musical in his teens. He studied literature and drama in Ghent and began writing his first theatre reviews for "De Morgen" at the age of 21. He later worked as a radio and television journalist and made his first forays into directing. His 2002 novel "Niets Was Alles Wat Hij Zei" ("Nothing Was All He Said") was a huge success. BEN X is his first film as a director.

## **SELECT ACTORS' BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Greg Timmermans**

An absolute newcomer. An absolute revelation. BEN X is the first feature film of this young theatre-actor, fresh out of school.

### **Laura Verlinden**

A sensation! Laura Verlinden is without any doubt the up and coming young star of the Flemish cinema. Even before graduating from acting-school she not only stars in BEN X, but also in another young feature film 'The Last Summer.' Immediately after playing in BEN X, she went on to clinch the female lead in a very prestigious TV-epic.

### **Marijke Pinoy**

A first and foremost celebrated theatre-actress, both in Belgium and in the rest of Europe, she has received many awards and much acclaim even at the prestigious Theatre Festival in Avignon. She has worked in television and cinema for more than 20 years, and also played the mother in the theatre production that was the basis for BEN X.

### **Pol Goossen**

Pol Goossen is an absolute celebrity in Belgium, being by far the biggest star of the most popular daily soap series 'Thuis'. He has however always remained a distinguished theatre actor as well. He is very reluctant to take on roles in the cinema or television. But was delighted to be a part of the BEN X cast.

# CREDITS

## Crew

Director	Nic Balthazar
Writer	Nic Balthazar
Based on the original story by	Nic Balthazar
Production Design	Kurt Loyens
Image	Lou Berghmans
Sound	Coen Gravendaal
Casting	Gunter Schmid
1 <sup>st</sup> Assistant Director	Eddy Stevesyns
Art Direction	Kurt Loyens
Costumes	Heleen Heintjes
Editing	Phillipe Ravoet
Music	Praga Khan
Sound Designer	Peter Flamman
Production Manager	Johan van den Driessche

## Cast

Ben X	Greg Timmermans
Scarlite	Laura Verlinden
Mother	Marijke Pinoy
Father	Pol Goossen
Bogaert	Titus De Voogdt
Desmedt	Maarten Claeysens
Sabine	Tania Van der Sanden
Religion Teacher	Johan Heldenbergh
Second Teacher	Jakob Beks
Psychiatrist	Peter De Graef