

# Steven Wouterlood about MY EXTRAORDINARY SUMMER WITH TESS

## “The best stories are often with the outsiders”

Sam, who is often described by friends as “weird”, is spending the holidays on a coastal island in the north of The Netherlands. Even in the company of his brother, his parents and herds of tourists, Sam still has a gift for ‘feeling alone’. Until he meets Tess, an elusive girl carrying a big secret. Being friends with Tess is not just fun, it is also a challenge, as the girl’s wandering thoughts and impulsive decisions often put their relationship to the test. This summer, they will both learn about the importance of friendship, trust and also about families, that you should cherish instead of flee from.

Based on a book by Anna Woltz, MY EXTRAORDINARY SUMMER WITH TESS finds its own rhythm, that comes and goes with the tides. Like a sweet, confusing daydream on a hot summer’s day. Director Steven Wouterlood is no stranger to the Zlin festival. “Three years ago I came here as a member of the Zlin Dog jury. That was an amazing time. Ever since, the festival team almost feels like family

to me. Back then I decided: I want to come back here with my first feature film. So... this is the moment, and it feels great.”

**Is the youngest child in the family always the weird one?**

Steven Wouterlood: I wouldn’t put it that way. Everyone is entitled to have their own little peculiarities. My film says being a little weird is absolutely normal. Every person has their own oddities and that is a beautiful thing! When Sam meets Tess for the first time, you hear him thinking aloud: *“People often called me weird, but this girl is even worse.”* Which is meant as a compliment. It makes him to like her immediately. It is a positive and interesting thing to tell stories from the perspective of someone who is a bit of an outsider. That’s where you’ll often find the best stories. Many people can identify with them, because all of us have sometimes felt insecure, like not belonging to a group. There is little more reassuring than watching a movie that depicts your vision, as if it



Sonny Van Utteren & Steven Wouterlood

is portraying your personal life.

**Adapting MY EXTRAORDINARY SUMMER WITH TESS was not an obvious choice. The film is based on a book that is particularly verbal, containing all sorts of word games.**

Wouterlood: When reading the book for the first time, four years ago, I immediately fell in love with the story. Producer Joram Willink and I thought it could be suitable for a film. It was a challenge to translate it into a film

script, but partly thanks to the great work of scriptwriter Laura van Dijk, it worked out well. We took our time to develop the script and had a great cast and crew to rely upon. The verbalism of the book is indeed often reflected in the dialogues, but we have made all kinds of changes to enrich the story and make it suitable for a feature film. At the same time, we remained true to the soul and spirit of the book.



**Whenever Tess is not there to talk to, Sam often talks to himself. Such an inner dialogue is not easy for both actor or director. How did you get away with it?**

Wouterlood: At some moments you can hear Sam's thoughts aloud through a voice-over. But I didn't want to explain things too formally, I didn't want to fill in every detail for the audience. The story should be told through the images. Finding the right balance was crucial, both in the phases of writing and editing. We have been very precise about that, and I am glad that it worked.

**The film is set on an island. There's often something special about islands. Is there a certain "island feeling" to the film?**

Wouterlood: We shot last summer on the beautiful island of Terschelling and we were very lucky with the weather – the summer heat suited the atmosphere of the movie. I visited that place as a child and I remember it as an endless playground. It felt like a safe place, where parents usually felt at ease. Sam and Tess are getting the freedom to spend time by themselves and explore the surroundings. The film's strong "island feeling" is connected with the ferry, the tour-

ist spots, the vast dunes and sandy beaches. We received a lot of help from the locals – the cooperation was excellent. Almost all extras in the film were islanders or tourists.

Sonny Coops van Utteren (playing Sam): We grabbed them the moment they got off the boat.

**How demanding was it to work so intensively, a whole summer long?**

Wouterlood: The warm weather was sometimes very demanding for the actors. But we made them feel more relaxed by doing silly things: dancing, singing, acting crazy. All such things make life on the set more pleasant.

Coops van Utteren: I totally agree. The crew was great. We were hanging out together all the time, going places or taking a rest. In front of the camera, I felt like an actor, but as soon as I was off set, I felt like a tourist. It really is a special place.

**Did the many 'water scenes', often shot in the sea, cause any unforeseen problems?**

Wouterlood: Due to the beautiful weather, filming in the sea was fairly easy, even though the water was sometimes cold. The crew was waiting for the actors on the beach with bathrobes and hot water bottles. Filming



on the beach with 40 crew members was a challenge that asked for accurate preparation. We had carts and tractors to transport logistics, including the special equipment for underwater filming. Often by the end of a hard day's work, we quickly took a dive. That is one benefit of a summer shoot at the beach side.

**"I will be at your funeral" is not an obvious thing to say to someone you have just met. But from Tess' mouth it sounds rather sweet.**

Wouterlood: Tess is headstrong and resourceful, just like Sam. She is one of the few people who can understand him immediately, which makes

their bond so unique. Tess is not very extraverted in terms of emotions. For example, she learned from her mother never to say sorry *"because women say sorry already too often"*. *"I will be at your funeral"*, for her, is an indirect way to say she cares about Sam.

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Gert Hermans