

## KAN DOOR HUID HEEN - CAN GO THROUGH SKIN

The life of Marieke is transformed by an act of violence. She decides to escape from her hometown and buys a remote and derelict cottage in the Zeeland countryside. By making a new start, she hopes to be able to shake off the violent experience, but the cold and loneliness only add to her feelings of fear and vengeance. With the arrival of summer and a new love, Marieke seems to be regaining strength. But slowly, she loses this grip on her life.

*Can go through skin* is a psychological drama with light touches. Rifka Lodeizen plays Marieke in the feature film debut of Esther Rots, who has won a range of awards for her short films *Dialogoefening no. 1: Stad, Ik ontspruit*, and *Speel met me (Dialogue exercise no. 1: City, I sprout, Play with me)*.

Further parts are played by Wim Opbrouck, Chris Borowski, Elisabeth van Nimwegen, Tina de Bruin, and Mattijn Hartemink, among others. People involved in realising the film include Lennert Hillege (camera), Victor Horsink (sound), Luuk Zonnenberg (focus puller, gaffer) Dan Geesin (music & sound design), and Maudy van Bree (production manager).

*Can go through skin* was produced by *Rots Filmwerk*'s Hugo Rots and Esther Rots, and Trent from *NFI Productions*. It was coproduced by *NPS* (dutch broadcaster). Other essential financiers were *Nederlands Fonds voor de Film*, *Stimuleringsfonds*, *CoBO Fonds*, and *Rotterdams Fonds voor de Film*. The film was shot in sixty-eight days at various locations, including Sint-Margriete, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam. Benelux Film Distributions will release the film in theatres by Februari 5th 2009.

## Synopsis

Marieke is a cheerful and carefree woman in her early thirties living the fast life in Amsterdam. Until her boyfriend suddenly leaves her. She wallows in her grief, rings up friends, and in a drunken daze acts as if everything is fine. Then, a pizza delivery-boy breaks into her house and assaults her. A friend comes to her aid, and they escape in a panic.

A few weeks later, Marieke impulsively buys a remote and derelict cottage in the Zeeland countryside. In these new surroundings, she thinks she will be able to shake off her painful experiences. She embarks upon renovating her new house, hoping it will take her mind off things but she feels choked by the wide-open winter environment. She doesn't feel safe in her new home, and regards the friendly and helpful villager John as an intruder. Then when the pizza delivery-boy's verdict turns out to be very mild, she becomes frustrated and filled with vindictiveness.

Through Internet chat rooms she meets fellow victims who, like her, are willing to take matters into their own hands. She rises above being the victim and in this process slowly learns to control her fears.

At the onset of summer Marieke seems to be returning to her former self. Her joint quest for justice with her fellow victims empowers her. She adds fresh energy to the renovation and becomes more aware of nature blooming around her. She even starts a relationship with John, gets pregnant and claims to look forward to having a baby. But without realising it, she loses control of her life.

## **INTERVIEW ESTHER ROTS: “I am fascinated by everything the mind can’t grasp”**

Esther Rots has made three short films screened at renowned festivals and winning many awards. *Speel met me* (Play with me, 2002) and *Ik ontspruit* (I sprout, 2003) were even selected for Cannes, and *Dialogoefening* (Dialogue exercise no. 1: City, 2005) among other prizes has been awarded the *Gouden Kalf* for best short film and the *NPS Prijs voor de Korte Film*. Written, directed, edited and produced by herself, *Can go through skin* is her feature film debut. On Rifka Lodeizen: “She doesn’t ask why – she just does it, and does it well”.

### **After three successful short films, *Can go through skin* is your first feature film. Why this transition?**

“Mart Dominicus was the *Filmfonds* artistic director, and he came up with the Ten to Watch project. Ten talented filmmakers received a budget for writing a film scenario. I was one of them. Before then, I had never seriously considered it. I even once said that I would never make a feature film. Perhaps it would have happened anyway, eventually, but the chance Mart offered me was the decisive push.”

### ***Can go through skin* is your first feature film scenario?**

“No. At the time I had started working on the scenario for *Now she yells*, a film I will make after this one, together with my brother Hugo and *Circe Films*’ Stienette Bosklopper. Writing progress was slow, though. I wasn’t used to adhering to scenario rules and structure. I usually write more instinctively. For me, a scenario is no more than a guideline, an aid in filming. The reasons why I write something, I do not want to explain to myself. I’m afraid the magic will disappear if you already start analysing at this stage. It is perhaps similar to poetry. There are poems that are better read personally than having them read to you. This resulted in considerable tension in the writing process, a battle between what needs to be told and what I need to feel and experience in my script as a guide for filming. I wasn’t making any progress. To escape this, I started writing the *Can go through skin* scenario. It just took off. I considered it a hobby. For my own enjoyment I allowed myself to do some writing for this, and then I made myself return to *Now she yells*. This turned out to be a very productive approach – for both scripts.”

