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presents

VAN DAMME

SPLIT PERSONNALITY!

A 52' Film Directed by Olivier MONSSENS
Produced by ARTE GEIE, RTBF, Flair Productions
& Kaos Films

Whether you like him or not, whether he arouses admiration, perplexity or laughter, Jean-Claude Van Damme's life is an incredible and unconventional adventure from Belgium to Hollywood.

SYNOPSIS

In 1988, an unknown man named Jean-Claude Van Damme became a worldwide celebrity by getting the lead role in a low-budget martial arts film that should have been released only on DVD, but would make millions of dollars.

This was the beginning of a meteoric rise for the young Belgian who had arrived in Los Angeles six years earlier, without money or contacts but with a stainless determination, which, after many setbacks, would make him one of the **best rated action film actors in Hollywood for more than a decade**.

Harder would be the fall at the end of the 90s, which drug abuse would accelerate. Mocked for the lunar and surrealistic reflections with which he now spices up his interviews, Jean-Claude would however know salvation in 2008 thanks to his humble and lucid performance in JCVD, a French film telling the story of a former kick-boxing star who has lost everything and finds his roots in Brussels. After which, little by little, Van Damme would climb back up the steps of respect.

Since then, between the United States, Asia and Europe, Jean-Claude Van Damme, unable to stop, has switched between action films, dramas and self-deprecating parodies, making him **one of the most lovable figures in cinema**.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE OF INTENT

Whether you like him or not, whether he arouses admiration, perplexity or laughter, Jean-Claude Van Damme remains a star as well as an unusual, elusive and touching character. Since he escaped Hollywood glory in the «action» category - without, it should be noted, suffering from his fame -, Jean-Claude is rarely where we expect him to be, in his works as in his thoughts. And if his thoughts sometimes take surprising or smoky shapes, the mockery is easy and very light in the face of a career that has taken him to the top of the American box-office and that owes everything to the incredible perseverance of this Belgian Rastignac who started from scratch, to a talent that was by no means innate but that he had to forge and then constantly put back on the tatami. **Van Damme's life is a novel and Jean-Claude his unlikely hero whose story this documentary will tell with lucidity and sensitivity.**

In addition to numerous unpublished and enlightening testimonies, notably from close friends and film professionals who, on both sides of the Atlantic, knew him or worked with him, this fascinating and incredible story will be nourished by excerpts from essential or little-known, iconic or kitschy films, and numerous interviews given by Jean-Claude throughout his career, from his very first appearance on a French TV news channel in 1988, shy or even candid, including some (un)controlled slips up to the last confessions without pretence of a sixty year old who has lived and experienced it all.

JEAN-CLAUDE LIFE'S: A NOVEL

«UGLY AS SIN, BLIND AS A BAT, STIFF AS A BOARD»

«I was a very dreamy, nostalgic, anxious boy by nature. In Brussels, my father had a bookstore before he had a flower store and, without realizing it, in my psychological world, my youth was spent among books. I read a lot, a lot of pictures between the ages of six and thirteen. I was always at home, on the sofa, and I would evade the world with Tintin. You know, you turn on those pages, you have Tintin going to Arabia, to China, to America... and you go out on his adventures...».

Among the images that impressed the young Jean-Claude Van Vaerenbergh (born on October 18, 1960 in a township of the Belgian capital), there are also those of the films that his father made him watch: *Ben Hur*, *Lawrence of Arabia* or *Tarzan*. «I wanted to be Tarzan and save Jane,» he said one day. And become an actor like his idols: Delon and Belmondo. But as a child, Jean-Claude was not what you would call handsome. With his big glasses, his lisp and his deep shyness, he was hardly the type to be the star of the playground, close to being the laughing stock. Except that one day, challenged, even cornered by the guys of his school, he managed, to everyone's surprise, to get a date with the girl that everyone was staring at, a bit out of his league and older than him. A dream that lasted a few weeks before being shattered.



