

# Breaking the Waves

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*Breaking the Waves* is a 1996 film directed by Lars von Trier and starring Emily Watson. Set in the Scottish Highlands in the early 1970s, it is about an unusual young woman, Bess McNeill, and of the love she has for Jan, her husband. The film is an international co-production led by von Trier's Danish company Zentropa. It is the first film in Trier's 'Golden Heart Trilogy' which also includes *The Idiots* (1998) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000).

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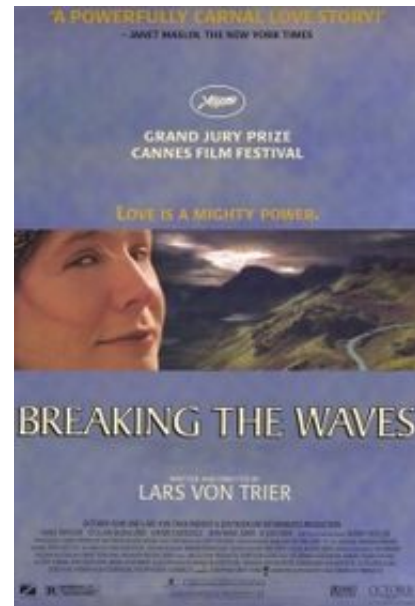
## Plot

*Breaking the Waves* tells the story of Bess McNeill, a pretty young Scottish woman with a history of psychological problems. She marries Norwegian oil rig worker Jan, despite the apprehensions of her community and Calvinist church.

Bess is somewhat simple and childlike in her beliefs. During her regular visits to the church, she prays to God and believes God answers through her using her voice.

Bess has difficulty living without Jan when he is away on the oil platform. Jan makes occasional phone calls to Bess in which they express their love and sexual desires. Bess grows impatient and prays for his immediate return. The

## Breaking the Waves



Theatrical release poster

<b>Directed by</b>	Lars von Trier
<b>Produced by</b>	Peter Aalbæk Jensen Vibeke Windeløv
<b>Written by</b>	Lars von Trier Peter Asmussen
<b>Starring</b>	Emily Watson Stellan Skarsgård Katrin Cartlidge Jean-Marc Barr Udo Kier
<b>Cinematography</b>	Robby Müller
<b>Editing by</b>	Anders Refn
<b>Distributed by</b>	October Films (US)
<b>Release dates</b>	18 May 1996 (Cannes Film Festival) 5 July 1996 (Denmark)
<b>Running time</b>	158 minutes <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Country</b>	Denmark
<b>Language</b>	English
<b>Budget</b>	\$7.5 million <sup>[2]</sup>

next day, Jan is paralysed from an industrial accident and is flown back to the mainland. Bess believes her prayer was the reason the accident occurred.

<b>Box office</b>	\$3,803,298 (USA) <sup>[3]</sup>
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No longer able to perform sexually and mentally affected by the paralysis, Jan asks Bess to find a lover. Bess is devastated and storms out. Jan then attempts to commit suicide and fails. He falls unconscious and is readmitted to hospital.

Jan's condition deteriorates and he urges Bess to find and have sex with other men and tell him the details as it will be as if they are together and will keep him alive. Bess begins to believe these actions are the will of God and in accordance with loving Jan.

Despite her unwillingness and inner turmoil to be with other men, she perseveres as she believes it is keeping Jan alive.

## Cast

- Emily Watson as Bess McNeill
- Stellan Skarsgård as Jan Nyman
- Katrin Cartlidge as Dodo McNeill
- Jean-Marc Barr as Terry
- Adrian Rawlins as Dr. Richardson
- Jonathan Hackett as Priest
- Sandra Voe as Mother
- Udo Kier as Sadistic Sailor
- Mikkel Gaup as Pits
- Roef Ragas as Pim
- Phil McCall as Grandfather
- Robert Robertson as Chairman

## Style

The film is influenced by the realist Dogme 95 movement, of which von Trier was a founding member, and its grainy images and hand-held photography give it the superficial look of a Dogme film. However, the Dogme rules demand the use of real locations, whereas many of the locations in *Breaking the Waves* were constructed in a studio.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> In addition, the film is set in the past and contains dubbed music, as well as a brief scene featuring CGI, none of which is permitted by the Dogme rules.

## Production

Helena Bonham Carter was von Trier's first choice to play the role of Bess, but she dropped out just before shooting was to start, reportedly due to the large amount of nudity and sexuality required by the role.<sup>[4]</sup> Melanie Griffith was also considered.