### **What was the idea underlying *Can go through skin*?**

“There was none. It was like knitting: I started out, but didn’t know whether it would become a sweater or a shawl.”

### **The story is not based on personal experience?**

“No, the story isn’t autobiographical. I did use myself as a guideline though: how would I react to something like that? By staying close to myself, it retains reality. I am fascinated by things the mind can’t grasp. Experiences you don’t really dare to imagine. Such things intrigue me.”

### **What was the starting point?**

“The argument between Marieke and her boyfriend. I’ve had a relationship with my husband for over thirteen years. I have thought about what would happen to me if he were to just leave one day. He lives a different life, and may have thoughts that are completely different from what I imagine him to think. I think everything is going well, but suddenly we appear to have grown apart. I found that an interesting point to depart from.”

### **How did you arrive at the idea of the assault?**

“That was just as big a surprise for me as it was for Marieke. I wasn’t planning on writing a story about a woman who gets sexually assaulted.”

### **The rest of the story followed automatically?**

“Yes, I wrote nearly each word from the notion: what would I do in her situation?”

### **So, in that respect, Marieke resembles you?**

“Yes, her approach may have been my own.”

### **Why did you opt for a main character so close to yourself?**

“Of all the things around me, the only thing I know much about is me. So if I want to write a story based on truth, one that is accurate, it can only be done by staying near to myself.”

### **During the scenario stage, did you have people reading along and providing criticism?**

“I initially wrote the story as a book, and turned it in to a scenario afterwards. After a year and a half, when I was in doubt as to whether it would be a feasible script, I have asked Chris Westendorp to read it. She’s a scenario writer and a director, and has previously assisted me with my short film *Dialogoefening*. The questions and

comments of Chris, who is very sharp and specific, allowed me to clarify the scenario. I was afraid, for example, that Marieke did not have sufficient sense of humour, a lack of cheerful traits. These are important, as it is a heavy story. Chris has managed to comfort me on these aspects. At the *Filmfonds*, Wilfried Depeweg has offered a great deal of support.”

**In addition to being a screenwriter, director, and editor, you’re also one of the film’s producers. Why did you want that position as well?**

“Together with my brother Hugo, I have established the *Rots Filmwerk BV* production company to ensure that we can make our films without any concessions. Producing equals prioritising, and I’m the person most suited to do so for my own film. The *Filmfonds*, however, was opposed against directors doing their own producing, and against minor and new producers. For these reasons, they have suggested other producers – big names in the industry. We were afraid we would lose our freedom, however. We decided to ask Trent from *NFI Productions*, with whom we were already consulting on executive production, to produce this film with us. He understood our approach and agreed.”

**You claim that producing equals prioritising. What did you consider priorities in *Can go through skin*?**

“It was about rough outlines. Such outlines matter to the coming about of a film. Where is the money going? I required seventy recording days. This was possible because I also wanted to work with a small crew. However, for example, I also wanted the liberty to adjust the scenario during recording without obligations to explain why, so that my intuitive approach would not be jeopardised. In addition to this, it is crucial for me to have a clear picture of finances, to know what represents what, and what I can substitute things with. “

**How small was the crew?**

“The core on the set consisted of five people. Cameraman Lennert Hillege, Victor Horstink for sound, gaffer and focus-puller Luuk Zonnenberg, Rifka Lodeizen, and myself. Outside of the set were a few people supporting us and arranging all the peripheral matters. With larger scenes we did have people to guide recordings, and at times there were for example stuntmen or special effects people. During the summer, Leyla Everaers and Maudy van Bree joined us as assistant director and production manager. The majority of the film was shot by the five of us though. Working in this way is only possible if you have incredibly able people at hand. There was a lot of humour, a lot of mutual understanding, and much respect. The intimacy and friendship that arose led to a specific kind of friendship – a kind that easily turns into an unmotivated laxness, but these people remained driven and passionate right up to the end. Very special indeed!

In retrospect, there may have been too much work on everyone’s shoulders. This may have been because we not only carried out our own tasks, but those of the other 20 people usually present on an average set as well. We did everything together. I’m glad we did it like that, because I’m not sure whether the film and its acting would have reached their present levels of intimacy otherwise.”

**Which was the main reason for opting for a small crew: money or intimacy?**

“Both. I’d rather have recording time than a large crew. It gave me freedom as well. During recording, at times when I’m not sure what to do and want to think for a bit, I like to be able to take a walk. If at such moments there’s a large crew hanging around and doing nothing while waiting for me, I do not have the peace of mind to do so. Another advantage of our approach was that I trusted and respected everyone. They all understood exactly what the film was about. So if anyone made any suggestions, I would seriously consider those. Good ideas can arise from larger crews as well, but then I just don’t listen. This is because I do not know people well enough, and also to protect myself. I don’t want to listen to too many people and admit too many influences to my work.”

