

Jonathan Elbers about THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN

“All our lines are all stolen from leaders who are currently in power”

“Keep it clean!” President Isimo’s slogan does not only refer to the city streets but also to the people. Whoever doesn’t fit into his perfect picture will be deported. Like Paul and some of his “ugly looking” classmates. Paul escapes and goes underground. The rebel movement prepares a national uprising, but a bounty hunter is sent to hunt them down. Dystopian science fiction is not the most popular among children’s film genres. When watching THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN you might wonder why not.

Seven years ago you shot a short graduation film, which you have now remade into a full-length feature. The idea behind that film has grown increasingly relevant throughout that period.

Jonathan Elbers: My graduation film was a funny parody - I created a kind of childish version of North Korea. Meanwhile, a strange man has taken

power in the US and regimes in Russia and Turkey have evolved. Populism and dictatorship can be felt from close-by in Europe. Reality caught up with us and this has made my film more political, and more harsh. All President Isimo’s speeches literally quote the words of Trump, Erdogan, Putin etc. We have added our own notion of beautiful versus ugly, but those lines are all stolen from leaders who are currently in power.

The ideal of beauty has also become an increasingly suffocating element for youngsters.

Elbers: Public opinion was very sensitive about that. *“There is no such thing as ugly children.”* Oh no? You should see my high school pictures, with my braces and nerdy glasses. And what if we had made a film about the Club of Beautiful Children? Would that have been problematic? Wouldn’t that be like making a distinction? Beauty is



an obsession, also on Instagram, Tinder etc. that you cannot name. When filming commercials, I am witnessing a meat inspection with people being rejected because of having the wrong earlobe. Our slogan was: everyone is ugly in their own way.

The title sounds provocative. Calling someone “ugly” is hurtful.

Elbers: We sent out a news item: “Club of ugly children looking for ugly children.” A flood of indignant reactions immediately started, although the film contains a positive message. Everything was explained in detail to the young actors. We didn’t feel at all like showcasing them as ugly. They were all proud to participate. That

“club of ugly children” is actually an honorary title for those who dare to resist.

At the casting they already knew what they were up to?

Elbers: We haven’t cast particularly weird looking children, most of them looked rather ordinary. In the end I simply chose the best actor for each role. More than 3000 children submitted a video in which they often immediately told what they found ugly about themselves: a birthmark, a strange finger... In the end, everyone is sometimes uncertain about their appearance. Some candidates were actually bullied for real, like the red-haired boy who becomes a leader of



the uprising. He did turn his negative experiences into something positive - I think that is so brave! Other candidates at the audition struggled so hard with their appearance that they finally didn't feel ready for acting.

The title sounds jolly, but the film is anything but non committing.

Elbers: So many films are made in the Netherlands about a cosy school on a dyke in a small village. We tightened things up a bit, like STRANGER THINGS for youngsters, so to speak. But actually it's just a good versus bad story. You see at first glance that the president is a bad guy, although that is not the way politics are practiced in general. Today even the worst dictator knows how to wrap up his message like a heavenly truth. THE CLUB OF UGLY CHILDREN is an exciting adventure film full of thrilling chases that can be enjoyed by kids from the age of 6. They don't notice the extra layer to the story, and that's okay. But older children often understand the references to WWII and to regimes that don't allow you to be who you are.

Which is clear from the very start.

Elbers: The opening scene with the passport photos makes your stomach shrink - this world is not a fun place



to be. There is no room for individuality in this society. In a beautiful country, everyone has given up personal freedom for prosperity and efficiency. Everybody must look the way President Isimo wants them to, deviant appearances will not be tolerated. That message is communicated through songs, billboards and social media. This is something children in our world experience on a daily basis via YouTube and Instagram.

The design of the film is grey and sleek.

Elbers: We travelled throughout the Netherlands in search of grey buildings, that we stripped down from all further cosiness, and to which we added even more grey. The spectacular settings for the 'grand finale' we found in Duisburg-North, an area full of abandoned industrial complexes. A true playground for the stunt team, but not for me, although all those

stunts have (temporarily) cured me from my fear of heights.

Thus the war in the film also becomes a war of colours.

Elbers: Grey stands for "not having the right to be who you really are". Only with the uprising, colours start entering the film and the images begin to breathe. In the paint shop where the rebels go into hiding, you can't buy anything but white, black, grey and red paint. But in the basement they find an oasis of colour and cosiness, and a girl wearing a yellow nightgown. As if people had saved these kind of clothes from a previous life, awaiting the great liberation.

How do adults respond to the film?

Elbers: Rather intense. Such a scene in which children are hauled off in a container is perceived very differently by adults. Just like the scene in which a news anchor doubts whether he dares

to tell the truth. With the TV news evolving into an official state news bulletin, he needs to decide whether he is man enough to revolt. First he must announce the president, then he must accuse his wife and daughter and finally call his son a terrorist.

There are a number of mass scenes in the film. How did you keep control over that crowd?

Elbers: We filmed the big uprising on the first shooting day! I had asked the extras to make banners and to look colourful. When they arrived on set, I got emotional, seeing how much effort they had put into it! Theatre teachers usually are skilled in working with large groups of people. They rehearsed the scenes with the children beforehand. As you can see in the close-ups: this is not a bunch of kids quickly doing the job, they really think along with the story.

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