

'The Broken Circle Breakdown' reviewed by Gilda Williams for *Sight & Sound*, November 2013

Belgium/The Netherlands 2012

Director: Felix van Groeningen

Certificate 15 111m 45s

Spoiler alert: this review reveals a plot twist You'd be hard-pressed to think of a Big Theme missing from *The Broken Circle Breakdown*. Love. Loss. Death. Heartbreak. God. Faith. Guilt. Parenthood. Dreams. Rites of passage. The role of friends, music, ritual and home in the cycle of life. The cycle of life. In this big love story between bluegrass-playing cowboy Didier and lovely blonde tattoo artist Elise, set somewhere near Ghent, Belgian director Felix van Groeningen also manages to cram in some surprisingly accomplished traditional American music, an immensely funny children's birthday-party scene with screaming six-year-olds cavorting hysterically to pop music and one of the sexiest seductions ever, in which corny country-and-western lyrics allow smitten Didier to voice the words of desire he is thinking while beauty Elise cheers approvingly in consent, visibly turned on. All this and more in your basic boy-meets-girl, boy-and-girl-find-perfect-love, boy-and-girl-face-great-tragedy-together, perfect-love-cannot-endure-the-pain plotline.

Broken Circle's opening sequence -- a seemingly all-American bluegrass quintet wailing out traditional Appalachian harmonies as the opening credits flash unpronounceable Flemish names -- immediately declares that any familiar ground will be transformed into unexpected territory. We later return to this same onstage footage to discover that it marks the precise moment when Elise first falls for Didier: that is, exactly when our leading lady first sets desiring eyes on her man, we too catch our initial glimpse of Didier, whose ups and downs will hold us gripped for the next 110 minutes. The film covers fairly tested movie ground: finding a mate, marriage, birth, the tragic illness of a child, break-ups and breakdowns. But *Broken Circle* pounds along with such intensely believable and dramatic peaks and lows that it leaves you gasping by film's end, when dying Elise might -- or not? -- return miraculously to life.

The film relentlessly swings in spirit, at times soaring to great heights of joy -- Didier and Elise finding each other, the birth of beautiful daughter Maybelle, the music and friends they share -- only to plummet to depths of sorrow as cancer steals little Maybelle away, or when Elise refuses to take her estranged husband's outstretched hand on stage, which we'd expected as the set's -- and the film's -- final redemptive moment. Expert non-chronological editing enhances the film's gruelling rollercoaster feel: for example, a doctor's devastating prognosis suddenly cuts to giddy heights of erotic pleasure seven years earlier, as the couple's once-in-a-lifetime-if-you're-lucky passion is amply consummated. This extreme splicing technique turns mildly incomprehensible in the last third of the film, when familiar overlapping narratives are interrupted by the repeated insertion of unexplained shots, showing an ambulance-bound Elise and a frantic Didier racing behind. These non sequiturs mostly end up serving as warnings for an emotionally exhausted audience, who are given the chance to prepare for the film's announced unhappy ending.

The Broken Circle Breakdown plays like a four-hour epic yet has been condensed into comfortably under two. Constantly you worry that the movie will collapse under the strain of more raw emotions but it rarely falters and never lapses into the predictable or the sentimental. Even quasi-crige-making scenes escape incipient awfulness and turn compelling, such as when fabulous new girlfriend Elise -- pure heaven in the sack -- reveals that she can sing like Loretta Lynn too, belting out pitch-perfect country to the astonishment of all (movie viewers included). When the distraught and humiliated Didier unexpectedly launches into a lengthy, out-of-the-blue antireligious tirade at the close of the group's fanciest ever gig, we join everybody on screen as they watch his public breakdown aghast, uncomfortably sharing the embarrassment of Elise and the band. When the dying Maybelle imagines a star as the shining soul of a dead bird she'd found earlier, the focus diverts away from the little girl's made-for-TV-style hopefulness and turns instead to Didier's struggle to comfort his daughter without betraying his deep mistrust of any such 'spiritual' conjectures. He fails, and when, despite dad's loving attempts to help her, Maybelle runs away in disgust, still clutching her bird and her fantasy, we get the message: *Broken Circle* is never going to sugar-coat life's disappointments. As Didier slowly turns more fanatical in his anti-religious intolerance, we grasp Van Groeningen's desire to show how events not only shape our lives but determine our innermost beliefs and very sense of self. Elise's copiously inked body -- with partially erased tattoos of past lovers always leaving some trace -- becomes a symbol of accumulating emotional scars, forcibly 'surfacing' on her pale skin.

Broken Circle is rife with such borderline hackneyed yet functioning symbolism, such as the innumerable roads, cars, trucks and ambulances perpetually crisscrossing the screen: Didier's pick-up driving away at speed, threatening to take love with it, or desperately racing after a speeding ambulance, literally chasing a dying dream. Slow-moving cars follow a gloomy funeral cortege accompanying a small white casket to its miserable destination, or act as sound-booths-on-wheels for screaming in rage, or as claustrophobic places for steamy impromptu sex. Throughout, automobiles literally drive the story. Another symbolically loaded site is an odd entrance-veranda of glass built on the front of the house -- part hothouse, part limbo -- that Elise insists be built and Didier grudgingly erects to his own bizarre specifications. Its transparency is able both to kill living things -- birds crash into it and die -- and unmask Didier's intolerance for his wife's need for some supernatural faith, as she begins to believe that Maybelle is magically returning to her in the form of a crow and, this time, at last, must be protected from death.