**Who composed the crew?**

“Much credit goes to Lennert for that. He has shot all of my films so far. I’m a big fan of his. He has convinced Luuk and Victor to join us. He had worked together with Luuk before and had heard promising stories on Victor. It was a golden trio. Reasons for this were their talent, enthusiasm, flexibility, and reliability, and their great sense of humour. The most important thing for me on shooting days is that I am able to completely focus on the film. That I don’t need to worry about what goes on behind my back or have distracting tensions on the set. You need a pleasant group of people for that. That’s the main thing. Things can always go wrong technically. I don’t have problems with that. In fact: at those points, you are forced to think of solutions which often turn out to be more brilliant than you would have imagined beforehand.”

**Can you give examples of that?**

“No examples caused by the crew. It all went smoothly. But for the court trial, for example, we had two recording days available. However, one day in advance we heard we would only be allowed one day. We were

still able to take more than half of the shots, but it meant we had to cross out a lot as well. I was forced to turn to the scenario and editing to solve that.”

**Why did you choose Rifka Lodeizen for the leading part?**

“I had met her while casting for *Dialogoefening*. I was looking for a different kind of character for that film, but I already liked Rifka a lot at the time. I knew I wanted to work with her someday.”

**Why did she impress you?**

“Rifka doesn’t ask why – she just does it. She is diverse, her timing is excellent, and she is able to perform the same scenes differently time and time again. Right until I know where it should be going. As a director, I have two major shortcomings. I do know in advance what things shouldn’t be like, but I often don’t know what they should be like. This is hard and frustrating – especially for actors. They mainly hear what isn’t right, but seldom hear what’s good. The second problem is that I am very extreme. So I write a scenario that is very extreme emotionally, and add “you should forget three quarters of it” as a comment. Then, during recording, I tell them how I envision things, and this could very well be the absolute emotional opposite. On set, these two polarities need to be joined. At that point, something magical happens because of the camera or the acting, I can’t even point out exactly what it is, and I just know: this is it.”

**Was there something in her appearance or aura that made you decide on her?**

“I think Rifka is incredibly pretty. That does matter, since the audience will be looking at her for ninety minutes. Me, I’ve been watching her for one hundred and twenty days, all alone in a dark editing studio. And I remained in love with her. That is only possible if someone shows all her personal facets. To me, Rifka shows a different face all the time, which is simply astonishing. And she is very honest.”

**Did you assess others for the part as well?**

“Yes. The prospect of working with Rifka seemed wonderful. Because I like her, and because of her diversity. But I was also looking for a lighter touch. Something fresh and funny. I had not experienced that with her yet. That is why Rebecca van Unen of Oi Mundo casting agency summoned some fifteen actresses. Rifka was among them, without me telling Rebecca anything about her. After a few casting sessions, I was convinced Rifka could also be that lighter touch.”

**How did you go about preparing Rifka for the part?**

“We’ve talked a lot between us, but we have also wandered outside a lot, for example. I would have her shop as Marieke, for instance. I also wanted her to walk and move like Marieke. Rifka always looks at the ground; Marieke looks at the sky. We have devoted much time to details such as these. This went along very well because Rifka was searching for Marieke just as much as I was. That’s pleasant. Rifka searches externally to herself. In the end, how she will emerge doesn’t matter to her, but how Marieke will emerge does. Rifka is not hindered by her ego, and that takes a lot of professionalism.”

**You mentioned Rifka as a member of the crew. Was she more than an actress?**

“Yes, she was one of us. She helped work on the house, she made soup, and provided her own clothing. She did not have her own room with heating to prepare, and no make-up artist. It was all very Spartan. She impressed me because she never had a bad day. Although that wouldn’t have been an option anyway since it would leave the rest of us with nothing to shoot/film.”

**How would you describe John?**

“According to my brother Hugo, John resembles my father. Ever since he mentioned that, I am noticing more resemblances between their personalities. But John is more of a rough and tumble kind of guy, with a pretty closed mind. A simple man with a clear goal: Marieke is his girl. At times he finds her difficult, but he accepts that as she belongs to him. I just love the way he enters her home: ‘I’ll fix that drain for you lass. You won’t need to worry about a thing.’ With him, everything is big. The next day she has a full-sized rubbish container on her doorstep. He’s a hands-on guy. Not just the drain cover is removed, but the entire floor as well, and preferably the toilet floor along with it.”

**Why did you select Wim Opbrouck for the part?**

“Rebecca introduced him, and when I saw him I immediately knew he was the one. That was at a theatre performance in Gent, which I visited along with Rifka and Rebecca. In the play, Wim explains why he loves his wife. He delivers a true bombardment of major and minor reasons, and he did so beautifully. I thought: if he can understand that, he will understand John as well. After the show, the four of us sat down together. That’s when I noticed his grand gestures. He also has a habit of talking just a little too loudly. Just the John I had in mind.

Another thing I like about Wim is the lack of emphasis in his acting: he's a no-nonsense actor. He just walks around the corner without some timing thingy. When he looks stupefied, I believe him."

