

Blu-ray Review: The Dardennes' 'La Promesse,' 'Rosetta' Arrive on Criterion

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on August 28, 2012 - 8:41am

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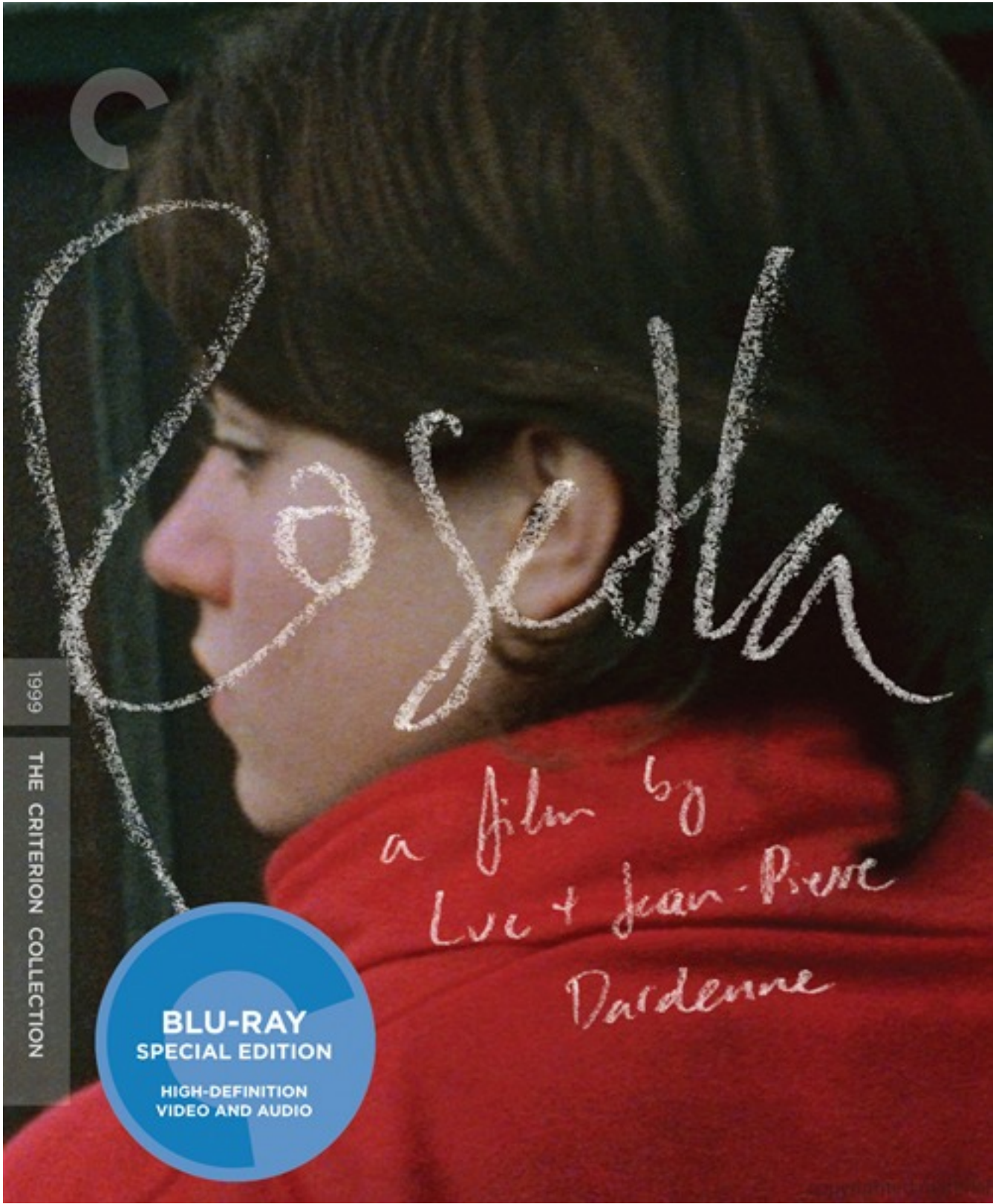
CHICAGO – When a film has gotten viewers so invested in a character's plight that it prompts them to shout at the screen, it's clear that they are in the hands of a master filmmaker. Consider the legendary stories from the initial theatrical run of Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho," when audiences found themselves screaming at Vera Miles to not investigate the fruit cellar, where her imminent doom appeared to be waiting.

