

Yfendo van Praag about I DON'T WANNA DANCE

"I never thought I had so much focus in me"

"I am Yfendo van Praag, 17 years old and I DON'T WANNA DANCE is like a snapshot of my life. You discover who I am and what I do. My character Joey is taken from his family. He would prefer to live with his mother, but encounters obstacles: should he choose for himself or invest in their relationship?"

In the Dutch film I DON'T WANNA DANCE by Flynn Von Kleist a true story is told by the boy who lived it. After living with his aunt and uncle for two years, Joey returns home to his mother. Everything is going well: mum has a job, the fridge is full and Joey has a great time with his dance crew. Until mother relapses in her old habits and youth care knocks on the door again. How long can Joey keep up this destructive dance with his mum at the cost of his own happiness?

Yfendo van Praag: I am not Joey, but 80% of Joey's story is taken from my life, although some details were dramatised or fictionalised.

How did Flynn Von Kleist find you?

van Praag: When I was 12, Flynn was working on a music documentary. I played the clarinet and my teacher told him I was good. When I told Flynn my story, he wanted to make a movie out of it. He chose elements from my life that we scripted over a 6 month long process. First we made a short film and from then on worked on a fiction film that was shot in 2019.

Your name is among the credits as "executive producer".

van Praag: Because I contributed ideas to the film on every level. I got to read every version of the script and was allowed to fill in my role and improvise. The many Surinamese words that I used add some extra flavour. I had a say in the musical choices and I included some artists from Amsterdam North, where I come from. I want to thank Flynn for that. Getting the chance to adapt your own story in this way feels very exceptional.

You also chose the dance crew?

van Praag: When looking for dancers, I immediately thought of my



best friends, two guys I consider my brothers. Amsterdam North represent! They are not actors; they have nothing to do with dialogue and cameras, but everything with dancing. We made one choreo, which recurs in a few scenes. It was hard labour before we finally mastered it.

If dancing means so much to you, then why is the film called I don't wanna dance?

van Praag: Because I don't want to dance anymore with this pain that holds me back. Dancing should be my outlet and that is only possible if my

emotions don't slow me down. It was my first passion and I still do it from time to time - nothing makes me happier than a few smooth dance moves.

And what about acting?

van Praag: I had to bring out all kinds of emotions: pain, sadness, love... But I'm not an actor; I don't know what tools to use. Fortunately, I got advice from experienced people on set. I learned to keep a distance between Yfendo and Joey. That was therapeutic. I've been much better at life ever since.





Could an experienced actress like Romana Vrede help you

van Praag: In the Netherlands Romana is a well known top actress. I could read her mind on the set: "oh no, another one of those non-actors..." Once we understood where we both come from, a bond grew but we kept our distance. She was very straight forward and demanded a lot of focus; I never thought I had so much focus in me. The intense, dark scenes that we did together were often situated on the thin line between love and hate. Romana taught me to release those feelings right away so I could prepare for the next scene. She is pretty feisty. As you can see at the end of the film, she resembles my mother like two

drops of water; they are like sisters.

All this happened with a camera pointed at your face. How did that feel?

van Praag: Awkward! The crew kept saying: "pretend that we're not there" but then I looked into the lens and we had to redo the scene... The first few weeks they kept their distance. Only afterwards they got very close with the camera for those close shots. That was frightening.

You've spent quite some days and nights on the set.

van Praag: We had 26 shooting days. The first three days on set were summery with wonderful temperatures

and late evening daylight. But when we shot those intense scenes, it was 40 degrees inside the house, there was no air conditioning and a crew of 50 people walked in and out. Some of the most demanding scenes were shot in the middle of the night.

What is the essence that I DON'T WANNA DANCE found in the story of your life?

van Praag: Actually it's all about self-esteem. You get to know the other side of a person; we cannot always immediately assess what is going on in someone's life. But I DON'T WANNA DANCE also tells about having fun in the things you do. When I first saw the movie, I thought mostly about the

scenes that were missing. But now I'm satisfied. The story still grabs me and touches other people too.

Do you see your mum regularly?

van Praag: Not so often, because I am mainly concerned with myself. Despite the distance, our family bond is very close, also with my brothers and sister. You won't hear me complain!

—
Lukas De Block