**Was it hard to find the right pizza delivery man?**

"No. Rebecca introduced Chris Borowski and he was exactly the right guy. Initially my idea was to almost continuously keep him off the screen. To only show his hands, because it isn't about the intruder as such, but about the fact that there's an intruder in the house. But that was just taking it one step too far. It was very important that he would never turn into a victim while being held in the attic by Marieke; he shouldn't evoke compassion. Chris plays that very well. He remains the perpetrator in each cell of his body."

**Is the house in the film one of the houses you and Dan had your eyes on yourselves?**

"No, we would have loved to have this one, but it's far too expensive. Evert Stolwijk, our locations scout, found it in Sint-Margriete, a wonderful Flemish village just across the border from Zeeland. It was perfect. It had tremendous atmosphere, was uninhabited, we could rent it for a year, and the proprietors were fabulous. They would often visit recordings. They were particularly fond of Wim. We have consulted them on renovating certain parts of the house during the recording period. Most of it was temporary and provisional. It looks good on the screen, but you shouldn't look outside of the frame. We did build a beautiful and expensive flight of stairs to the attic, which actually never features on screen. That's a bonus for the proprietors. On the other hand, we did demolish the kitchen. They were less pleased with that."

**Music plays a very important part throughout the film. Both the atmospheric music in highly varied arrangements, and the songs. Did you consult Dan on this prior to recording?**

"I just said to him that I didn't want any voices. Since he is a singer himself, he decided to misinterpret that. Thought I didn't want to hear *him*. So he wrote some songs regardless and had them sung by Charlie Dee and Anneke van Giersbergen, who used to sing with *The Gathering*. That is very headstrong. He is very clever; he sees things in the film that other people don't notice so easily. That's why I gave him total freedom and let him just run wild. But the film doesn't contain a single note we didn't both want in it. Dan has recorded music using various instruments, but he has also taken sounds from the house. He recorded the sound of a suspended rope, for example, stretched up to the point where it snapped. He also strung iron wire between the attic beams and played it like an instrument. They are sounds with frayed edges and that is why they sound so authentic."

**What were your main thoughts during editing?**

The first version was an emotional battle of attrition. There were too many small, fractured scenes from Marieke's daily life. Too many internal explosions as well. The idea was to drive the audience just as mad as Marieke during those gruelling winter days, but it didn't work. I could have stubbornly clung to the concept, but that way I wouldn't cope with it myself. I put the film aside for a month, pondered it, and then cut it back to ninety minutes. Now I'm pleased with the film. So much is happening to Marieke already. It's a well-known sequence of events: a woman has a mental breakdown, leaves everything behind, and secludes herself in the country. This framework provides grip and tranquillity to people when they have the film wash over them. There's plenty of intangible elements as it is."

**What are your hopes for this film?**

"It would be nice if people would be talking about Marieke and the choices she eventually makes. I hope I will be able to actually reach out and touch the viewers."

## **INTERVIEW RIFKA LODEIZEN: “Marieke is a part you wait for your entire life.”**

Rifka Lodeizen (1972) was nominated for the *Gouden Kalf* for her part in *Simon*. In addition, she featured in *Rent a Friend*, *Nadine*, and *Hufters & Hofdames*, as well as in television series like *Evelien*, *Gooische Vrouwen*, and *Wet & Waan*. On her part in *Can go through skin*: “I have rediscovered my love for films and my admiration for genuine film makers.”

### **How did you get this part?**

“A few years ago, I had a conversation with Esther about her short film *Dialogoefening*. We connected. I thought: this part is mine. This turned out to be a miscalculation. Later on, I met her at a movie scene party. She told me there was another part for which she was considering me. Those things happen all the time at such parties, but it was nice to hear nevertheless. A while later I was called by Oi Mundo asking me whether I would go to a casting for a feature film by Esther Rots. I was surprised. A casting? I thought that part fitted me like a glove? But I went anyway, twice even, and did my utmost.”

### **What were you asked to do at the first session?**

“I had read the scenario and was asked to play two tricky scenes. In the first one, I am calling up people while I’m drunk, crying and laughing at the same time. They wanted me to improvise, but to stick to a schedule as well. Very tricky indeed. Normally, you’ve studied a text and the transitions are easy. This time I had to make my own reference points. In the second scene, Marieke sketches the pizza delivery man and also talks to him. They wanted me to toy with that. To pronounce fragments of text out loud while merely thinking other fragments. I was allowed to personally alternate between these two modes. In my experience it lasted incredibly long, an hour at least.”

### **And at the second session?**

“That involved a conversation with Esther at an outdoor café. They wanted to find out whether there was genuine chemistry between us, because after all it was an intense and prolonged project.”

### **Why did you want the part so badly?**

“Because it is a dream part. The part you’ve been waiting for all your life. Demand for female actresses in Dutch films is limited. I don’t intend to make this a feminist statement, but you often get to play the wife, lover, or ex of the male leading part.”

