



# Finding love in unexpected places

## Moscow, Belgium

*Moscow, Belgium* is the uplifting debut feature film from director, Christophe Van Rompaey, who tells a universal story of finding love when you least expect it.

Who would have thought that a mundane trip to the supermarket could change someone's life? Well that is exactly what happens to Matty, the central character in Christophe Van Rompaey's award winning debut feature film, *Moscow, Belgium*. The film recounts the story of the human heart and the complexities of relationships with those we love — from partners to children and everyone in between. Diverting away from the hegemony of Hollywood romantic comedies, which often leave the subject of love exhausted and see a slight variation on the same theme; boy meets girl, they fall in love, an obstacle gets in the way, but it turns out perfect for everyone in the end, and the joyous couple live happily ever after. *Moscow, Belgium* breaks the mould; the characters are refreshingly imperfect in their attempts to find love, and feel alive. Everyone can identify with them.

Switching from the classic locations for romance, Van Rompaey chose the heavily populated working class neighbourhood, Moscow on the outskirts of Ghent, Belgium as the setting for this story. In Ghent, the Tramway 4's final stop is Moscow, a name that constantly amuses tourists who smile at the idea of a tram that could take them all the way from Ghent to the Russian capital. *Moscow, Belgium* begins with the principal character, Matty (Barbara Sarafian) a 41-year-old mother of three who is struggling on her own, after her art teacher husband, Werner (Johan Heldenbergh) left her for a total of five months, two weeks and three days.

Werner's new love interest is Gail, a 22-year-old former student. Matty's situation becomes worse when she bumps her car into a stationary truck in the car park of a supermarket. The outraged truck driver 29-year-old, Johnny (Jurgen Delnaet) climbs down from his cabin and noticing a dent in his bumper proceeds to launch a tirade of abuse at Matty. Matty is no shrinking violet, and fires back some heated words. Their discussion descends into an argument and the police intervene.

After the confrontation, Matty returns home with her damaged car and decides to take a relaxing bath. The phone rings and her eldest daughter, 17-year-old Vera (Anemone Valcke) answers, passing it to Matty, who finds that it's Johnny, who saw her telephone number on the police documents. A few days later the intercom at Matty's flat rings — Johnny emerges and proceeds to fix the damaged boot of Matty's car. Matty's children gaze on in astonishment as they witness the emotive interaction between her and Johnny. Matty agrees to go for a one-off drink with Johnny, and so the conflicted story begins — the last thing Matty needs is another man in her life.

*Moscow, Belgium* is an impressive debut feature film, a love story, which is packed with drama and humour. Van Rompaey was born in 1970 and has worked in a variety of roles in the film industry since graduating from film school in Belgium. His diverse roles include working as a casting director, an assistant director, and first assistant director. Van Rompaey has previously directed a number of short films. However, his first love was music, which is what led him into the world of filmmaking. "Most of my colleagues have these spectacular stories about terrorising their family with cameras since being able to walk. I don't have any of those. I was involved in music. I played in a few bands and I had a little studio at home. I wanted to continue studying to learn more about sound and music. The only place that you could do that in Belgium at the time was at film school — this is where I discovered images and that you could do something with those too."

Van Rompaey ended up in the director's department at film school, as they gave the most interesting classes on sound. His interest in film intensified during his years at film school, and he became interested in the role of director, a highly coveted position in the small Belgian film industry. "As soon as I found out what direction involved, I was immediately fascinated by it, but I couldn't just become a director. In Belgium, it is a very small community and we need public funding to make films, because our market is so small, there isn't a real industry.



You have to start by making a short film, so they can see that you can do something, or know how to direct.”

