

THE INNOCENTS



Written and Directed by Eskil Vogt

Running Time | 117 minutes
Country | Norway

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LOGLINE

During the bright Nordic summer, a group of children reveal their dark and mysterious powers when the adults aren't looking.

SYNOPSIS

The Innocents follows four children who become friends during the summer holidays. Out of sight of the adults, they discover they have hidden powers. While exploring their newfound abilities in the nearby forests and playgrounds, their innocent play takes a dark turn and strange things begin to happen.

Q&A WITH ESKIL VOGT

Where did the initial idea for the film come from?

It started as a result of having kids of my own and being witness to their fumbling attempts to make sense of the world. That triggered some childhood memories in myself. Not important memories, just random memories, and I realized how radically different you were as a kid, how strongly you felt, and how open you were and even how you experience time in a different way. I tried to get into that space again. It was also the fascination you have when you observe your kids, especially when they don't know you're there. Like you're going to school to pick them up, and you see them before they see you, and they're not like they are with you, they have a secret life. I felt that was an exciting space to be in.

It's hard for adults to really have that child-like approach, how did you try to tap into that personally?

I tried to learn from my kids. And I was trying to remember what it was like in the places I grew up – I moved around a lot when I was a kid, so there were different specific periods. I remember one period when I was probably five or six, living in a huge apartment building, next to a forest (this is common in Norway), and I remember a feeling of walking down those corridors or being in that forest. It's easy to remember childhood in a very nostalgic way, as though it was always a happy time, but it's also a very scary time because there are so many unknowns. There's so much you don't know and you have such an amazing fantasy imagination. Those things feel real, so I have never been as scared as an adult as I was as a child.

Did you do research with kids other than your own?

Yes, I talk to kids every day (laughs). But we did an extremely long and thorough casting and workshop process for a year and a half before shooting. Part of that process was to check if the kids we had in for casting had active imaginations, because that would help us. Through exercises, we saw some really interesting glimpses into their thoughts. For example, we showed the same photos to different kids, and they were supposed to make up a story. And what that revealed of their imaginations and their inner worlds was fascinating and I'm sure

that enriched the film in many ways.

The older sister character is autistic, did you research families living with autism?

Yes, I did. One of the first things to inspire the movie was an interview with an author who had a son with what she describes as “regressive autism” – he had been a kid that could use language until he was about four, and then he lost the language and retreated inside himself. As a parent, I felt that must be a real nightmare, of course you will always love your child, but it would be hard not to think maybe he is trapped inside. So that became part of the story.

The kids in *The Innocents* are ages 7 to 11, what was so special about that particular period of childhood?

When you get to 12, you’re already like a tween and have one foot in the teenage years and discovering your sexuality. That can be a fascinating theme but that’s not the theme of this movie, I wanted to look at childhood as a place before you become an adult, when it’s more fluid, more magical.

The child actors lead this film. So if they didn’t perform well, the film would have failed. Was that a nerve-racking thought for you as a director?

Yes, I was very nervous about that, and also about finding a child who could portray a person on the severe end of the autism spectrum. We knew if all that didn’t work, we had no movie. So, we looked for the children for a long time and we had the casting director Kjersti Paulsen working very closely with the children in casting and before and during the shoot. Usually when you are casting a kid, you want them to resemble the adult actor, or you have them in mind as a princess with long blonde hair. Kjersti said that would mean we would pass straight over kids with talent who didn’t fit our preconceived notions. So as a screenwriter, I had ideas for these characters but we tried to put that aside and just find great, interesting kids. Then I could make them work within the scripts. We ended up changing both genders and ethnicity of many roles in order to make them fit the best talent.

The story is disturbing, so how did you explain it to the kids?

I knew that if I sat them down and told them the story from A to Z, it would just be too much information. But one rule I had was that I would answer all their questions truthfully, so in the course of preparing the film, bit by bit, they learned everything that happened with their character. But of course the parents knew everything about the film before we offered the role to their children.

So, you didn’t use that technique with kids to say, ‘pretend your dog dies now and cry for this scene’?

They accessed their emotions, like real actors do. We tried to work with them for such a long time to give them the tools of real actors. We talked about the basic emotions the characters would need and then we did workshops with them. Or we might ask them to bring in an image of something they thought was scary, make them aware of their reactions. We could say to them for instance, ‘See how you breathe faster when you’re scared.’ And we could use that on shooting days.

Tell us about the idea behind the film's title, *The Innocents*?