### **And then there’s the fierce competition within your age group, from Carice, Kim and Thekla to Halina, Katja, and Ricky.**

“Correct. I have lovely competition. I thought one of them was participating here as well. At the auditions they told me: we will have to wait a bit, because she is abroad. I thought I immediately knew just who they meant, and I thought would never win if she was in. I have seen quite a few good leading parts pass me by. But not this time, fortunately.”

### **What makes Marieke such a dream part?**

“It is the sort of part you start to crave at some point. In it, you get to show different aspects of the character and of your talents. It is very satisfying to play a psychologically complex personality in a wide range of situations and under various conditions. I very much wanted that. It seemed a lot of fun to do. It turned out to be hard in reality at times though, because I have regularly met my upper limits.”

### **Could you give examples of that?**

“We started out with the winter section where Marieke is alone on the farm. That was difficult in itself, but moreover we never knew in advance which scenes we would be recording on any given day. We had to shoot a lot of footage outdoors, depending on the weather. When we were recording indoors, the scenes we could should depended on the progress of redecorating, so I could hardly prepare for anything. It was pleasant at the same time though, because it’s also nice to be forced to collectively figure out what scenes to shoot, and how.”

### **Doesn’t that approach interfere with your concentration? It sounds very messy.**

“It turned out not to. The mental process mainly occurred in the minds of Esther and Lennert. It wasn’t just shooting from the hip, but a very meticulous search for the proper mood for a certain scene. Camera positions played an important part in that. I could hardly understand the language they spoke to do this. I truly was the one performing it. But it was pleasant for me to be present at the foundations of filmmaking. You don’t experience anything of the process seated in a trailer. At times, all the attention would go to a technical flaw. That makes sense when you cooperate. If I experience a temporary malfunction, they have to wait as well. You usually get

pampered during shoots. A chauffeur will pick you up at your home and you drive to the set. Lighting is already being arranged when you arrive. You get made up by the makeup artists, while they chat with you to make you feel good. You read your lines again, do a run-through and play the scene. All well and good, but very distant.”

**And in this film?**

“I really felt I was a part of the crew. That is why this film is so close to me. I’ve reinvented my love for films, as well as my admiration of genuine filmmakers. Esther is not about telling some story, with her it’s a creative process. She would at times retreat for half an hour to think. For inspiration. Esther is truly an artist. That’s something I haven’t experienced often at a film set.”

**When was the last time you had a similar sense of involvement?**

“At the first films by Eddy Terstall, like *Hufters & Hofdames*. He used a very small team initially. I used to make my own sandwiches then, too, and checked costume continuity myself. I’m not saying everything used to be better and more fun back then, because it would at times disrupt my concentration, but that old sense of cooperation did return with this film.”

**When did you lose that feeling?**

“With TV series like *De Co-assistent* you really get caught up in a machine. I don’t mean to be negative about the people who work at those productions; they are often very nice, but it is a machine you momentarily enter and then exit again. To me, it doesn’t feel like I’m contributing anything.”

**Marieke is partially based on Esther. She is a product of her imagination. Was Esther an inspiration to you while performing?**

“Yes. Initially I spent a lot of time finding my way. I asked Esther whether Marieke drinks coke. No, she drinks diet coke! As Esther likes to drink that herself, I realised she had incorporated some of her own traits into Marieke. That was good to know. When trying to find my way, I often looked at Esther to recapture the feeling. Because I am of course a completely different person from either Marieke or Esther.”

**How would you describe Marieke?**

“She’s a cheerful and socially minded woman, with a fancy IT job. I’m not into computers at all myself. But at the moment I start playing her, she and her boyfriend have just broke up; she gets sexually assaulted and moves to a remote farmhouse, which she renovates by herself. I think she’s tough. In a situation like that, I would be ringing friends or my mother right away. But that’s something else that sets Marieke apart: she never has any contact with her family. There’s something odd there. What I also like is that, as a viewer, you slowly discover that she hasn’t really made proper arrangements for herself.”

**What was there for you to cling to?**

“Her pride and stubbornness. She will not be pushed around, and is very independent. She has a vivid imagination and a bizarre sense of humour at times. The way she handles the pizza guy, for instance. The jokes she makes on such accounts – on the verge of sadism, but with hints of self-mockery. I like the way that puts things into perspective.”

**Is Marieke an attractive part to play?**

“It’s a delightful part. There’s no fun in playing the soft and agreeable girl. I do that at home sometimes. I know her by now. It’s very shallow. This part is so attractive because it’s about denial. And it only gets more interesting as she slowly starts to lose track, but doesn’t fully realise it herself. There is no reflection at that point. Things have been too hard.”

**How difficult were the many scenes where there was no co-star?**

“I did notice how much I loved to play scenes where Wim or other actors were present. I like playing collectively. Walking outside on your own, getting startled by something and running inside again – those aren’t the easiest or the most fun scenes to play. But they do make up a large part of the film. I did notice though, that a camera and cameraman can also be your co-stars. I had never experienced the importance of that exchange before.”

