

The background of the poster is a warm, golden-toned photograph of several women in white, sleeveless dresses. They appear to be in a celebratory or ritualistic dance. In the center, a woman with dark curly hair is smiling broadly, looking down at her hands. To her left, another woman is seen from the back, her arms raised. To the right, a woman is bent over, her head touching the ground. The air is filled with many small, white, feather-like objects that are falling or floating around the women, creating a dreamlike and ethereal atmosphere. The lighting is soft and warm, highlighting the textures of the dresses and the movement of the feathers.


OUR LADY OF THE NILE

A film by Atiq Rahimi

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2019
CONTEMPORARY WORLD CINEMA
OPENING FILM

A photograph of two young Black women standing in a forest. The woman on the left is looking slightly to her right with a serious expression. She has short, dark, curly hair and is wearing a white collared shirt under a patterned, floral-patterned jacket. The woman on the right is looking towards the left, also with a serious expression. She has short, dark hair and is wearing a white collared shirt under a tan jacket. The background is filled with green foliage and trees, creating a natural, somewhat somber atmosphere.

*"There is no better lycée than Our Lady of the Nile.
Nor is there any higher. Twenty-five hundred meters, the white teachers
proudly proclaim. "Two thousand four hundred ninety-three meters,"
points out Sister Lydwine, our geography teacher. "We're so close
to heaven," whispers Mother Superior, clasping her hands together."*

Excerpt from Scholastique Mukasonga "Our Lady of the Nile"



OUR LADY OF THE NILE

A film by Atiq Rahimi

2019 - France, Belgium, Rwanda - 93 mn - Color - French with some Kinyarwanda

SCREENINGS SCHEDULE @ TIFF

PRESS & INDUSTRY

SAT 7, 11:45 AM @ Scotiabank 6

FRI 13, 12:30 PM @ Scotiabank 8

PUBLIC

THU 5, 6:45 PM @ TIFF Bell Lightbox Cinema 1

FRI 6, 12:15 PM @ Jackman Hall

SAT 14, 8:30 PM @ Scotiabank 8

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SYNOPSIS

Rwanda, 1973. Young girls are sent to *Our Lady of the Nile*, a prestigious Catholic boarding school perched on a hill, where they are taught to become the Rwandan elite. With graduation on the horizon, they share the same dormitory, the same dreams and the same teenage concerns. But throughout the land as well as within the school, deep-seated antagonism is rumbling, about to change these young girls' lives – and the entire country – forever.



ATIQ RAHIMI

Atiq Rahimi is a novelist and filmmaker.

His first feature, *EARTH AND ASHES*, co-authored with Iranian filmmaker Kambuzia Partovi, was presented in the “Un Certain Regard” section at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival where it was awarded the Prix du Regard vers l’Avenir.

SYNGUÉ SABOUR: THE PATIENCE STONE, his first novel written directly in French, won the Prix Goncourt on November 10, 2008.

In 2011, he adapted it into a screenplay with French author and screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière. The movie, which he also directed, world-premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and went on to enjoy widespread public acclaim when it was released on February 20, 2013. Notably, it showcased actress Golshifteh Farahani who received a César nomination for her performance.

OUR LADY OF THE NILE is Atiq Rahimi’s third feature film.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ATIQ RAHIMI

Atiq Rahimi, your latest film is an adaptation based on Scholastique Mukasonga's novel, *Our Lady of the Nile* (Renaudot Prize 2012). This is your first time working from someone else's writing...

Correct. My first two fiction feature films, *Earth and Ashes* and *The Patience Stone* were inspired by my own novels. With *Our Lady of the Nile*, the experience was quite peculiar given it was an autofiction and that the story took place in Rwanda, a country I had never been to. When the producer Marie Legrand offered me the film adaptation, I was hesitant. She liked the way I had depicted the female characters in *The Patience Stone* and she thought I was "the ideal person". I couldn't be sure before visiting the country myself. I had to feel the nation's soul before I could sign on.



Before visiting Rwanda for the first time, what knowledge did you have of the country?

