

Sugar and spice and all things nice – that's what little (Belgian) boys are made of...

THE INTERVIEW

...at least according to Alain Berliner's new movie, *'Ma Vie en Rose'*. Below, Liese Spencer interviews the director, while, opposite, Ryan Gilbey reviews his film

As a young boy growing up in Belgium, director Alain Berliner would fly his own private jet on regular trips to Africa. Before you begin to wonder at European cinema's new Howard Hughes, at this pilot protégé of the Lowlands, it should be pointed out that these holidays took place in Berliner's head.

Vividly remembered, it's just such flights of fancy that nourish his first feature, *Ma Vie en Rose*. A droll fable of pre-teen transvestism, the film ices its liberal "issue-drama" with the candy-coloured fantasies of its winsome hero, a seven-year-old boy convinced he will grow up to be a girl, despite being lumbered with the name Ludovic.

Seen through Ludo's rose-tinted spectacles, the film caricatures the bland conformity of life in the Parisian suburbs, where fathers leave for the same office in the same cars and wives play house in identikit homes. Although initially indulgent of Ludo's cross-dressing, it soon becomes clear that this neighbourhood is no place to carry on camping. Oblivious, Ludo continues an inadvertently comic assault on convention that includes "marrying" the son of his father's boss. With Ludo's psychological make-up written on his face in his mother's make-up, the terrified neighbours close ranks. Guilt, frustration and anger storm through his family and Ludovic's dreams of difference become as hard to hang on to as his cherished locks.

So heartfelt is Berliner's domestic drama that you can't help wondering whether it stems from personal experience. "The film is not autobiographical for me," says the 34-year-old Belgian, "but it is for the screenwriter, Chris Vander Stappen, who was absolutely convinced she would grow up to be a boy. For this story she just inverted the sexes, because it's more acceptable for girls to be tom-boys. For a boy to want to be a girl is much more threatening to established notions of virility. The stakes are much higher for men."

Indeed, the stakes were high for the schoolboy who merely acted out Ludovic's glamorous transgressions. After months auditioning for a child actor who could play the part convincingly "without any risk of identification", Berliner was lucky to land self-possessed 11-year-old Georges du Fresno. "At the beginning both he and his parents were concerned about the material," admits Berliner, "but his mother is an actress and his father owns a theatre, so they could understand that it was just a role." (As did Georges, who refused to don a dress to fuel publicity at the Cannes premiere.)

More worrying for Georges's parents was



Ludo Berliner: 'The film is not autobiographical for me' Geraint Lewis

the reaction he would get at school after the film's first screening. Luckily, celebrity proved a powerful charm against playground conservatism. "When Georges walked in, his whole class broke out in applause. In fact it even helped him with his classmates," notes Berliner wryly, "because he's not like other boys, he's very mature and not interested in stuff like football. He likes art and music and reading. Now, even the bullies leave him alone because they respect him for being different. They're like, 'Oh, no, we can't smash you in the face because you have to act'."

Deftly balancing humour and pathos, Berliner elicits an impressive performance from his young lead. "I openly discussed the problem of Ludovic's identity with Georges," says Berliner. "There was never any question of lying to him or making him act scenes without clearly explaining what they were about." In fact, Georges was less disturbed by the story than were some of the adult actors. Actress Monique Laroque, for example, found it difficult to behave harshly towards her screen son. In particularly upsetting scenes, she would ask Berliner how she should react – and receive advice from the phlegmatic Georges.

Although Fresno is 11 years old, Ludovic is seven, an age deliberately chosen by the film-makers to avoid the conflation of iden-

tity and sexuality. "We picked a presexual age, an age before actual sexual experience very carefully," says Berliner, "because seven seems to be the time when children are asked by parents to enter their sex – to become a boy or a girl. Before that, everything is very fluid: parents usually let their children dress up, experiment, play, do whatever they like. Seven is the age of reason."

Although Berliner consulted child psychologists to check that the film's therapist "didn't talk bullshit", much of the psychology of the movie is based on his own observations. "The primary way in which children define themselves is by what they see in their parents," he expounds, "then by what their parents tell them, and finally by what they learn for themselves and decide to pass on to their children. While I was making the film, I talked to a friend of mine whose father had lost two fingers in the Second World War. Up until the age of seven or eight, for him every father had eight fingers. It was only when he met the father of one of his friends that he realised that other fathers actually had 10."

Thinking all men have eight fingers is one thing, but modelling yourself, as Ludo does, on a life-sized Barbie-doll called Pam is something else. But then, as Berliner's feel-good message would have it: *Vive la différence*.

THE FACE

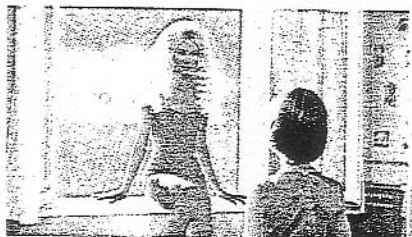
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Just kidding. Little Ludovic
doesn't know who he is (that
he is, in fact, a girl).