**Didn’t you feel tempted to play with the camera?**

“Yes, at some point, Lennert told me that each time I came into view, I wanted to do something. That was true. As soon as the camera was on me, I would want to explain something or other. Which I was not supposed to do, obviously.”

**Did you find it hard to watch yourself on film?**

“No, but I do remember watching the first rushes and thinking: I see only myself. That was confusing. I had so gotten used to the feeling that we were making this film with the five of us, that I had stopped realising that it was just me who would get on screen. When I first saw the entire film, I mainly found it hard to watch it objectively. I hope I’m not doing too badly, but in the end, it’s about the film. What did take some getting used to, though, was seeing myself with no makeup. When I told professionals that we would not be using makeup prior to shooting, they warned me. I would look ill with red spots. It didn’t turn out to be that bad. Lennert and Luuk are professional people and we did a lot of work outside.”

**The scenario also contains descriptions of Marieke’s thoughts. How did you put those to use while playing?**

“At times, I felt them literally – *Is someone coming in?* – and at other moments they provided a foothold. We didn’t use them most of the time, as many scenes just arose on set.”

**What sort of director is Esther? She told me that she regularly had you play scenes in various ways, until she found the feeling she was looking for.**

“She is not the kind of director to provide you with a fixed framework. Someone who will tell you exactly what you should play and feel. Esther is an artist. She knows exactly what she wants. She has a sensation that belongs with something and she will start looking for it together with you. We’ve really come to understand each other in doing so. She also has a highly visual orientation. She watched the camera position. Only then could she assess whether what I was doing within that frame was working out. It was all about the exchange. If the camera wasn’t positioned right to her standards, she would focus on that first, and only then on my acting and rhythm within the new setup. It was a very unusual experience doing exactly what is on someone else’s mind.”

**For a long time, you were filming with just the five of you. Was mental switching required when a sixth person was added on Wim Opbrouck joining you?**

“Not for us. We were already on that train. It was more difficult for Wim. He had to adapt to our methods. He was used to doing what the director told him. Esther will ask for your contribution, but she may just toss it away afterwards. So you have to work without your ego. It’s not about whose idea it is. You offer, and then she starts chiselling away at it. And at times she will say: no, that’s not what I’m looking for. But Wim has tapped into that method quickly.”

**The film’s seventy recording days were spread out across a year. Did that mean you’ve carried the part along in your mind for a year?**

“It never vanished completely. Not that I have read the script thirty times, but it did linger all the time.”

**Did you have a heightened sense of responsibility?**

“Yes, definitely, playing the main part did make me feel like I had more responsibility. And I did at times feel terrible because of the idea that I would ruin such a unique project. Just like any other actor, and probably like any other human being, I am insecure and do experience fear of failure from time to time.”

**How did you prepare for the part?**

“I have mainly been talking to Esther. We have gone over the entire script and talked about every scene. But it was also about Marieke’s background. About the kind of woman that she is, what she does, where she lives. We’ve often wandered about town together. Marieke has a posture that is different from my own. She looks up, I look down. She walks differently, a bit like a giraffe, while my walk is more crooked. So I was forced to adopt a different posture. It was a lot of fun and very inspirational to work like that. You get the hang of it after a while.”

**Were there any other films you’ve watched for inspiration?**

“I did watch *Meisje* and *Rosetta* in order to grasp their style, because I knew that Esther appreciated their raw camera operation.”

**What was the first day of recording like?**

“It was freezing. The scene was a very technical one. I had to walk across a meadow and the cameraman was walking ahead of me. Fine scenes to get into it. It was about the way I walk and sit down. The cold did leave me knackered, but with a sense of satisfaction. I’ve slept like a log in my holiday cottage afterwards.”

**Which were your favourite scenes, and which ones did you find the hardest?**

“What I personally liked, and reveals a lot about Marieke, is when John enters her house for the first time. She suddenly talks and then you discover she actually has a pretty big mouth. It tells you something about her former

life. The urban attitude, the airs. They don't really have any impact on John at all. You get to know yourself through others. The scene where she gets drunk with John was fun as well. Finally, certain difficult scenes turned out to be easier than I had expected, while some easy scenes turned out to be harder. The scene where I yell something in the door opening, for example, was trickier to me than I had anticipated. Who am I yelling at? And why? While the scene where she sketches the pizza delivery guy was much easier than I had expected."

**The assault was not your most difficult scene?**

"The main thing I dreaded was running naked in the street after the assault. Production asked whether they should close down the street for that. That would have probably just resulted in more spectators, though. Prior to recording I thought that I would have much to overcome, but when we actually recorded it I just did it and it was over before I knew it."