Like most people, my knowledge was limited to the 1994 genocide. A tragedy which, in my mind, merged inevitably with the fratricide war in my own homeland, Afghanistan, which began two years earlier. In both cases, it all started on a political level and gradually narrowed down to questions of ethnicity, race and even religion... At that time I had just lost my brother, who was killed during the war. The civil war in Yugoslavia had also just broken out. That period was particularly violent. The world's silence in the face of these three tragedies horrified me. Ever since then, I had wanted to travel to Sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular to Rwanda which, like

a mirror, invites humanity to reflect upon itself, to feel its wounds and to re-encounter itself both in its horrors and its delights.

This film was the perfect opportunity, then...

Before leaving, I read a great deal of books and I watched almost every film ever made - both fiction and documentary - about the history of Rwanda, but nothing could replace the direct encounter with its people. Foolishly, I had an image of a very violent, chaotic country, filled with noise and under permanent tension. When I arrived, the stillness, the kindness, the cleanliness and the order all immediately surprised me. I was surrounded by peaceful faces; Hills covered in fog which exuded a sense of calm. That first trip was

an incredible revelation for me and convinced me to embark on this beautiful cinematic adventure.

Did you read *Our Lady of the Nile* when it was first released, in 2012?

Of course. Scholastique and I met in 2008, at the Montreal Book Fair. I remember one night there was a fire in our hotel and we ended up in the basement with all of the other guests, in the middle of the night, in our pyjamas! When *Our Lady of the Nile* was published I read it immediately and liked it very much. Little did I know I would later have to try to penetrate into the psyche of the novel's characters, and delve into the inner world and collective imaginary of a people I knew nothing about... It's quite overwhelming when you think about it...

Is it possible the various constraints (either cultural or regarding the historical period...) may have paradoxically allowed for broader freedom of action?

Even when it comes to Afghanistan, which is my own country of origin, I always work at a certain distance. I've always struggled with being direct and immediate with events I feel personally concerned by. I don't know how to recreate historical and social events through realistic or naturalistic narratives. I like recreating a world based on my own experiences and ideas. *Our Lady of the Nile* is a personal, quasi autobiographical novel, structured like a chronicle about a school the author personally attended. Where do I come in, in all this? And I don't mean that in terms of legitimacy but

rather of inspiration. I didn't want to repeat what Scholastique had already brilliantly written in her book. I had to reshape the material and extract myself from the specific historical event in order to create a universal story about the human tragedy. Because contrary to literature, cinema is quite fragile when confronted with this kind of story; it can easily become somewhat trivial.

When did you find your place within the story?

After my first trip to Rwanda. As soon as I found, within its culture, something I've been obsessed with ever since I started writing books and making movies: the relationship between the sacred and violence. The ideas set forth in philosopher René Girard's "Violence and the Sacred"

have stayed with me since my college years. And that's is exactly what Our Lady of the Nile is about. The story unfolds in the 1970s, in a Catholic boarding school for girls who are seemingly carefree and yet who find themselves thrust at the center of an irreversible mechanism of violence, all in the name of their origins. In the seventies, Rwanda, much like Afghanistan, is under absolute rule. It isn't the people who decide, for better or for worse, their political system. It's the elite, the technocrats and the leaders. The genocide against the Tutsi of 1994 didn't arise all of a sudden or without premeditation. Its roots can be found in 1959, when the monarchy was overthrown by the Hutu clan. And then later, in 1973, when the manhunt on the elite and intellectual class began,

in preparation for what would be known as the " Popular Genocide ". They pushed out and went on to annihilate the consciousness of an entire nation. Our Lady of the Nile takes place during that preparatory phase.

There have been some excellent and powerful films about the 1994 Rwandan genocide but what interested me most in Scholastique's novel was how it went back to the roots of the conflict, clearly showing that the interethnic opposition had first been introduced by the early German settlers. It is they who in the 19th century decided to brutally segregate the Rwandan people. Prior to that, the people were simply differentiated by social class and occupation; not by their origins. In the film, when we're in Monsieur de

Fontenaille's house (the character is played by Pascal Greggory), we see old photographs and drawings of Hutus, Tutsis and Twas all posing together. Then, right beside them, there are photographs of a German anthropologist measuring someone's nose in order to better establish the physiological differences between individuals. This brings us back to the notions of myth and the sacred. In order to oppose people, we sacralise one part of a community and we give them a false sense of superiority. Like in the Bible, which I quote in a scene in the church, when the priest mentions Noah's famous passage. There are colonialists and racists who interpret the text by associating the curse of Canaan to the fate of all descendants of Ham, thus justifying black slavery.



