

# Nora Fingscheidt about SYSTEM CRASHER

## Wild, disturbing and dissonant

'System Crasher' - this unofficial term refers to a young person who pushes the youth welfare system to its limits, and finally to failure. In this case, we're not talking about a troubled teenager, but about Benni, a traumatised 9 year old girl, who has already been rejected from numerous foster families, community houses, special schools and she always ends up in children's psychiatry. Everyone is overstrained with this unpredictable, manipulative, violent little girl and her inexhaustible energy: her mother, who is afraid of her, the often well meaning social workers and the warm hearted Mrs. Bafané at the Youth Welfare Office. Finally there is Micha, the anti violence trainer for delinquent youths, Benni's final straw to cling onto. The girl finally sees him as a father, but Micha already has a family.

At the Berlinale 2019, Nora Fingscheidt's feature debut SYSTEM CRASHER (SYSTEM SPRENGER) not only received plenty of attention, but also a Silver Bear Award for cinematic innovation (Alfred Bauer Prize). More

awards followed at the Film Festival Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and this is only the beginning. The extraordinary director ("1983) was involved in several international youth film projects. She started out as a drama coach, worked as a director's trainee on the feature film GOETHE! before studying 'direction' at the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg. Her graduation film WITHOUT THIS WORLD (OHNE DIESE WELT), a documentary about an isolated religious community in Argentina.

SYSTEM CRASHER tells the story of a strong girl full of anger and longing. This social drama takes you on a rollercoaster ride of emotions, always remaining close to Benni. And consciously, as Fingscheidt stated at the Berlinale press conference, in "a cinematic, sensual movie experience" rather than in a documentary because "reality is often even more complex, entangled and sometimes hopeless".

**For a long time you were looking for a story about a mad and angry girl.**

**Why?**

Nora Fingscheidt: It partly has to do with me as a person. I was a very energetic kid, I clearly remember what it felt like to annoy the adults. From time to time I also had these rages, but not as physically aggressive as Benni. For years I've been concerned about girls in movies being too quiet for my liking, except maybe Pippi Longstocking and Ronja Robber's Daughter. Too often they were watching the world with big eyes instead of actively participating. It felt like something was missing.

**Why is Benni so angry and where does her energy come from?**

Fingscheidt: She probably was born energetic. And her raging anger has to do with the fact that she can't be with her mother and time after time gets rejected. Her mother is afraid because of her anger, it is a vicious circle. Other children might react more introverted and depressed, while Benni's desperation is simply erupting.

**Through Benni's emotional ups and**



**downs, the film confronts us with a dilemma. It is so easy to lose your heart to Benni. On the other hand her violent potential is huge, she is a ticking time bomb. Is that a way to have different parts of our society represented?**

Fingscheidt: It was never my intention to capture society in metaphors. It's all about this unique character and her irrepressible, destructive energy. Of course, the social component unavoidably resonates throughout the story, and I am glad this might raise discussion. But that was not the pur-





pose of my film. We avoided all social bias: that's why Benni is not yet an adolescent, she does not live in a prefabricated slab, she has no background in migration. These causal patterns do not apply to her. Her behaviour, that's the naked truth we're dealing with.

#### **Let's talk about your fantastic main actress.**

Fingscheidt: Helena Zengel was among the first girls proposed by our casting agent. I never expected to find our protagonist so fast and easily. That's why I continued searching, but in my thoughts I always ended up with her again. In her acting Helena embodies both the energetic aggression, as well as the delicate vulnera-

bility. We met regularly to talk about Benni, we went to second-hand stores together to find Benni's clothes, and she attended some adult casting rounds to get more acquainted with Benni's universe.

During the filming Helena lived with us for several months, she went home for the weekends and spoke with her mum on the phone every day. In the evenings we developed a kind of script-diary together. She had to do some homework on the side, for which we hired a private teacher. Afterwards, she was even better at school than before.

#### **There's also music and colours ...**

Fingscheidt: We wanted to transmit Benni's energy into every aspect of



the film. That's why she is wearing strong, warm colours: red, pink, purple, yellow, and orange. Only when she's in the psychiatric centre, she loses her strength and her colour palette changes into bright blue or turquoise. In terms of music, we wanted something wild, disturbing, and dissonant, but at the same time childlike and emotional. That was a challenge.

#### **Why were you attracted to cinema? And since when?**

Fingscheidt: Actually since 'forever'. Since I saw my first movie, which was *THE BEAR* by Jean-Jacques Annaud (1988). Mama bear passes away in an early stage of the story, time after time again I re-invented and retold

the story in my head. This has never pushed me in front of a camera, I was always the one who wanted to invent stories. Nobody in my family has anything to do with art, so I had to google to find out 'how to become a filmmaker?' Of course my parents were worried about me choosing this unusual, insecure path. Luckily, nowadays they are very proud of me.

#### **Did you expect *SYSTEM CRASHER* to become so successful?**

Fingscheidt: I couldn't expect anything like that! I felt very insecure at times, which is a natural and stimulating part of the filmmaking process. I believed in this project and I am happy about how it is now perceived.

#### **After a six year preparation period filled with advice from academic experts, and the support of a trustworthy crew, how frightened are you about your next project?**

Fingscheidt: Fear is a part of it – it has to be. The question is whether one can find a way to embrace that fear. I have already started preparing for my next project, about which I can't tell you anything. In any case, it will be a completely different experience!

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Uta Beth