After helming six celebrated narrative features, the Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne have proven to be masters of suspense in their own right. Though their films often run only a hair over 90 minutes, they leave the audience feeling drained. By the time they reach their third act, I always find myself perched on the edge of my seat while holding my breath with the hope that no harm will come to the protagonists. Yet while Hitch accompanied even his grisliest scenes with jet-black humor, the life-or-death stakes in the Dardennes' work feel far more dire.



Blu-ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

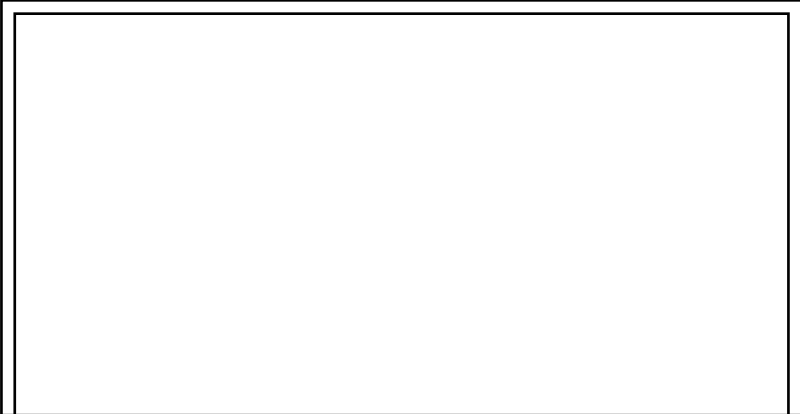
In their spellbinding 1996 breakthrough effort, "La Promesse," the duo fused their sensibilities as documentary filmmakers with a story that felt wholly authentic. J  mie Renier was only 15 years old when he took the lead role of Igor, a young boy who assists his father, Roger (Olivier Gourmet), in renting apartments to illegal immigrants and draining them of their money. It's clear that Roger views his clients as something less than human, while Igor's limited worldview has been shaped entirely by his father. His studies at school and advancement at work are consistently interrupted by Roger, who seems hellbent on having his son follow in his lawless footsteps. Twenty-five minutes pass before the inciting incident occurs, but this opening act is crucial in getting the audience fully involved in the rhythms of the characters' daily routines. Suddenly, their reliable pattern is disrupted. As the police head toward the apartment for a routine investigation, one of immigrants falls off a scaffold and lies dying on the ground. Before he loses consciousness, he asks Igor to promise him that he'll look after his wife, Assita (Assita Ouedraogo), and their young child. Igor makes a last-minute attempt to save the man, but once Roger comes upon the bloodied body, he immediately hides it from view and later buries it in concrete. He lies to Assita that her husband merely vanished without a trace, while harboring plans to do away with her.



Rosetta was released on Blu-ray and DVD on August 14, 2012.
Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

As Igor gradually awakens to his father's corruption and begins to feel flickers of rebellion well up inside of him, Renier's performance is flat-out captivating. He's well-matched by Gourmet, whose beady eyes and large girth give him an inherently frightening presence. He can turn on a dime from warmly paternal to savagely monstrous, and the threat of violence is always palpable. There's a tremendously powerful moment when Igor—overwhelmed with confusion and guilt—tightly embraces Assita, whose anger and paranoia melts into a haze of bewilderment. And then there's the scene late in the film that caused me to literally holler at the screen, just like those audiences did during "Psycho" over half a century ago. If you've never seen a Dardenne Brothers film before, the pristine Criterion edition of "La Promesse" is a splendid place to start. It is one of the best films of the '90s.