The violence creeps in slowly and seems even more unreal as it unravels in a closed-off environment...

Yes, indeed. When you visit Rwanda nowadays, it's surprising to see so much softness and peaceful beauty on the faces and landscapes of the country, despite its violent past. It's hard to believe one of humanity's most gruesome horrors was committed there. But as with all my work in literature and film, I didn't want to turn that horror into a spectacle of violence. Especially because the story takes place in a Catholic school for girls, high up on a hill, cut-off from the reality of the outside world. I first film the girls in their careless innocence; then, politics and the influence of religion progressively come in, transforming their angelic world into a nightmarish reality.

The sacred inserts itself everywhere and is even present in your way of filming the faces of these young girls...

The sacred is what is sublimed; it equates to a constant search for beauty. It's partially what has characterised religious art since the dawn of time. I wanted to make an icon out of each and every one of these 20 young girls. However, beneath the sublimation and all that beauty, a certain violence begins to form. Once that violence takes over, nothing is aestheticised any more. To the contrary, the brightness suddenly fades, the composition loses its harmony, the image becomes twitchy, convulsive... The onset of violence shatters the country's beauty and softness.





In fact, the film opens on those stunning images of an almighty Nature and a young girl bathing, almost as if purified...

Absolutely. The film is constantly navigating between the realms of memory and dream. That first scene and the opening credits set that tone for the film. This carefree girl, swimming so gracefully, is the image of Rwandan youth today, and the voice-over is the voice of her grandmother as she recounts, in the form of tales and legends, her own story and the story of her country. Then, the camera moves into the dormitory where the girls are asleep. The dreams and memories of a people: the most beautiful, precious things to capture.

Among the 20 young girls, none held the main role. Was there a conscious

desire on your part to have them all on equal footing?

Well that's how the book is written. There's a common thread, Virginia, who we follow from beginning to end, but it isn't through her that the story is experienced. Little by little the tandem made up of Gloriosa (the Hutu) and Modesta (half Hutu-half Tutsi) makes it way to the surface. In those days, all of those schools had quotas for Tutsi students.

How did you find the actresses who play the students living in the school?

In Rwanda there aren't really any young professional actors and actresses aside from the ones who appear on TV shows. So, we created a workshop in Kigali. I told the casting director I didn't want to know the

he sincerely believes everything he says, he seems well-intended, except he's catering to the very legend on which the genocide will take basis. Just as the Christians did in many other countries. Colonialism and Christianity have often helped each other create myths in order to better divide and conquer.

And yet Monsieur de Fontenaille tries to reinstitute a dream stolen from an entire people...

... Maybe, but that too breeds violence. And therein lies the problem!

Was it an obvious choice to have Pascal Greggory play the character?

In order to steer clear from clichés, I had to find an actor who was capable of bringing a sense of mystery to the character. Pascal was perfect for

it. He's elusive. During the shoot I would ask him to do each scene in a different tone: perversity, aristocratic poise, extravagance... He was perplexed at first but he quickly got on board. I then mixed the different takes in editing.

Can you tell us about the voice-over we hear in the film?

It's the voice of the Rwandan people, its collective imaginary, its spirit. I asked Florida Uwera, also known as "the diva of Rwandan music" to lend her magnificent voice for the part. She kindly accepted.

In the dormitory, we see photographs of certain celebrities hanging on the wall: Brigitte Bardot, Johnny Hallyday... All White...

In the words of Franz Fanon: "Black

skin, White masks". The White man's world was everything these young girls could dream of. That's how they were raised. In fact, one of the nuns from the school says: "Africa is for geography, History is for Europe." The fantasy of all these countries was to be a part of History, as written by the western world. Just as Veronica's character dreams of performing in White movies. The sequence where the brown paint fades off of the Our Lady of the Nile statue, revealing the white skin hidden underneath, is significant in that respect. There, it's the black mask over white skin that one of the young girls yearns for!

Among the enigmatic characters in the film, there's the witch...

She represents the archetype of the Rwandan people's beliefs.