Deep wound. Narcissistic too, no doubt. Because when he thinks about it today, Jean-Claude tells himself that it is perhaps a little «*because of her*» that he wanted to «*mutate*», that **he trained intensively in martial arts and surpassed himself in karate**. Even if it was his father who, at the age of twelve, after watching a film with Bruce Lee, pushed him to take up karate, by enrolling him in the demanding classes of Claude Goetz, to shake him up. Rough training sessions and it's an understatement to say that the preteen didn't have much of a chance at first: «*ugly as sin, blind as a bat, stiff as a board*» the teacher said of him. But after periods of discouragement, his determination would take over with only one goal: to improve. In karate but also in kick-boxing. **Weight training for hours and repetitions of punches in the void with dumbbells at arm's length, stretching and splits, endurance, karate moves, sparring sessions**, the training of his teacher Claude Goetz is insane. Much later, the man would become the actor's coach, accompanying him on some of his shoots, and sometimes becoming an anchor when the actor had a bad time or a breakdown.

MISTER BELGIUM

As a teenager, Jean-Claude, who was interested in classical music and opera, also took ballet classes for four years - "*ballet is an art, but it's also one of the most difficult sports. If you can survive a ballet workout, you can survive a workout in any other sport.*" But karate remains his priority, a passion for martial arts that he then shared with a buddy, Mohamed (Michel) Qissi, with whom he became inseparable. Over the years, Jean-Claude managed to overcome his fear and participated in numerous fights during which his opponents were the victims of his speed and leg power. At the age of 18, he became European champion with a black belt in the Light-Contact category and won the title of Mister Belgium in the bodybuilding category.

In 1979, during a world karate championship held in Wako, Florida, he achieved one of his dreams: to go to the United States. Although he did not shine in this competition, succeeding in the United States in action films became as soon as he got back to Belgium, a fixation, an obsession that he shared with Mohamed. **They promised each other: they would come back and put Hollywood on the tatami.**