Also new on Criterion is the Dardennes' follow-up effort, 1999's celebrated "Rosetta," which finally garnered them the widespread critical acclaim they deserved. It's no less masterful and intense than their previous feature, yet it's somewhat more difficult to love since the life of its titular heroine is so uncompromisingly bleak that it becomes oppressive. In an astonishing performance that earned her the Best Actress award at Cannes, Émilie Dequenne plays Rosetta, a world-weary teen forced to care for her alcoholic wretch of a mother in a mud-caked trailer park, while literally fighting tooth and nail for stable employment. She charges onscreen like a force of nature, clawing at the walls in protest when she realizes that her latest job has eluded her grasp. Potential friendship materializes in the form of a compassionate young man, Riquet (Fabrizio Rongione), who invites her to dance to his amateurish band in the film's tenderest and most humorous scene. Yet Rosetta's desire for a job supersedes her need for a relationship and threatens to alienate her from everyone who cares for her. The jittery camera remains so close to Dequenne's face that it creates suspense by withholding the details of her surroundings. This is a claustrophobic, often devastating picture bound to put your stomach in knots, but rest assured that the final moment—when it arrives—is utter perfection.





La Promesse was released on Blu-ray and DVD on August 14, 2012.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

"La Promesse" and "Rosetta" are presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.66:1 aspect ratio) and each include an hour-long conversation between critic Scott Foundas and the Dardennes in Liège, which has provided the setting for much of their work. For "La Promesse," the directors reflect on just how crucial of a turning point this was in their careers, since their previous picture, 1992's "Je pense à vous," was a conventionally made flop. The Dardennes decided to wage war not only on "French quality" but on their own failures by avoiding every technique that made filmmaking feel like factory work. They decided to write their own scripts and devise their own production schedules that allowed them to shoot their scenes in sequential order. They also switched to a bare-bones crew in order to create as little distance as possible between them and the actors. Much of the subject matter for the narrative features was gleaned from the hundreds of interviews with working-class citizens that they conducted for their documentaries. "Rosetta" was criticized by leftists in France who championed the popular opinion that a life devoted to work resulted in alienation (the Dardennes admit that they were staunchly opposed to such a viewpoint). Since the film marked the screen debut of 17-year-old Dequenne, the directors were initially nervous when they saw her start to visibly blush on-camera during early takes.

Yet it wasn't long before Dequenne allowed herself to become completely immersed within her characters' skin, and in an excellent 18-minute interview on the "Rosetta" disc, the actress says she was freed from her self-consciousness while under the Dardennes' guidance. Opting for long takes rather than traditional shot/reverse-shot coverage, the directors allowed their actors to never be overtly aware of where the camera was at any particular moment. As for her character's animalistic walking style, Dequenne says that it was formed by the bulk of her clothing as well as shoes that caused her weight to shift forward. For her audition, the young actress was asked to carry a stack of ten chairs (representing Rosetta's gas tank) before collapsing in tears. On the "La Promesse" featurette, Renier echoes this story by describing how the directors preferred their actors to do things for real on-camera (thus requiring the actor to learn how to ride a moped). Rather than intellectualize about character motivation, the Dardennes would rather have their actors become so involved in their characters' universe that the nuances of their psyches are naturally conveyed through their body language. Gourmet also appears on both discs to provide his own delightful anecdotes and jokes that while the directors continue to cast him in their work, his roles have gotten progressively smaller to the point where he'll likely be seen as a "subliminal image" in their next film.

'La Promesse' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Jérémie Renier, Olivier Gourmet and Assita Ouedraogo. It was written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. It was released on August 14, 2012. It is not rated.

'Rosetta' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Émilie Dequenne, Fabrizio Rongione, Olivier Gourmet, Anne Yernaux and Bernard Marbaix. It was written and directed by Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. It was released on August 14, 2012. It is not rated.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

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