*Moscow, Belgium* is honest, realistic and natural in its portrayals of the lives of the characters. Matty’s life is described as being full of “dents and bruises.” It is a story that walks the line between light and dark, and examines the fragility of human emotions, and how those who claim to love you the most can hurt you with ease. This is what happens to Matty when Werner leaves her, instead of making a clean break and filing for a divorce, he keeps Matty hanging and constantly talks of leaving Gail and returning home. When Werner finds out about Johnny, he becomes extremely jealous and spiteful. “When filming, *Moscow,*

“As soon as I found out what direction involved, I was immediately fascinated by it, but I couldn’t just become a director. In Belgium, it is a very small community and we need public funding to make films, because our market is so small, there isn’t a real industry. You have to start by making a short film, so they can see that you can do something, or know how to direct.”

*Belgium*, I thought the most interesting way to tell this story was from Matty’s point of view. This decision helped, as it is a low budget film, we could eliminate all the scenes from the script that Matty was not in and tell everything from her perspective. The viewer gets to experience the events with Matty. This transgresses from the classical mode of film, where you have two parallel stories.”

Viewing the film from Matty’s perspective engages with the day-to-day reality of her life and diverts from the conventional notion of the viewer being a detached third party observer. Van Rompaey’s engagement with *Moscow* and the surrounding area creates a remarkable backdrop for the action. *Moscow, Belgium* has received an array of critical acclaim, particularly at Cannes Film Festival in 2008. This is an enormous achievement for any film, but *Moscow, Belgium* was shot on location in chronological order and on a small budget, shooting 100 minutes in a mere 20 days. “I filmed everything in one shot — the whole scene. When there was time, we would shoot the scene again from a different angle to show all of Matty’s point of view. This mode of filming helped the actors to have a continuous performance in the scenes. Sometimes when shooting films, or television series the style of shooting is very fragmented. We didn’t have time to film in this way, and it would not have helped with the realism we were searching for.”

As a true reflection of real life the blossoming romance between Matty and Johnny encounters obstacles. Werner’s jealousy leads to a malicious comment about Johnny’s recent past, he declares that Johnny attacked his ex-wife 18 months ago, after discovering that she was having an

affair. Van Rompaey delicately addresses these issues and examines the whole spectrum of human behaviour — from Johnny’s anguish at his wife leaving him and subsequent violence to his blossoming romance with Matty. The non-judgemental approach, combined with the natural and engaging style of acting and stimulating dialogue leaves room for the viewer’s response and embraces subtlety.

Van Rompaey comments: “As *Moscow, Belgium* is not packed with action, explosions or special effects, the big challenge was to make these people as real and authentic as possible. When you are dealing with real people, you come to the conclusion that nobody is black or white, or that this is the good person and that the bad person. It is much more nuanced than that. What I find interesting is that we are all human beings and we are allowed to make mistakes, but what do you do with that knowledge? What do you do after the mistake? Did it change something? Did you learn something? Do you behave differently?”

A sense of realism permeates *Moscow, Belgium*, the apartment where Matty lives is in a real 1970s building, the cars trundling past are rushing by on the highway outside, and it all adds to the realistic ambience of the film. The universality of the story means that it could have been shot anywhere in the world and the sentiment of the search for love could be applied to any community.

“I didn’t want to emphasise the surroundings of *Moscow* to say ‘look at this poor area.’ I hope that I succeeded in making it look like a normal environment. At the same time, that is the environment of *Moscow*, it is not a marginal area in Ghent, but it is also not the richest area. I didn’t want to place emphasis on this; instead I wanted to create people in their normal habitat.” Some of the cast and crew even had specific links to the area. “The producer and scriptwriter have lived in the area, and Johan Heldenbergh, who plays Werner, used to live in the same apartment block as Matty. It was a strange experience for Johan, as he was in the same situation as Matty and Werner’s youngest son — Johan’s father used to collect him from there, as his parents were divorced, and now here he was standing in the same spot playing his father in a way.”

In *Moscow, Belgium*, Van Rompaey captures the search for love and the need to break with the past in order to strive forward towards a happy, fulfilling future, while encompassing the universal human desire to feel alive. *Moscow, Belgium* will be released in UK cinemas in April 2009. For further information please visit: [www.moscow-belgium.com](http://www.moscow-belgium.com).

Shona Fairweather