Christianity is only introduced much later, from the outside, and is the result of colonisation. To these young girls, the witch subconsciously represents a refuge to turn to, within their ancient imaginary, whenever they are threatened by the Church, colonialism or political violence. As can be seen in the last two parts of the film.

Where was the film shot?

In a village near Lake Kivu, in the district of Rutsiro. It's a Catholic school which is still in use and which has some recent buildings as well as some older ones. It's located high up in the mountains and is difficult to reach. Once you arrive, it's quite impressive to see the church overlooking everything. We shot the film between October and December,



over the course of seven weeks, during the light rains. It complicated things but I knew I wanted to shoot at that time of the year, with its swift changes in light, going from cloudy to sunny, often bringing out halftone colours. It's the complete opposite from my film *Earth and Ashes*, in which the harsh sunlight crushes everything.

Speaking of which, the lighting created by Thierry Arbogast is very expressive...

Contrary to my previous films, I didn't have any specific pictorial references to show him this time. The instructions were to respect the Rwandan natural light and its predominant colours: the ocre red of the ground, the green of the hills, the blackness of the skin, the whiteness

of the fog... There are also a few scenes shot at dawn and during the night which are in shades of blue... Rwanda has a visually and sonically ethereal atmosphere which I wanted to capture.

Did you have any film references?

Various heterogeneous references which, on a narrative and theme-related level, seemed to all be related in my mind! When it comes to Nature, violence and the sacred, it's difficult to not think of Terrence Malick's earlier films. To me it seemed evident. I also had Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* in mind. The pillow-fight scene with the feathers flying in slow motion is actually a tribute to him. For the massacre scene, I thought of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* and the silence that accompanies the killing scenes.

I wanted that silence of death to be present in the film. Finally, the last shot is a nod to Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the olive trees*.

Tell us about the music...

The film score is something I always obsess about and I can change my mind half-way through the process, depending on the rhythm and tone we find in the editing room. I admit it can be a bit tiresome for some of my collaborators. While I was in Rwanda there were three jazz albums by this trio made up of Aldo Romano, Henri Sexier and Louis Sclavis that I would listen to all the time. A few years ago they travelled through Sub-Saharan Africa and stopped to play in different villages. When my film editor, Henri de Luze, asked me for musical references I brought in a

few tracks from those albums. In the end they made the final cut. It was that ethereal music, the very one that had filled my Rwandan nights, that had influenced me... probably even in my film direction. I find certain track titles echo strangely with the film: *God doesn't exist*, *Little white beds*...



AN INTERVIEW WITH SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA

Our Lady of the Nile, published by Gallimard in 2012, is your first novel...

Yes. Up until then, I had only written autobiographical books: *Cockroaches* (2006) which was about my childhood years in the town of Nyamata and *The Barefoot Woman* (2008) which was a tribute to my mother, as well as all to Tutsi mothers in Rwanda who remained dignified in the face of adversity and whose only reason to live was to save their children. So *Our Lady of the Nile* is indeed my first fictional piece although everything in the book is based on my own experiences. Unlike my first two autobiographical books which were written in pain, the writing process of *Our Lady of the Nile* unfolded, much to my surprise, in a more peaceful atmosphere given the characters were fictional: it showed me the joy of writing. My high school was actually called Notre-Dame des Cîteaux, and was located in the city



centre of Kigali, not in the mountains as is said in the film or novel. It was a Catholic school, like most schools in Rwanda, attended mainly by young girls of the country's elite. I shared a classroom with the daughters of the prime minister and the president. I was among the few Tutsi to have had the opportunity to go to secondary school despite the quota policies that limited the number of Tutsi students.

Why did you feel the need to tell this story?

Firstly, I wanted to describe my encounter with discrimination. Before attending the school, I lived in Nyamata with my family. Experiences of pain, humiliation and brutality were shared commonly by all of us. As a Tutsi you just dealt with it, it was almost normal. We had been

told so many times that we had to die, that we were nothing more than "cockroaches", that our only right in life was to one day be killed... We had accepted and internalised the idea of death. The very first pogroms began in 1959. When I joined Notre-Dame des Cîteaux and later, when I went into social assistant training in Butare in the early sixties, I found myself isolated and very vulnerable. I had to carry that pain on my own two shoulders. I no longer had my loved-ones around to protect me. It was extremely violent. Virginia's character in the novel and film is actually me... even if I wasn't fully aware of that while I was writing it. I turned to fiction in order to put some distance between the events and myself. It would have been too destructive otherwise. But my

writing caught up with me and reality naturally imposed itself, without my knowing. One way or the other, I had to tell this story. Unlike my parents, I survived, and I owed it to myself to testify so that nothing would be forgotten. I feel that responsibility very strongly. To live or rather to not die, in order to tell my story.