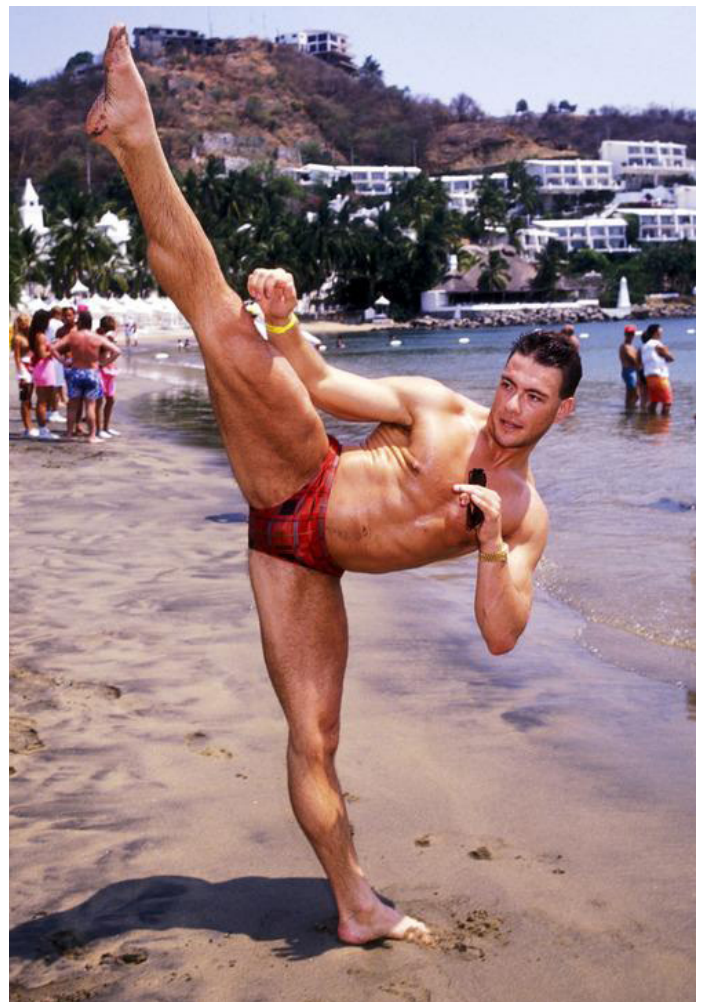


In the meantime, in 1979, Jean-Claude appeared for the first time in a historical and political drama for film lovers by the Flemish director André Delvaux, *Woman Between Wolf and Dog*. As an extra: we first see him, in 1940, watching the news in a movie theater, before seeing him again with other boys, listening to the story of a young soldier collaborator, a scene that carries on in a scrum. Apart from this brief and improbable interlude, Jean-Claude was twenty years old when he opened his own training gym, the California Gym, inspired by the famous Gold's Gym in L.A. And all this while doing as many odd jobs as he can for two years with his friend Mohamed to pay for the ticket to Los Angeles, which was very expensive at the time. Especially since the goal was becoming clearer. In Brussels, they met an American who, touched by their dream (and fed by Mohamed Qissi's mother's Moroccan meals), offered to put them up when they arrived in the villa he said he owned in Hollywood. **And in 1982, Jean-Claude and Mohamed took the leap, finally boarded their plane and landed in California.**

CARPET INSTALLER IN CALIFORNIA

As soon as they left the airport, Jean-Claude and Mohamed called their «American friend» who was supposed to welcome them... **but nobody answered and they never heard from him again.** The problem was that they had invested almost everything in their ticket and had no money left. Upset, Jean-Claude could not see any other way out than to use their return ticket. But for Mohamed, there was no way: *«I told him: I'll succeed here or I'll die here! We are not going to go back to Brussels with our tails between our legs and be ridiculed!»* In Belgium, many people considered them at best as dreamers, at worst as myths. So it was settled, they stayed and, at random, in Santa Monica, entered a dingy kick-boxing gym, begging the owner to let them stay.

The guy was cool, they could sleep there at night, in a corner. They would spend a few nights and also give classes there for a few dollars. But not everyone was that nice in Hollywood and **their dream soon came up against the cynical and bitter reality of the down-and-out.** From then on, Van Damme would once again take a series of makeshift jobs: carpet installer, bouncer, limousine driver... He slept in his car, stole food in supermarkets but never stopped believing in his dream.



GAY KARATEKA, RUSSIAN KARATEKA

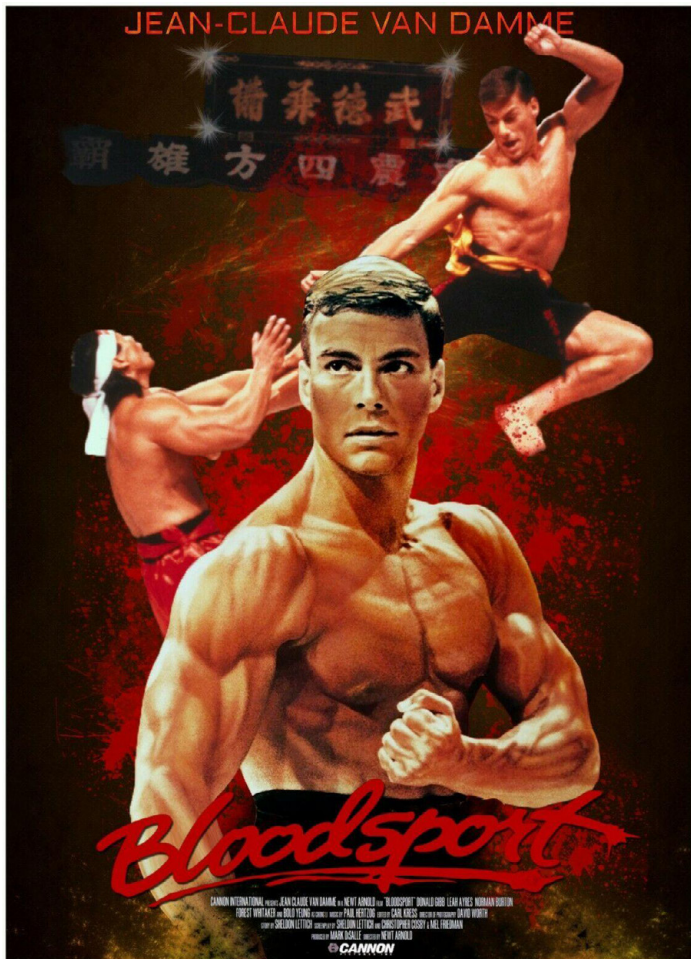
In 1984, Jean-Claude finally got his first (small) appearance in an American film produced by Cannon Films, *Breakin'*. During a break dance scene in the street between the three main characters, we see among the girls and boys in fluorescent bikinis, training suits or tank tops, a young man in a black shirt dancing and clapping to the rhythm of the music. It is the young Belgian. As he would later tell us, during the scene he tried to draw attention to himself by jumping in the air and doing flips (jumps with front or back flips)... but these images were not included in the editing. Whatever, we still see him on the screen, a first car is hooked and he would soon be having his first important professional meetings: **Lou Ferrigno, the famous bodybuilder and interpreter of the series The Incredible Hulk, and especially Chuck Norris**, who was in the second film in which Jean-Claude appeared. Sympathizing with the latter, Norris hired him for a while as an assistant for his training sessions and on certain sets.

