

## MADARA DISLERE ABOUT PARADISE '89

“With a drop of nostalgia – like summer when it’s almost over”

Summer, 1989. Sunlight softly falls in delicate rays over the village where city girls Paula and Laura come to spend their summer holidays. Four girls in flowery skirts, unattended, playfully imitating the life of adults, while in the background the signs of a national uproar against the Russian occupier can no longer be denied. Paula even befriends a young dissident on the run from the state police. The tastes of adult life force the girls to make life determining choices.

At the Film'on festival in Brussels, director Madara Dislere can't emphasize enough how deeply the film is based on her own childhood experiences. *“It's about a young girl's farewell to the life she had so far, and the start of a new era.”*

### What exactly is that paradise you mention in the title?

Madara Dislere: It has many meanings. This film is telling my own story and I definitely had a paradise-like childhood, full of freedom and fun. Latvia was a part of the Soviet Union and we

were not a free country, but as children we were free. Nowadays in a free country, children have less freedom than we had. One girl in the movie asks: what is paradise? The other one answers: it's the place where you have everything you're dreaming of. That is why the word here is also used in a slightly ironic way, because for children and adults, paradise doesn't have the same meaning.

### Were you familiar with life in the villages in that time?

Dislere: I was nine years old in '89. Everything that happens in the movie, happened to me, my sister and my cousins during that summer. We came from the city and my cousins lived in a village not far from Riga. All my memories I collected in that script. I wanted to have everything as precise as possible, all the locations, the props, the words, the feelings, were very important to me. All the exterior shots were filmed in that same village where I spent my childhood summer, in that same house. Over the years, almost nothing had changed there.



Madara Dislere: “Our country was fighting for freedom in an almost childlike way”

### When the film speaks about independence, that is as well the independence of a country and of the girls. Both are growing independent together?

Dislere: Exactly. It was the idea to show how the girls and the country were growing up simultaneously. Even the way our country was fighting for freedom, was almost childlike. When we were standing there, holding hands, who could even imagine

this could lead us to freedom? We didn't know how to do it, we were just improvising. Just like the girls.

### Children were very much left to themselves.

Dislere: All people of my age remember their parents being very busy, having two or three jobs to earn a living, and many of them meanwhile had a political commitment in the Popular Front. My generation very much





grew up by itself. Today we take much more care of our children, like flowers growing up in a greenhouse.

**You talk about the innocence of childhood, but this film is also about the loss of innocence. Every paradise sooner or later comes to an end?**

Dislere: The bible says that when you do something wrong, you're chased out of paradise. Every child loses its innocence at a certain moment, probably when turning into a grown-up. Paula is still a child, but her paradise might soon come to an end and she

realises that. She arrives in the village as a well-behaving child, very strict with her sister, not yet having her own ideas, but she starts becoming the person that she will be. It's already in the title of the movie: there's the digits 8 and 9, but afterwards comes 10, like a countdown: 8-9-10... and you're out!

**In the beginning of the film Paula is so reluctant and earnest, as if she doesn't dare to live her life.**

Dislere: She learns a lot from observing her cousin Maija. She wants to be just like her. Like Maija, she wants to

enjoy doing whatever she wants. *"Our parents don't allow us anything at home."* In Maija, Paula sees the freedom she's lacking. Later she'll understand that freedom comes with consequences and difficulties, and she realises Maija is not telling the whole truth. From then on, Paula starts looking at life from her own eyes. She decides to choose her own way and live her own life. *"Don't teach me how to live,"* she says.

**There was a refreshing amount of natural nakedness in the film.**

Dislere: I did it to emphasise this feeling of innocence. In my childhood, nowhere was it taboo to run around like that, and unfortunately this isn't the case anymore. It's a sign of the times.

**There is a scene in the film with a long queue, stretched out all over the marketplace, waiting to sign a document for independence. I was surprised by the diversity of people there. There's hippies and punks, there's farmer's daughters and fashionable girls, there's old ladies and young men...**

Dislere: And they all wanted the same: freedom. As children we really stood in that queue and signed that document, we wrote our names and got the badges of the Popular Front, and

we were so proud we did it. We knew that we did something good, but then afterwards got scared when a neighbour told us we'd be sent to Siberia.

**A TV set is often playing in the background. What was on TV those days?**

Dislere: In every house, radio or TV were on all day long. Everybody wanted to hear the news. In the movie you'll pick up a glimpse of a popular TV programme GOOD EVENING LATVIA, which was on at midnight, once per week. Everybody was watching it, as this was the only programme that would tell us what was really happening and speak about the growing amount of demonstrations and protest. The film also shows the archive images of the Russian speech, officially reacting to the Baltic uproar, stating that what we did was wrong.

**For a young audience it's difficult to understand the right context and circumstances of the story: the civil war, scarcity in the shops, the language confusion... Did you ask yourself how much youngsters today would understand of it?**

Dislere: When writing the script, I only thought about Latvian family audiences, as a movie just for ourselves, about ourselves. I tried to bring generations together in a movie for children,



parents and grandparents. In Latvia, kids go to the cinema together with their parents. I was hoping after the screening they would have a dialogue about those times, the values and the history. To trigger that dialogue, the narrative of the girls is combined with a political background story. Children at school still learn about this period but personal stories about real people will bring Baltic children closer to their recent past and will form their political consciousness.



**But still they'll always ask you about that dead cat!**

Dislere: They do! They always want to know. The dead cat is there, because that really happened to Jonas, the dissident I met. When he was hiding, all he had was a radio and a cat. And then it died! I want to show that in life, good and bad things happen and they're not always clearly defined. Everybody makes mistakes, but we all

try to do good as well. This goes for all my characters. In reality Jonas was indeed taken to the militia, but then was sent home. Nowadays he's doing fine, working as an artistic director for a film company.

**One of the things striking me from the very first scenes, was the visual elegance.**

Dislere: For the entire film I wanted to maintain the sunny summer feeling, corresponding with my warm memories. Sunny, with a drop of nostalgia – like summer when it's almost over. Like the paradise they're in, but already with one leg out. Gints Berzins is a fantastic DoP who worked on many beautiful poetic movies. I myself am inspired by the great classic directors, like Tarkovsky, Kieslowski, Bertolucci...

**All of them men! While in your film I can feel a strong female touch all over.**

Dislere: You can't escape from yourself. As this is my first, and very much autobiographical feature, I allowed myself to do it in a feminine way. Most of the men in the film are quite weak. I think men were like that in those days, while women were working hard and carrying all burdens upon their

shoulders. You know why? In World War II many women lost their men, and we grew up with the idea we had to protect them all. That caused another paradox. All this motherly care and protection didn't let them to become real men.



**Your young actresses together are a marvellous ensemble.**

Dislere: For every role, 500 girls were applying. I started to look for them at quite an early stage, because one year before the shooting I had to film a teaser to convince financiers. So I casted them quite young, as they still had one more year to grow before the shooting. Through that test, I understood I could really work with them. All the girls were pretty similar to the role they played. Before the shooting started, we went to the house, they had to put on the dresses and we lived there for three days to get into the right atmosphere.



**Did your parents see the movie about their daughter's childhood?**

Dislere: At the premiere, my mum was crying. "I never knew life was so hard for you. Only now I understand how it was for you to be so all alone, while we were busy." For my generation there was no hugging, no physical affection, never was love spoken about. That was not the way emotions were expressed. PARADISE '89 showed her a perspective that she never even thought about before.

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Gert Hermans