THE TOMBOY girl: shinning up trees, muddying clothes, tousling hair. No problem. The girlie boy: borrowing mummy's make-up, wearing dresses, playing with Barbie. *Aaarrrggghhh!* Somehow society doesn't cope so easily with challenges to conventional masculinity, however fragile the source. In *Ma Vie En Rose*, the magical debut film from Belgium's Alain Berliner, the family of little Ludovic panics when he insists he's really a girl. It's a strong concept: the boy's dogged expression of his nature colliding with the grown-up world of agendas and appearances. Even stronger is the aesthetic: a Teletubbied Technicolor landscape seen through

Ludovic's bright, wide eyes. "When you're a child, you don't know some things are forbidden," explains Berliner. "You see life through rose glasses." His realisation of that vision makes this the best-designed film since *Romeo & Juliet*. Remember: The future's bright, the future's pink. **CG**
Ma Vie En Rose opens on October 24



IN THE PINK

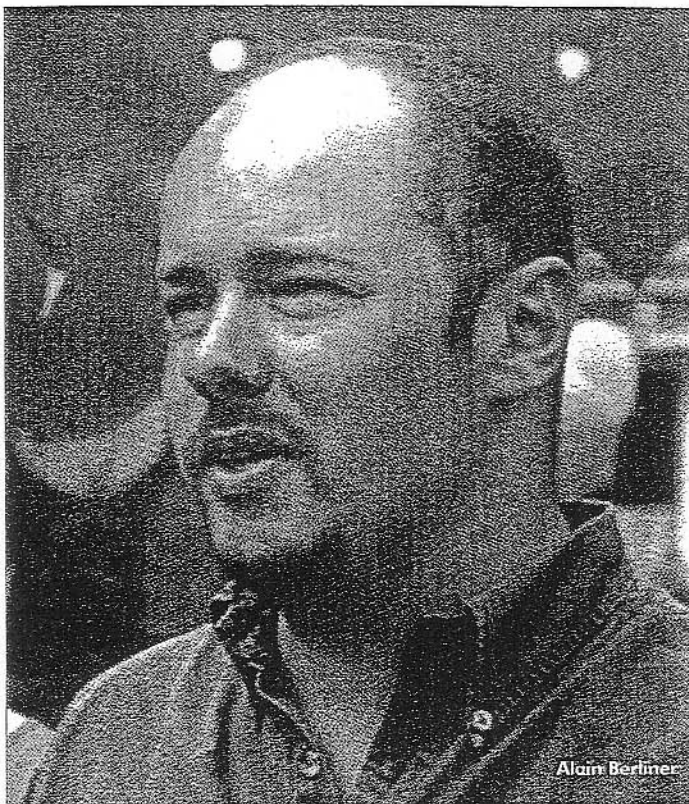
Alain Berliner's first film, 'Ma Vie en Rose', taps into our fear of being different, as he tells Tom Dawson

Every few years, it seems, a Belgian film by a first-time director comes along, seemingly out of nowhere, and reminds us of the magical qualities of cinema. In 1991 it was Jaco Van Dormael's *Toto the Hero*. This autumn it is Alain Berliner's *Ma Vie en Rose*, which tells the story of a seven-year-old French boy, Ludovic, who fervently wants to become a girl and who constructs a vivid fantasy world. A big hit at Cannes, where it was sold to 35 countries, *Ma Vie en Rose* was also selected as the opening gala at this summer's Edinburgh Festival.

In a Marble Arch hotel, the 34-year-old Berliner, looking every inch like a creative advertising type with his goatee, shaven head and baggy suit, confesses to being taken aback by the success of *Ma Vie en Rose*. "When I was writing the script and shooting the movie I had no idea the story was so universal," he says. He graciously accepts my Van Dormael comparison, saying "I really love *Toto the Hero*, it's very bright. I really love the way Van Dormael makes his shots, I like the rhythm. But the inspiration for *Ma Vie en Rose* is mainly *Edward Scissorhands*. I'm closer to Tim Burton than to Van Dormael. You never find female characters like Ludovic's mother in a Jaco Van Dormael movie. He has a different point of view of what a woman should be."

Although Berliner's film adopts the point of view of the child, it doesn't stint on showing the pain, confusion and anger experienced by his parents, who are soon ostracised by the local suburban community on account of Ludovic's cross-dressing tendencies. "I don't think any human situation is 100% one person's responsibility," Berliner explains. "It's impossible for me to write a script or direct a movie if I feel the character doesn't have the chance to reveal himself and to be really human. Sometimes being a human is being very violent or angry. I really don't like it when the trajectory of a character is flat. I prefer ups and downs, peaks and troughs. That's exactly what Michele Laroque [who plays Ludovic's mother] is like in this film. Initially, she's optimistic, she thinks there will be a solution. Step by step she realises there is no solution, just emptiness in front of her, and then she's afraid, and she breaks down and does terrible things to this boy."

Perhaps one of the reasons for the film's appeal is that its central theme - the fear of difference - is so universally pertinent. Why, I ask Berliner, are we so afraid of genuine diversity and otherness? "It's very human," he replies. "In our lives with our friends, our parents, our lovers, we all want to be like somebody. If you grow up in the suburbs you



Alain Berliner

want to have the same car as your neighbours. It means something to you. If you grow up in a violent neighbourhood, you must be tough like your friends otherwise you're nothing. It's very difficult to be yourself and to be different from those around you."

Berliner, a former television screenwriter, believes that 70% of the director's work is in the casting, and in Georges du Fresne, who plays Ludovic, he has clearly unearthed a singular talent. In previous interviews, Berliner has revealed that they had spent several fruitless months trying to cast this particular part. And then a couple of weeks before filming along came Georges. "He really had something special about him," the director says. "He comes from an artistic family, and so he knows the difference between performance and reality. And he's very small for his age which means he can be more mature in his head, but his body and legs are like a seven-year-old."

Articulate and talented, Berliner looks to have a bright future ahead in the cinema, but he reveals that as a youngster he regarded himself an outsider. "I started to write and got to movies because I wasn't able to be involved with other teenagers," he says. "It was difficult for me to talk, so I had to express the things I had in me in a different way. Some people I was at school with have rung me up and congratulated me on my film and said, 'I dreamed to do that.' I thought, well, when I was 15 I dreamed to be like them!"

MA VIE EN ROSE opens in the West End on October 24.