In 1984, Jean-Claude played the small role of a gay karateka in *Monaco Forever...* a film that remained unfinished for a long time and was only distributed as a medium-length film once JCVD was famous. In 1985, Jean-Claude's career marked a turning point. He got his first consistent role in *Karate Tiger / No Retreat, No Surrender* in which he plays a Russian karate villain. He is only in the picture for ten minutes but his magnetism almost steals the show from the main actor. **And it is for this film that he would change from «Van Vaerenbergh» to «Van Damme» - a name chosen for its phonetic proximity to «damage».**

A HEAVYWEIGHT IN HOLLYWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

However, the event that would change his life occurred a few months later when, in a restaurant where he was having dinner, Van Damme saw Menahem Golan, the big boss of Cannon, an influential producer in the world of action films, enter the room... and that he had more than once solicited, without any reply. The opportunity wouldn't present itself twice. He had to impress him. He got up and approached him. A plate of soup in each hand, he performed a back kick that passed just above Golan's head. Golan gave him his card. A month later, in his office (after waiting a day in the hallway), Van Damme put on a new show - this time a facial split between two chairs. And insisted, with tears in his eyes: **«Look, I'm still very young. I have a thirst for cinema and I'm really cheap. I can do anything that this or that guy does in your movies. Please, give me a chance!»** Touched and convinced, the producer throws the script of *Bloodsport* in front of him, saying: **«Next week in Hong Kong»**. Jean-Claude exulted. But Golan didn't suspect that by offering him the title role in a film that was supposed to be released on DVD, **he had just launched one of the biggest stars in the action movies industry.** Jean-Claude didn't forget about his buddy Mohamed, to whom he gave a small role in the film.

Released in 1988, *Bloodsport* was a box-office hit in the United States and around the world. It marked the beginning of a period of eleven box-office successes for Van Damme that would build his reputation, fill his bank account and ensure his long-awaited fame: *Kickboxer*, *Full Contact*, *Universal Soldier*, *Hard Target* by John Woo and *Timecop* - his biggest success in the United States, which would generate more than 100 million dollars worldwide. **Jean-Claude was now a heavyweight in Hollywood entertainment.** In the action film category, he was one of the highest



paid actors and worked with Stallone and Bruce Willis. An unthinkable success for the one who is now nicknamed «Muscles from Brussels» (a wordplay with «mussels» in English).

THE FALL OF “JEAN-CLAUDE VINGT GRAMMES” (JEAN-CLAUDE TWENTY GRAMS).