## Cast CV

### **Rifka Lodeizen** (Marieke)

Rifka Lodeizen was nominated for the *Gouden Kalf* award in 2004 for her leading part in *Simon* by Eddy Terstall. Among other productions, she also appeared in feature films such as *Nadine*, *Tiramisu*, *Sextet*, *Olivetti 82*, *Villa des Roses*, *Rent a Friend*, *De Boekverfilming*, and *Huften & Hofdames*. On television, she featured in Telefilms such as *Escort* and *De trein van 6 uur 10*, the short films *Mercedes* and *Beet*, and television series such as *Gooische vrouwen*, *Evelien*, *De band*, and *Wet & waan*. Rifka has performed on stage in *Wina zingt*, *Arcadia*, and *De bittere tranen van Petra van Kant*.

### **Wim Opbrouck** (John)

Wim Opbrouck has featured in films such as *Manneken Pis*, *Man zkt vrouw*, *Verder dan de maan*, *Meisje*, and *Iedereen beroemd*, besides Flemish television productions such as *Man bijt hond*, *Wittekerke*, *Windkracht 10*, *De Rederijders*, and *Matroesjka's*. Opbrouck completed his studies at *Studio Herman Teirlinck* and played at *Blauwe Maandag Compagnie*, *Het Toneelhuis*, and *NTGent*. There he excelled in theatre plays such as *Ten oorlog*, *Aars!*, *de Leenane Trilogie*, *L. Ling of Pain*, *MacBeth*, *De asielzoeker* (*Louis d'Or* nominee), and *Ik val... val in mijn armen*.

**‘This is genuine. This is something else.’**

Her first two short films were immediately selected for the Cannes competition. Now, Esther Rots’ first feature film has hit the theatres, located in a Flemish meadow, starring Rifka Lodeizen. ‘Shivers were actually running down her spine.’

‘The scenario did in fact have an ending. But when I wrote it I didn’t have the slightest idea how the actors would work out together. They did spend an evening sitting down together prior to recording, but something just has to blossom. I have adjusted the story along the way. Nothing too drastic – just small matters. The ending did appear to be roughly right, in retrospect.’

In the feature film *Can go through skin* by Esther Rots, the bubble of Marieke’s carefree urban life is burst abruptly when her boyfriend breaks up with her. In the turbulent period that follows, an accidentally passing lunatic intrudes into her home and sexually assaults her. From a ‘normal’ person who thinks she has it all, Marieke turns into a victim. Instantaneously.

The majority of recording occurred in Sint-Margriete, a hamlet with less than 700 residents situated in Meetjesland in northwest Oost-Vlaanderen, near the Dutch border. In an endless field, all the way down a dead end country lane, flanked by ditches and pollard willows, is the house to which Marieke retreats after the assault. Production manager Maudy van Bree: ‘There are no locals who don’t know us by now. Everybody helps out. You need a tractor? No problem! Your cesspool needs emptying? We’re on our way!’

The plot of land behind the house is occupied by an old, concrete piggery and a collapsed chicken barn. In the distance, a group of trees indicate where the neighbours live. ‘The location is very important’, according to Esther Rots. ‘Marieke’s development parallels that of the house.’

Rots established her name at breakneck speed with two totally self-willed, associative, and near-plotless films, which were both selected for the Cannes festival short film competition: *Speel met me* (2002), in which a young woman loses herself in associations one summer day, and *Ik ontspruit* (2003), about a woman returning to the house where she grew up. ‘If I didn’t have a newspaper article about it, I still wouldn’t believe it. It’s so absurd. Cannes seemed distant and impossible to approach. It isn’t as if the festival seems smaller to me now, or as if I have become larger, but it did put things into a new perspective. You can be in there just like that.’

World-famous within the festival circuit, unknown to Dutch cinema audiences; it speaks volumes about Rots’ work and method. With her, it isn’t about the story; Rots has an intuitive language of her own, in which an important part is played by seemingly futile details, and by nature and the turning of the seasons.

‘As Marieke regains her strength after a severe winter, the house gets prettier. At times when she is optimistic, the viewer has to see new opportunities through the saturated grey walls and the rotten wood. At the start of the year we were drudging in the freezing cold. This creates a kind of intimacy, of sincerity. There’s no time or energy for nonsense.’

She wonders whether this will show in the final result. ‘I think it will. If you keep things genuine, so much will happen that you would never have imagined. If you’re fast enough, you can latch on to that. They’re gifts you will never get when you’re filming in 30 degrees Celsius. Starring actress Rifka Lodeizen had a runny nose; you don’t get that when it’s warm. Shivers were actually running down her spine. That is genuine. That’s something else.’

Recording occurred during long continuous periods, at the start of the year, during summer and autumn, and in December. The house shows traces of previous recordings. Parts of the walls are old and derelict. Other sections have been renovated. In a corner of the house, painted in soft blue tones, stands a widescreen television. Rots: ‘When we set out at the start of the year, someone had lived there. There was wallpaper on the walls and the floor had been furnished. When we started removing that, or rather: when Marieke started to remove that, the damp, rotten floor emerged. Winter reveals the scope of the task before her, as well as how small she really is.’

