

Stefan Westerwelle about INTO THE BEAT

“Every gaze they gave each other was real”

Katya will dance anyway, there is no way around it... Dancing runs in her blood. But whether she'll go for the ballet classes that she is so good at, or for the hip-hop style that she recently embraced wholeheartedly, will have a big impact on her life. Will it be the New York Ballet Academy or the Sonic Tigers Crew? There's family traditions involved, that brutally clash with the free expression of the hip-hop style. Marlon, introverted by nature but extroverted on the dance floor, might help Katya to bite the bullet.

This German movie by Stefan Westerwelle, presented last year at the Schlingel Industry Forum, now made its international festival debut at the Zlin Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award. After the screening, the audience had but one thing on their mind... Dancing! Put on your dancing shoes for a cinema visit, but will you pick your ballet slippers or your streetwear sneakers?

INTO THE BEAT is something totally different from the MATTI & SAMI film you made before.

Stefan Westerwelle: Every new project for me is a huge step to take. One aspect that made INTO THE BEAT extra challenging was the fact that we had to include a whole new department that none of us had ever worked with before, the choreographers. To let them do their job we needed a large part of the soundtrack created long before shooting. In a very early stage I needed to know exactly what I wanted. During that phase I was describing the images in my head to our composers, helping them to structurally and emotionally find a path through the scenes.

That was even before you met your main cast?

Westerwelle: That was another challenge. We needed a girl, good at ballet and hip-hop, and additionally with advanced acting skills. I appreciate



Philipp Budweg (Lieblingsfilm) for never giving up until we found THE right girl. I remember when first seeing Alexandra's profile on Instagram, I started shaking, as deep inside I knew immediately she was 'our girl'.

Both Alexandra Pfeifer (Katya) and Yalany Marschner (Marlon) in the first place were trained as dancers. Did this somehow physically influence their way of acting?

Westerwelle: At first they moved like every debuting actor, slightly stiff and intimidated. I guess they both felt a huge responsibility on their shoulders. But as soon as acting coach Wolfgang Wimmer entered the scene, they both gained more self-confidence, exploring their characters on their own and discovering many

similarities with their alter egos. I remember Alexandra and Yalany going through harsh ups and downs but never giving up. I was impressed by their dedication. When we met on the first day of shooting, both were extremely focussed and didn't seem to be nervous at all. Every line they spoke sounded like coming up spontaneously, every gaze they gave each other was real. On my monitor I didn't see Alexandra and Yalany acting, I saw the story of Katya and Marlon coming to life. These kids gave everything they had and made me feel like a proud father.

This must have helped them create that physical tension between them.

Westerwelle: This special tension was not just the result of an intense train-





ing process. Philipp and I already witnessed this magical energy when they first met in the final casting round. Each male candidate had to improvise a dance with each female candidate. Already after a few seconds it was clear that something unique happened between Yalany and Alexandra. It was not simply about 'liking' your dance partner, it was about allowing the other one to come close. They were a perfect match. In such situations there is but one more thing to do: work, work, work! During the rehearsal phase, sharing an apartment in Berlin for three months, they held onto each other. Being both far away from home and completely new to the world of film, it feels very encouraging to know that the person right next

to you understands and supports you. These shared experiences made Alexandra's and Yalany's performance even more sparkling.

How did you choreograph the mass scenes with the dancers?

Westerwelle: Luckily it wasn't me being in charge! I worked with passionate choreographer Pepita Bauhardt who created all character driven dance scenes, and with Jeff Jimenez who has a huge talent for group-choreographies, like the one when Katya enters Battle-Land for the first time. We talked in depth about each scene. One good thing about being a film director is that you work with many talented people and you learn that filmmaking is nothing but teamwork,

making every little step the result of a mutual understanding and trust. I love it! Once you get there, the right energy and atmosphere follow automatically. That is why in every dance scene you can feel the fun we had while shooting.

Did you involve local dance crews in the production?

Westerwelle: Locations like the ballet school and Battle-Land we found in Leipzig, while the outdoor scenes were mainly shot in the city of Hamburg. Katya's classmates were casted locally but our choreographer had a strong vision on who he'd like to include in the street dance scenes. I am super proud that Jeff could convince great Berlin crews like Team Recycled and M.I.K. Family to take part in our film.

Do you have a background in street culture yourself?

Westerwell: My dancefloor skills are -1! I absolutely can't dance. I tried many times and failed every time again. I always had this strong affinity with dance, most likely because as a child I often watched dance movies with my mother. There is something magical about them. Even if the stories are often similar, they feel like new every time I watch them. They tell



about young people struggling with big issues: 'Where do I go?' and 'Can I be loved for who I am?' Such questions might sound trivial to adults, smiling compassionately over teenagers' overdramatic attempts to find answers. But I believe that deep inside we still struggle with the same issues. Maybe that's what makes dance movies so special, they remind us of the things that we're still dreaming of.

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Gert Hermans
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