The exterior scenes were shot in Scotland: the graveyard was built for the film on Isle of Skye; the church is in Lochailort, the harbour in Mallaig, and the beach in Morar.<sup>[5]</sup> The interiors were shot at Det Danske Filmstudie, Lyngby, Denmark.

The helicopter used in the movie, G-BBHM, a Sikorsky S-61-N, was later involved in an emergency landing and fire that destroyed the aircraft but none of the four crew were injured. This occurred at Poole, Dorset on 15th July, 2002.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Reception

### Critical response

*Breaking the Waves* was named one of the ten best films of the decade by both Roger Ebert and Martin Scorsese during a show where the famous film personalities listed their top movies of the 1990s.<sup>[7]</sup>

### Box office

Released on November 13, 1996, the film has grossed just over \$4 million in the US.<sup>[8]</sup>

### Awards

*Breaking the Waves* won the Grand Prix at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival,<sup>[9]</sup> and three awards at the 1996 European Film Awards including: Film of the Year, International Film Journalists Award, and European Actress of the Year (Watson). Emily Watson was nominated for the 1996 Academy Award for Best Actress, the 1997 British Academy of Film and Television Arts award, the National Society of Film Critics prize, and the European Film Award for Best Actress.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> ^ Lasagna, Roberto; Lena, Sandra (32 May 2003). *Lars von Trier* (<http://books.google.com/books?id=E9FYAibtRr4C&pg=PA122>). Gremese Editore. p. 124. ISBN 978-88-7301-543-7. Retrieved 15 October 2010.
- <sup>2</sup> ^ Goss, Brian Michael (January 2009). *Global auteurs: politics in the films of Almodóvar, von Trier, and Winterbottom* ([http://books.google.com/books?id=IR6sIjOBE\\_AC&pg=PA27](http://books.google.com/books?id=IR6sIjOBE_AC&pg=PA27)). Peter Lang. p. 27. ISBN 978-1-4331-0134-2. Retrieved 15 October 2010.
- <sup>3</sup> ^ "Breaking the Waves (1996)" (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=breakingthewaves.htm>). Box Office Mojo. 1996-11-13. Retrieved 2012-07-30.
- <sup>4</sup> ^ Bright Lights Film Journal | Lars Von Trier – Pornographer? (<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/43/trier.htm>)
- <sup>5</sup> ^ *Breaking the Waves* (<http://www.scotlandthemovie.com/movies/fwaves.html>) at Scotland: The Movie Guide.
- <sup>6</sup> ^ <http://www.skybrary.aero/bookshelf/books/382.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> ^ "Ebert & Scorsese: Best Films of the 1990s" (<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20000226/COMMENTARY/41219001/1023>). *Chicago Sun-Times*.
- <sup>8</sup> ^ "Breaking the Waves - Box Office Data, DVD Sales, Movie News, Cast Information" (<http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/1996/0BRWV.php>). The Numbers. Retrieved 2012-07-30.
- <sup>9</sup> ^ "Festival de Cannes: Breaking the Waves" (<http://www.festival-cannes.com/en/archives/ficheFilm/id/4684/year/1996.html>). *festival-cannes.com*. Retrieved 2009-09-15.

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- Ebbe Villadsen: *Danish Erotic Film Classics* (2005)
- Georg Tiefenbach: *Drama und Regie (Writing and Directing): Lars von Trier's Breaking the Waves, Dancer in the Dark, Dogville*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2010. ISBN 978-3-8260-4096-2.

# External links

- *Breaking the Waves* (<http://www.allmovie.com/movie/v136347>) at allmovie
- *Breaking the Waves* (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=breakingthewaves.htm>) at Box Office Mojo
- *Breaking the Waves* (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0115751/>) at the Internet Movie Database
- *Breaking the Waves* (<http://tcmdb.com/title/title.jsp?stid=442820>) at the TCM Movie Database
- *Breaking the Waves* ([http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/breaking\\_the\\_waves/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/breaking_the_waves/)) at Rotten Tomatoes
- *Breaking the Waves* (<http://www.metacritic.com/movie/breakingthewaves>) at Metacritic

Awards		
Preceded by <i>Ulysses' Gaze</i>	<b>Grand Prix, Cannes</b> 1996	Succeeded by <i>The Sweet Hereafter</i>

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Categories: 1996 films | English-language films | 1990s drama films

| Best Foreign Language Film César Award winners | Danish drama films | Danish films

| Films directed by Lars von Trier | Films set in Scotland | Films set in the 1970s | Films shot in Denmark

| Films shot in Highland, Scotland | Heart of Sarajevo Award for Best Film winners

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