I think kids are beyond good and evil or rather *before* good and evil. But I don't think children are little angels, that people are born pure. I think children are born without any sense of empathy or morals, we have to teach them that. That's why I think it's interesting to see a child doing something that we would call evil in an adult. The moral aspect is more complex since they aren't fully formed yet. I read about a child psychology study when a small kid pokes the eye of an animal. It's not necessarily a danger sign, kids are experimenting when they are young and empathy evolves in different rhythms. Morality begins with your parents saying what is wrong and right, but a real sense of morality should be grounded inside you, it's what *you* feel is wrong. And to discover that inner moral compass I think you have to experiment, you have to transgress what your parents tell you is acceptable behavior. It was important to me that even the most dangerous kid (in the film) is not an evil kid. That they all kept their humanity.

Can you talk about your visual approach to the film?

One of the main reasons why I wanted to work with the cinematographer Sturla Brandth Grøvlen was that I wanted to feel like you're there with the kids. Sturla is so good at getting between the actors like you are really part of the group, the camera interested in the same stuff as the kids. As a kid you pick up objects and you really look at them. And I wanted the camera to do that as well. Sturla and I knew we needed all those close ups, even though they don't advance the plot. I think it is those details, a hand picking at a scab, touching a grain of sand with your finger, that might trigger your own memories from childhood.

I really enjoy the juxtaposition of the close ups and really wide shots -- most films are stuck in the middle of that and they have no sense of place and no real sensuality.

We wanted the contrast to see the big apartment buildings and the forest. When you're close with the kids, you're in their world, you accept their reality. And then you cut to the wide shot, and an adult could walk by and not really understand what's at stake.

And to be present in the kids world we wanted vibrant colours and natural skin tones. Usually in scary movies you try to keep the tones down -- almost black and white -- and you have the shadows of darkness and white skin tones. But we wanted a warm and natural look. Because it's set in a summer, that meant we had to avoid some of the scared-of-the-dark horror cliches. Also because the sun in Norway sets at like 10 pm during the summer, the kids in the film had gone to bed before then! So, we had to make sunlight scary.

But we tried not to get lost in realism. We also wanted to remove a lot of the contemporary "noise," so that everything in the shots feels a bit more iconic and simple.

Were there other films that you had in mind as inspirations or references?

When I had this idea, I felt this is something I hadn't seen before. But when I talked about it, the synopsis sounded like every film with young adults discovering they have some kind of powers (laughs). I didn't check out those other movies while writing because I knew we were playing a different game. I did watch some films to get a sense of child acting, like *The Spirit of the Beehive* or *Ponette* – what they could do with a five-year-old gave me hope for my

film. If you have a kid doing real acting and not just reciting lines you can get something extraordinary. Also one Japanese manga was an inspiration, which is *Domu* by Katsuhiro Otomo.

How far did you want to go into the horror genre?

I don't set out to write a pure horror film, I don't use genre conventions as a tool while writing. My guiding principle is that if I like it, If I'm true to what I think is interesting, if it's human drama, poetic details or suspense or whatever. It will feel coherent. But then again, I'm a big horror fan. I'm a little offended by this label of "elevated genre" because I don't think it's a genre that needs elevating. There are so many interesting pure horror films. If people say I've made a horror film, I feel that's a compliment because I wanted it to be scary. Horror movies need to be visual and it is liberating as a filmmaker to go in that direction because you need to have visual storytelling, you need to have iconic images, you need all that to work. I really enjoyed exploring that.

This is a more ambitious production than *Blind*, how did it push you as a filmmaker?

After *Blind*, I was more prepared about the pure exhaustion of directing a feature. *The Innocents* was a longer shoot and I felt I handled it better. What's fascinating about making movies is that you learn a lot from each film, but then again, each film is a new knowledge and there's new stuff you've never done before. That's what's great, you always find something to focus your fear on. On *Blind*, it was about is this believable that she is blind, and with this film, it was first about finding kids who would be believable. You need to go outside your comfort zone to be a good director. As I writer I forbid myself to consider how difficult something will be to direct. You can't have that voice in your head saying, I hate shooting in cars, or night shooting is too tiring. It's too constricting. I guess that's why I ended up making a film with four small kids and a cat – there are easier stories to tell! When you fall in love with the story and the concept, you're willing to get out there and do the work and risk it.

What do you hope a viewer takes away from *The Innocents*?

I think a lot about the spectator when I make a movie, especially one like this. You want to orchestrate being on the edge of your seat or a gasp here or there. But what I'm especially happy about is if people talk after the movie about the magic of their own childhood. I want them to talk about being kids, and experiencing the limits of right or wrong, almost everyone has some kind of memory of that. I would love if the movie can blow on the embers of people's forgotten childhood and make them relive some of that and carry it with them.

You have two films in Cannes this year – you are also a screenwriter with your frequent collaborator Joachim Trier's *The Worst Person in the World*. How does that feel to be in Cannes with a doubleheader?