But this powerful crystallization of the dream will leave traces in his family life and his friendships. In 1993, Jean-Claude divorced Gladys Portugues, a New York bodybuilder he had married in 1987 and with whom he had two children: Kristopher and Bianca. In 1995, after a brief affair with the singer Kylie Minogue during the filming of the nanar (crappy film) *Street Fighter*, he married the model and actress Darcy LaPier with whom he had a child, Nicholas. They divorced two years later before Van Damme remarried to his first wife, Gladys Portugues.

As for his friend Mohamed Qissi, with whom he had decided to conquer Hollywood, their paths would separate in the aftermath of *Full Contact*, a film in which also plays Qissi. They would not meet again on a set until fifteen years later for a sequel to *Kickboxer*. For the time being, Van Damme was «elsewhere». **From now on, his life was between Los Angeles, Monaco and Hong Kong**, he created his own production structures and directed *The Quest* himself, which, in 1996, he shared the poster with Roger Moore.

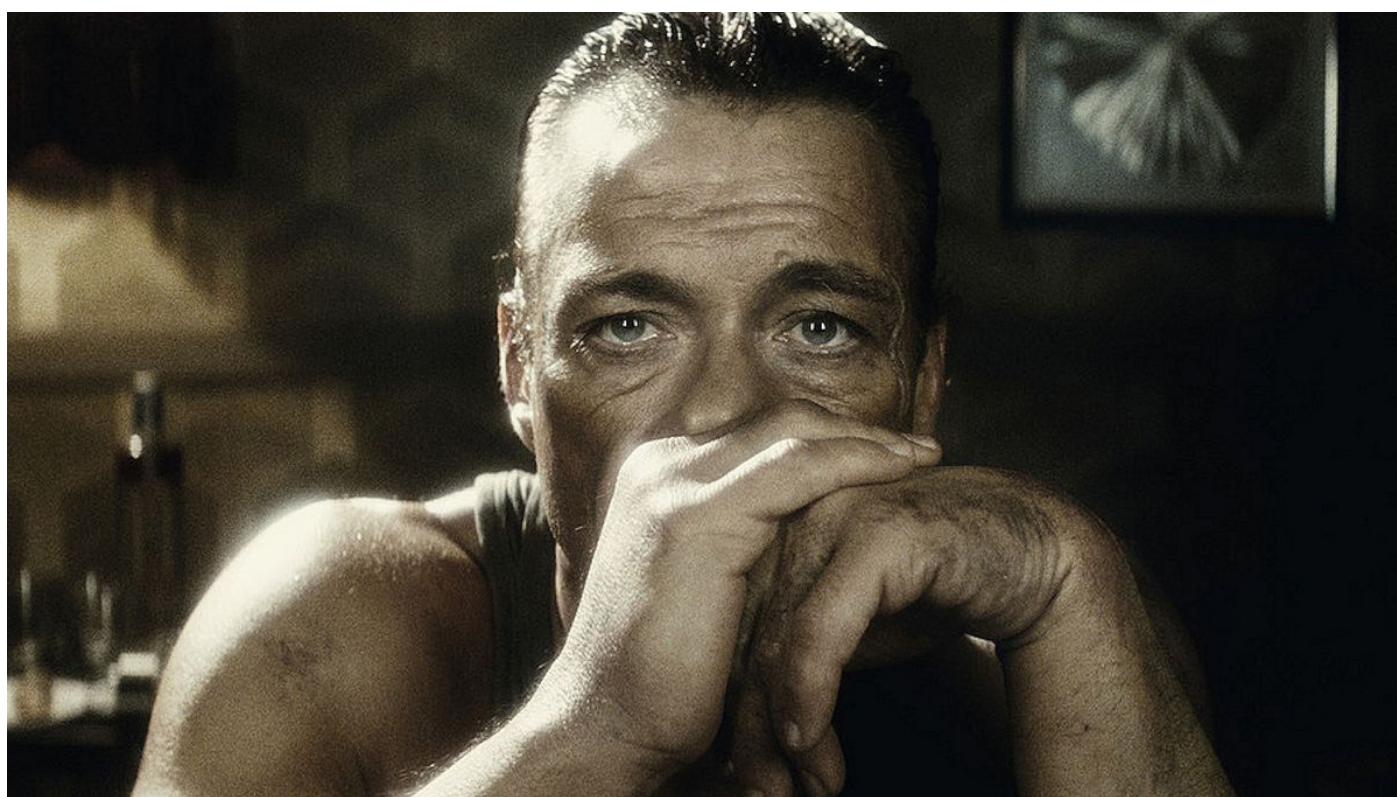
But his success, the excitement that followed and a certain form of megalomania took him away from reality. Especially since, for some time, Jean-Claude fell into cocaine. «My friends used to call me Jean-Claude Vingt Grammes,» (Jean-Claude Twenty Grams) he recalls. His ability to judge was severely impaired, so much so that in 1995, when Universal Studios offered him a contract for three films at 12 million dollars each, Jean-Claude, stoned, refused because he wanted 20, «like Jim Carrey» who had just made it big with *The Mask*. Universal let him go, he started to freewheel and, little by little, **from the end of the 90s, he accumulated flops, his films skipping theaters to go on DTV** (Direct to Video). A foretaste of the end of his American dream...