Was this duty of remembrance ever too heavy to bear?

Before writing this novel I was afraid I'd lose my mind. In 1973 my parents said to me: "Scholastique, you've learned French, you have an international passport, you have to leave. You will be our memory!" My parents knew that by staying in Rwanda they were doomed, and so they ordered me to leave. I was 16 years old. I went to Burundi and

then left for France in 1992, two years before the genocide. On April 6th 1994 I woke up like everyone else in France. In a state of total shock. You hear your parents tell you, your whole life, that extermination is your foreseeable fate, but you can never imagine something like the genocide being possible. Suddenly everything crumbles. Madness creeps up on you. "You will be our memory!" Those words resonated within me. I had to carry on. So I wrote, I put pen to paper, I was terrified my memory would fade, all of a sudden. I had to salvage it, at all costs. I couldn't sleep, I had nightmares every single night. I took notes. It was only much later that I went back to them in order to write my two autobiographical books and later for *Our Lady of the Nile*, which liberated me from the guilt of



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The novel's publication and the Prix Renaudot must have come as a relief...

It's all the result of a long process. Writing my first two autobiographies and meeting with the readers are what initiated the liberation. I was finally telling my story, with words. My voice was slowly being freed. I often say that "the poison was leaving me". I was healing. It's really then that I felt the strength and power of writing. That's when I finally decided to try out fiction with *Our Lady of the Nile*. Fiction is magical, it's less painful. As I was writing it, I would sometimes catch myself smiling. It felt good. I didn't think the manuscript would interest Gallimard, let alone receive the Prix Renaudot. I had ventured onto the path of literature by a duty of

remembrance. The Prix Renaudot proved not only that the story I was telling deserved to be told, but that it also had literary value. It was like a passport, it authorised me to continue on this beautiful adventure that is literature.

Today, the novel has been made into a film...

Everything surrounding this novel is exceptional. I'm quite aware of that. A few months after receiving the Prix Renaudot, I received a phone call letting me know Charlotte Casiraghi wanted to meet me. She had read my novel, had been extremely moved and believed it would make a beautiful film. Charlotte told me then and there that making a film is a long process and that it would be at least five

years before the project would come to fruition. She bought the film rights. I waited. I was confident. In 2017, Dimitri Rassam came on board and everything accelerated. To make a long story short, five years later, just as Charlotte had predicted, *Our Lady of the Nile* is now a film. It's quite wonderful.

Did you have a say in the choice of director?

Dimitri told me one day: "Scholastique, I found the director for the film. Atiq Rahimi!" Marvellous. Ever since we met in 2008 at the Montreal Book Fair, we had become very close. He the Afghan, I the Rwandan; we shared a similar story. He was very well placed to adapt *Our Lady of the Nile*.

What was your involvement in the film making process ?

I acted as a consultant, I followed each step of the process and read the different versions of the script. I had no reason to react like Marguerite Duras, who was against film adaptations of her work. I was in the opposite state of mind. What counted most to me was that the film be shot in Rwanda. In the same context as the novel. Everyone agreed. Atiq completely immersed himself in a culture foreign to him. He involved himself tremendously. He made a first trip to Rwanda and stayed on-site for two months. He's a very sensitive person, who understands things quickly. He went back for another six months, during the preparation of the film. He worked with Rwandan actresses who



knew nothing of acting and yet who come across as total professionals on screen. I met him there in order to introduce him to the diva Florida who does the voice-over in the film. Today, Atiq practically knows as much as I do about my own country's culture. We even gave him a rwandan name, Kanyamisozi (the one from the mountains).

Are there big differences between the film and your novel?