Broken Circle is well served by its impressive leads, Veerle Baetens (the standout) and Johan Heldenbergh, who co-wrote the play from which the film is adapted. Baetens's acting talents are given a real workout: she proves equally convincing first as pure temptation, irresistible in her stars-and-stripes bikini, then as grim-faced mother, absorbing more bad news from her daughter's physician.

Set between 1999 and 2006, Broken Circle weirdly depicts a digital-free world; everyone speaks face to face and there is barely a laptop or mobile phone in sight. The story is 'timeless', dramatising basic human experiences explored at least since the Greeks and the narrative could have been adapted to any period. Nonetheless, the film exploits the early 21st-century contrast between the narrow-minded, fundamentalist America of George W. Bush (often seen on TV) and the fantasy-soaked, home-on-the-range US that Didier imagines, where lonesome immigrants invent bluegrass by playing the instruments of home -- the Italian with his mandolin, the few on his fiddle -- resulting in another symbol, this time of dreams versus reality, wished-for harmony versus real-life discord. The scene in which Didier's fury at Bush's Christian myopia explodes turns somewhat over-wordy, contrasting with the film's portrayal of life events eating characters up more inwardly than out. This change in pace late in the film ultimately acts as a welcome relief for viewers, able to refuel emotionally before facing the final slew of misfortunes still left in the tank.

Possibly the only Big Theme absent here is money, which is oddly never mentioned, never a concern for otherwise worry-plagued Elise and Didier. Our world, Van Groeningen seems to say, places excessive emphasis on money -- either too much of it or too little -- as the root of human troubles. Money's got nothing to do with it: life is, in turns, impossibly beautiful and unbearably painful, by nature. It's as if Van Groeningen has somehow translated a hokey country-and-western ballad, all overheated passion and maudlin heartbreak, into something genuinely sublime: an oddly uplifting yet desperately sad movie. Multiple rounds of strong drink followed by intense all-night conversation are the only worthy aftermath to this mindblowing film.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by Dirk Impens

Screenplay

Carl Joos Felix van Groeningen With the collaboration of Charlotte Vandermeersch Based upon The Broken Circle Breakdown Featuring the Cover-ups of Alabama by Johan Heldenbergh and Mieke Dobbels

Director of Photography

Ruben Impens

Editing

Nico Leunen

Art Direction

Kurt Rigolle

Music

Bjorn Eriksson

Sound

Jan Deca

Costume Design

Ann Lauwerys

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Production Companies

Menuet & Topkapi Films present with the support of Flanders Audiovisual Fund, Nederlands Filmfonds, Eurimages. Kinopolis Film Distribution, Lumière, 1 VTM, Belgacom, Tax Shelter of the Federal Government

of Belgium. Casa Kafka Pictures. Casa Kafka Pictures Movie Tax Shelter empowered by Belfius A Felix van Groeningen film

Cast

Johan Heldenbergh

Didier Bontinck, 'Monroe'

Veerle Baetens

Elise Vandevelde, 'Alabama'

Nell Cartrysse

Maybelle

Geert Van Rampelberg

William

Nils de Caster

Jock

Robby Cleiren

Jimmy

Bert Huysentruyt

Jef

Jan Bijvoet

Koen

Dolby Digital In Colour [2.35:1] Subtitles

Distributor Studiocanal Limited

10,057 ft+8 frames

Ghent, Belgium, 2006. Six-year-old Maybelle is dying of cancer; parents Elise and Didier are distraught. Seven years earlier. Bluegrass-loving Didier, who lives in a caravan, meets Elise, who works in a tattoo parlour. They fall in love. Elise grows fond of his bluegrass music, later singing lead in his band. She unexpectedly announces that she is pregnant; at first unhappily surprised, Didier soon begins refurbishing a real home for the family. They marry, baby Maybelle arrives and they are happy. But when Maybelle is diagnosed with cancer, Elise and Didier's lives revolve around hospital visits and attempted cures. Maybelle dies. Friends and family rally round the grief-stricken couple but Elise is inconsolable. When Didier tries to help, she makes unjust accusations and they argue. Afterwards, even as they attempt to mend their lives, Elise grows remote, and Didier more frustrated. Eventually Elise leaves.

Visiting Elise at work to try to woo her back, Didier discovers that she has changed her name to 'Alabama' -- a change he mocks. At their band's gig later that week, she renames him -- at his request -- 'Monroe', after his favourite musician. She sings sadly; he offers her his hand but she refuses. At the end of the gig, Didier explodes into a bizarre antireligious tirade. Elise/ Alabama runs off. Searching for her late that night, Didier finds her dying from a suicidal overdose. He rushes her to hospital but it seems too late. As the band sing by her bedside, we see her most recent tattoo: 'Alabama Monroe'.

A woman for all seasons: Veerle Baetens's stand-out performance takes her from seductive temptress to distraught mother

The saddest music in the world