

Daphne Lucker on FLAME

“A distorted view of love and how to be loved”

Olivia (15) has a passionate but destructive relationship with her mother. After another fight, she's taken out of her home and put into a crisis centre, where she meets new girls and learns to question the bond she has with her mother. That forces her to make choices. Watching *FLAME* can be painful at times, from the physical pain in the scenes where Olivia mutilates herself to the bitter aftertaste of the scene in which she has to pretend to be her mother's younger sister to improve the latter's chances on the dating scene. But the Youth Jury at Film'On gritted their teeth and awarded Daphne Lucker's Dutch feature film their prize.

Can too much love harm a person?

Daphne Lucker: It depends on who that love is for—yourself or someone else. Do I give love simply to prove that I'm a noble person? Does Selma put herself first, or her daughter?

Who can teach you to give love in a healthy way?

Lucker: Your parents! But unfortu-

nately, that's not always the case. I believe most mothers love their children as much as they possibly can, but not everyone succeeds in doing so. Sometimes illness plays a role, or they've learned the wrong patterns from their own parents and end up trapped in a cycle of violence. To the outside world, they keep up appearances—in Selma's case, all the love she shows her daughter is just a performance.

Much of the dialogue in the film consists of people talking more to themselves than to others. Even though there is a lot of shouting, people rarely listen. What was that like for the actors?

Lucker: It all came quite naturally through improvisation. The girls in the shelter home were constantly chattering and shouting. Most of them have been through difficult family situations themselves. We talked about their lives and added personal elements to their characters, so they were largely playing versions of themselves. After the improvisations, we



discussed which elements worked and how to incorporate them into the dialogue.

Is the line between parents and children becoming more blurred in our modern age?

Lucker: Your relationship with your parents changes when puberty hits. You start to feel more mature. I remember that from my own teenage years (which aren't that long ago), and so does scriptwriter Rosita Wolkers, who based her story largely on her own memories. Selma treats Olivia more like a friend than a daughter.

That can seem cool—Olivia's friends think she has the coolest mum ever. But Olivia knows better: it's not fun when your mum shows up at a parent-teacher meeting, gets drunk, and starts flirting with the teacher. That's totally not cool. When her mum goes on a date, Olivia even has to pretend to be her sister. Her mum constantly rubs it in how much she wants this guy, pushing all the wrong buttons.

It isn't a film about sexuality, but sexuality is often part of the arena in which the story unfolds.

Lucker: It's also part of the relation-





ship between Olivia and her mother. That's what happens when you treat your daughter like a friend. Adults talk about sex with their friends, and Selma has similar conversations with her daughter. Some scenes have a clear sexual undertone, but that sexuality is rarely addressed healthily.

You can brag about sex, lie about it, use it to manipulate people...

Lucker: We visited the crisis shelter where screenwriter Rosita Wolkers had once lived, and the situation there was quite troubling. Many of the girls had been involved with "loverboys."

That gives you a completely different perspective on relationships and sexuality—on how you relate to your body, and on what love really means. Everyone in the film has a distorted view of love and how to be loved.

Some scenes must have been physically discomfoting for the actors.

Lucker: We had an excellent intimacy coach, who approached things from a purely technical perspective, never as something tied to the girls' personal experiences. For example, for a scene in which Olivia has to climax, we sat in a circle and discussed how

to approach that on camera. We all had to make loud noises, like a lion or a seagull, and breathe as if we were extremely hot or cold. Sophie Lindner (Olivia) could then choose for herself what felt right for her. It was awkward for all of us, but any sexual connotations were stripped away.

A constant tension between attraction and repulsion marks Olivia's relationship with her mother.

Lucker: During check-in sessions, Sophie and Thekla Reuten (Selma) discussed with the coach about their boundaries. Thekla is a wonderful ac-

tress, and her warm motherly feelings towards Sophie made it great fun to work with them. They felt very much at ease with one another. That was a condition for the actress playing Selma: she had to be kind and supportive to help Sophie feel safe in her role.

Did Sophie have any background as a dancer?

Lucker: Not at all. In the film, Olivia expresses her emotions through contemporary dance, sometimes exploring the entire room with her body. Sophie danced a little as a child,





but she hadn't done anything like this since. Her dancing isn't about perfection; it's about telling a story through the body, and she appears to be very good at that. The way she explores the room is like exploring her inner self; her gestures grow larger throughout the film, as if she's breaking free and gaining autonomy. By the end, you may still have questions about her future, but you sense that she's strong enough to make her own decisions.

She's constantly searching for pain. Why is that?

Lucker: During our research and casting process, we were struck by how

many of the girls we met used self-harm as a way of coping. We decided to incorporate that into the story. It's just as much a physical thing as the dance sequences.

Did you have a special budget for all those lighters?

Lucker: At first, the flames symbolise the pain she inflicts on herself, but they also represent an inner fire that drives her, which ties into the film's title. The girls appreciated that we took their experiences with self-harm seriously and portrayed them with care. We show that there are ways to overcome those urges. When it comes to expressing emotions that Olivia can't

put into words, she channels them through dance.

Why did it sometimes feel like I was watching a documentary, even though it isn't one?

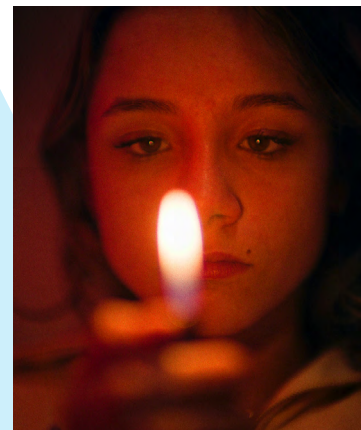
Lucker: The girls in the shelter house are somehow playing versions of themselves. Their raw, authentic presence is what makes it feel so real. It's also in the camerawork. The images are often bright, with girls wearing colourful outfits in a stylized setting, but the camera follows Olivia in a loose, almost documentary-like way.

You can even see it in her skin, which shifts from pale to a rosy glow.

Lucker: That's mostly done in the colour grading. We used very little makeup because we wanted the girls to look as natural as possible, with all the small imperfections and pimples that come with puberty.

All we want for Olivia is for her to find peace of mind. What does she need to grow into a more balanced individual?

Lucker: Her mother constantly lets everyone down, and Olivia doesn't want to be let down again. Other people help her see that she doesn't have to accept that; she can stand up for herself, even against her mother. We



often feel a sense of loyalty towards our parents; we grow up believing that parents are always right. That's why someone else needs to tell you that things just aren't your fault. Mum always claims it's Olivia's fault, and so many girls in crisis centres believe the same thing. We should not blame the victims, but make it clear that it is not their fault.

– Gert Hermans