A film script isn't a novel. You have to make choices and synthesise as much as possible. To rewrite the novel on screen would have been both impossible and in vain. Atiq respected the tone of the book all the while bringing in his own creative voice. I was very fond of the subtlety he brought to the character Gloriosa.

He was right to choose a beautiful actress to play the part. It avoids caricature. He understood perfectly: the heart of *Our Lady of the Nile* was meant to reconcile.

Where did the character Monsieur de Fontenaille come from?

The character was inspired by a true story: there was an old settler who had a coffee plantation in Burundi, on the shores of lake Tanganyika. It had become a very popular beach. He lived in a big abandoned villa, decorated with "Egyptian" mosaics. It became the theme of the novel. Through this disturbed, decadent character, I underline the settlers' full responsibility in the Rwandan tragedy. They're the ones who established differences within the population and who planted the

idea of a superior race. Monsieur de Fontenaille embodies the folly behind the concept of the Tutsi myth. He fantasises completely without ever realising the tragic consequences it entails.

How big of a role did the Catholic church play at the time ?

In the sixties and seventies, there was a Catholic school every 10 kilometres. Any Rwandan who wanted to get an education had to be baptised. No one questioned it, it was part of our education. Generally speaking, boys were sent to seminaries with the priests and girls joined the nuns. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to study and train as a social assistant. My goal was to return to my hometown villages after graduation in order to help the

forsaken rural community. Sadly, I wasn't able to see it through...

Tell us more...

It's a lot like what you see in the film. One day, I was in class when suddenly a group of students from another class comes in. "Scholastique, they're here, run!" So I ran away. I was ready, always on the lookout, like a hunted animal ready to flee at any given time without a moment's doubt. I knew it could happen at any time. That was in 1973, the year the government cancelled the quotas allowing Tutsis to go to school. The thought of Tutsis gaining access to knowledge was unbearable to them. And so, they chased us out of the schools. I ended my studies then and there and left the country.

In the film, the violence is offset by a deliberately pure, beautiful cinematography...

The beauty of the images, landscapes and faces. It's extremely powerful. It's a wonderful tribute to mankind and Nature. Paradoxically, the beauty brings out the violence even more. Nowadays, we can observe the violence without any unwholesome, hidden agenda. As a matter of fact, the notions of Tutsi and Hutu no longer exist in Rwanda.

The genocide isn't taboo in Rwandan society...

... which is great! We don't hide anything from our children. No falsehood. We must avoid denial at all cost and find the right words and the right images in order to preserve them, to shelter them from the poison that ruined my own childhood. Our children must not be held prisoners of our past.



CAST

Virginia Santa Amanda Mugabekazi
Gloriosa Albina Sydney Kirenga
Immaculée Angel Uwamahoro
Veronica Clariella Bizimana
Modesta Belinda Rubango Simbi
Frida Ange Elsie Ineza
Goretti Kelly Umuganwa Teta
Fontenaille Pascal Gregory
Mother superior Carole Trévoux

CREW

Genre: Drama

Written by: Atiq Rahimi et Ramata Toulaye-Sy

Based on: “ Notre-Dame du Nil ”
Scholastique Mukasonga’s book, © Gallimard,
2012(Winner of the 2012 Renaudot Prize)

Directed by: Atiq Rahimi

Director of photography: Thierry Arbogast (AFC)

Editing: Hervé de Luze, Jacqueline Mariani

Sound Design: Dana Farzaneh Pour, Ingrid Ralet,
Etienne Curchod, Mathieu Cox

Production Designer: Françoise Joset

Costume Designer: Cédric Mizero

Casting Director: Hope Azeda

Still Photographer: Sophie Davin

Produced by: Chapter 2, Les Films du Tambour

Producers : Dimitri Rassam, Charlotte Casiraghi,
Marie Legrand et Rani Massalha

Coproduced by: France 2 Cinéma, Swoon Productions et Belga Productions

Coproducers: Patrick Vandenbosch, Jérôme de Bethune, Fabrice Delville,
Christophe Toulemonde

With the support of: Canal +, Ciné +, France Télévision, Wallimage
(La Wallonie), Proximus, Rwanda Film Office, CNC

In association with: Cofinova 15, Cinéventure 4, Wallimage (La Wallonie)

French Distributor: Bac Films

Belgium Distributor: Belga Films

International sales: Indie Sales






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