JCVD

After a detox and a few relapses, Jean-Claude got healthy again in the early 2000s, **immersed himself in personal development and expressed his new vision of the world in the media.** To the great pleasure of French-speaking television channels that invite him mainly to make fun of him and his improbable and surreal thoughts... often the result of jet lag, a poorly developed

French (long since deserted in favor of English, not forgetting that if his father is French-speaking, his mother is Flemish)... **and a complete let-go, with no filter at all! More than his roles, it is the «Van Dammeries» that make him famous.** He is given the same old «*aware*» all the time, he is reminded of his hazelnuts that he «*breaks between the butts*», the so good «*pectin*» contained in the apple crunched by Adam, his «*allergy to cocaine*» and other wanderings - it is necessary to call them so. But Jean-Claude remains zen - or at least tries to be. Especially since, in the print media, among the specialists of the genre, there are always supporters who recall a certain talent and the road traveled.

A form of salvation would come in 2008 thanks to his performance in *JCVD*. A French film that tells the story of a former kick-boxing star who has lost everything, returns to his Belgian roots and discovers the bitter reality of being a loser. **A role that he tackles with obvious lucidity and that would convince a large part of the audience and the critics...** including the New York Times.



In 2013 and in a completely different genre, it is a commercial for Volvo that offered him international visibility (over 60 million views on YouTube in less than a month). We see him perform a facial split between two trucks that, while driving, gradually move apart...

Since then, Jean-Claude found himself in a few American action movies directly released on VOD and DVD (including *Kickboxer: Retaliation* which also features ... Mike Tyson), in the French-Belgian drama *Lukas* (in 2018) but also, in self-deprecating style, in the U.S. TV series *Jean Claude Van Johnson* and the film *The Last Mercenary* for Netflix in 2020.

IF I STOP, I DIE

«*We'd like you to take a break, Jean-Claude,*» his father recently told him on a television show. «*Now that you've made sure the whole family is well taken care of, you can get some rest*». The son's

answer: «*Thanks, Dad, but if I stop, I die.*» What also seems to say the bronze statue erected in his honor in 2012 in Brussels and which represents him geared up and ready to fight. At the inauguration of which he said: «*This statue represents the dream of a Brussels ketje (kid). It is for all the children who want something bad. If you believe in something strongly enough, it can come true.*»

BIO OF THE AUTHOR-DIRECTOR

OLIVIER MONSSENS



Olivier Monsens is the author and director of some fifteen «pop culture» documentaries (for France Télévisions, ARTE, TF1, Canal+), most of which are devoted to the often unpublished or little-used backstage stories of a certain showbiz, a narrative that is both unusual and relevant to the general public, to its collective memory. Among these : *Jim Morrison, derniers jours à Paris*, *Disco Europe Express* and *High Energy* for ARTE, the prime time documentary *Les Belges, ça ose tout* for France 3, *Dorothée, Hélène et les garçons - génération AB* productions for TF1 or the initiatory and iconic *Marcel Superstar*.

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