Rifka Lodeizen (Marieke) is waiting in the tiny kitchen. Although the gas stove is on, it is bleak. A mock belly is on the kitchen table. Lodeizen asks Rots whether she should strap it on. Her co-star, Flemish actor Wim

Opbrouck, is scribbling in a notebook. 'Many actors smoke. I don't. This is my way of remaining calm. I've filled books with these.'

Opbrouck plays the part of John, a local man who takes Marieke under his wing. In the final scene, he has to lift her out of the shower, carry her across the narrow hallway and the living room, and then lay her down to bed in the bedroom. During camera repetitions, Opbrouck is allowed to conserve his strength; he is replaced by sound man Victor Horstink. Time and again, a small parade traverses the house: Lodeizen in the arms of Horstink, hounded by cameraman Lennert Hillege and his assistant. The director follows a few metres behind, scrutinising the recordings on a portable monitor. In the nick of time, Hillege notices the threshold is has come off. 'It's rotting away as you watch.'

Rots (1972) studied fashion at *Hogeschool voor de Kunsten* in Arnhem. 'I was sixteen, wanted to do something related to art. Fashion as such, the pants so to speak, has never really appealed to me.'

Subsequently, she spent a year and a half studying art direction at *Filmacademie* and started making films, initially joined by her partner Dan Geesin, and by herself later on. Her first films primarily caught foreign attention; her third short, again nearly plotless film *Dialoog oefening*, about a young woman making her way through the city and through her own thoughts, was awarded the *NPS-Prijs* at the *Nederlands Film Festival* and the *Gouden Kalf voor de Beste Korte Film*. Meanwhile, Rots was given carte blanche by Mart Dominicus, artistic advisor to the *Filmfonds*, for developing a plan for a feature film. 'Writing progressed sluggishly. It got me frustrated. That's when the idea for *Can go through skin* emerged.'

*Can go through skin* originally set out as self-reflection, but the film is not autobiographical, Rots emphasises. 'I take myself as my criterion. In order to stay genuine, I write about how I might react if such a thing were to happen to me. Marieke really thinks she will regain control of her life. But she is fooling herself. We all do, I think. I do too. Every day.'

During recording, more of Rifka Lodeizen has made its way into Marieke. 'She has a particular kind of humour, a kind of self-mockery, which tremendously enriches Marieke. I was looking for a Daphne Bunskoek slash Sophie Hilbrand-like woman. A strong, level-headed woman living a fast-paced life. I have had Rifka in the back of my mind ever since she auditioned for *Dialoog oefening*. She brings so much to the table; she is so diverse. And what I am asking of her is no laughing matter.'

'I have been put under a cold shower four times and I was made to run naked through the streets of Rotterdam at night. I've never been naked in a film so much at all. And you'd think I would have had my share working with Eddy Terstall!', Lodeizen adds with a laugh. 'When you're alone in a house, you just take a bath', Rots smooths it over. 'Especially Marieke. She will turn on the stove as well; she'll get a kind of party going.'

In the final scene, Lodeizen gets to keep her clothes on. 'It's the last thing the viewer will get to see', Rots explains. 'Marieke distances herself from the life she lives here. In this scene, she decides that John, the cottage, the baby she carries; these things do not make up the life she wants. That is where the viewer should dislodge from her, so to speak.'

It takes a lot to arrive at that feeling. 'Some shots we just slap on in one go. If she exits the supermarket and enters her car, for instance, such things you only have to do once. But this is very delicate. If Rifka looks into the camera too long by just a fraction of a second, then that's disturbing.'

After the first take, Rots asks Opbrouck if he could lay Lodeizen down on the bed a little bit more gently. The actor replies that will not be easy, since he has to wriggle into an unnatural pose. 'Normally, in my spare time, I'd lay her down like this.' At the second take, Rots is satisfied. 'It's beautiful like this. Wim is exceptionally beautiful. Everyone is beautiful.' That comes in handy. Opbrouck only has until about 3 p.m.; that evening he will have to be on stage in Gent again, in *Instinct* by Johan Simons.

Rots has already started editing during the periods when she was not filming.

If she wants to make the Cannes deadline, the film would have to be finished by May, but Rots doesn't think she will pull that off. 'In order for that to happen, you would have to submit the film by January, or maybe February. I think there's no point in editing yourself to pieces against the tide. Cannes is tremendously important, but there are a number of other festivals where this sort of film can fit in well. Venice would be wonderful as well.'

She doesn't experience any pressure. 'It would be brilliant if something wild was to happen to the film, but that would have no major impact on the feelings that will last with me. I intended to try out a certain way of working. In that sense, the film is a success already.'

Disappointing visitor numbers of recent Dutch artistic films such as *Wolfsbergen*, *Tussenstand*, and *Nadine* don't mean much to Rots. 'This may sound a bit strange, but I have primarily made *Can go through skin* for myself, and not for those 2,042 Dutch viewers. Which isn't to say that I don't take the audience into consideration. On the contrary. There is something I want to pass along. Half of them may think it's nonsense, but some people have to get something out of it, or else the film will be a failure as far as I'm concerned.'