Honestly, it just feels great. It feels like a once in a lifetime thing. I'm just so happy to be there, and that it will be a real physical festival with a real audience. I'm so hungry for that. We had a prolonged post-production period where you are tweaking every image and every sound, and all the time you're thinking of it being on the big screen with full focus from the spectator. The cinema experience is so unique. Cannes will be a celebration of that.

Will the child actors be in Cannes with you?

I hope so! They can't watch the whole film because obviously it's a film for adults, but the plan is for them to see the opening of the movie, leave, and then come back when it's over, hopefully for some applause. I can't wait for people to discover how great these young actors are.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**Director's biography**

Eskil Vogt is a directing graduate from La Fémis in Paris, the National French Film School. His directing debut *Blind* premiered at Sundance in 2014 where it won him The World Cinema Screenwriting Award before going on to win more than 20 international awards including the European Cinema Label Best Film Award at the Panorama Section at the Berlin Film Festival. In Norway the film won him national film awards for writing and directing as well as the Critics' Prize for film of the year. Vogt also has a longstanding and close collaboration with Joachim Trier including the scripts for the features *Reprise* (2006), *Oslo, August 31st* (2011), *Louder than Bombs* (2015), *Thelma* (2017) and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021). All their films have premiered at A-list festivals to critical acclaim and achieved wide international distribution, establishing Eskil and Joachim internationally as Norway's most revered and successful filmmaking talent.

CAST

IDA - Rakel Lenora Fløttum
ANNA - Alva Brynsmo Ramstad
AISHA - Mina Yasmin Bremseth Asheim
BEN - Sam Ashraf
HENRIETTE // Ida and Anna's mother - Ellen Dorrit Pedersen
NILS // Ida and Anna's father - Morten Svartveit
HANI // Aisha's mother - Kadra Yusuf
BEN'S MOTHER - Lisa Tønne

CREW

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|-------------------------------------|---|
| Director | Eskil Vogt |
| Screen writer | Eskil Vogt |
| Director of Photography | Sturla Brandth Grøvlen |
| Focus Puller | Tor Edvin Eliassen |
| Gaffer | Aslak Lyththans |
| Editor | Jens Christian Fodstad |
| Composer | Pessi Levanto |
| Production Designer | Simone Grau Roney |
| Art Director | Marius Winje Brustad |
| Set Design | Louise Andersson |
| Props Master | Karl Gunnar Schmidberger Karlsen and Victoria Wælgård |
| Costume | Marianne Sembsmoen |
| Make up Design | Salla Yli-Loupa |
| Sound Design | Gustaf Berger and Gisle Tveito |
| Sound Recording | Jesper Miller |
| Sound mix | Gisle Tveito |
| VFX Supervisor | Esben Syberg and Ludvig Friberg |
| VFX Artists | Esben Syberg and Ludvig Friberg |
| First Assistant Director | Binne Thoresen |
| Script Supervisor/Continuity | Gjyljeta Berisha |

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|------------------------------|--|
| Casting | Kjersti Paulsen |
| PRODUCER INFO | |
| Production company | Mer Film AS |
| Producer | Maria Ekerhovd |
| Co – producer Sweden | Zentropa Sweden / Lizette Jonjic |
| Co – producer Sweden | Film i Väst / Peter Possne |
| Co – producer Denmark | Snowglobe / Mikkel Jersin, Katrin Pors, Eva Jakobsen |
| Co – producer Finland | Bufo / Misha Jaari, Mark Lwoff |
| Co – producer France | Logical / Eric Tavitian, Frederic Fiore |
| Co – producer Norway | Zefyr / Magnus Thomassen |
| Co- producer Norway | Don´t Look Now / Eskil Vogt |
| Executive Producer | Axel Helgeland, Dave Bishop, Céline Dornier |
| Line Producer | Lina Pedersen |
| Associate Producer | Ragna Midtgard |
| Financing partners | Norwegian Film Institute, Danish Film Institute, Finnish Film Institute, Eurimages, Nordic Film and Tv- fund, DR,YLE |

MER FILM

Mer Film is a Norwegian independent production and distribution company founded by producer Maria Ekerhovd. Since Mer Film was established in 2011, the company has produced many award-winning and critically acclaimed films. Mer Film's ambition is to engage a large audience with visionary, unique and relevant films. Mer Film also runs a talent program with focus on diversity and bringing untold stories and new perspectives to the screen.

In 2021 Mer Film premiered the debut feature *Gritt* by Itonje Sømmer Guttormsen in competition at Rotterdam International Film Festival and a co-production; *Flee* by Jonas Poher Rasmussen premiered at Sundance Film Festival.



PROTAGONIST PICTURES

Protagonist Pictures is an international sales, finance, and production company with a proven track record in outstanding films and commercial successes. Based in the UK, the company handles films from around the world, always maintaining a strong focus on filmmakers with exceptional vision and storytelling skills.

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