

Simon Lereng Wilmont about A HOUSE MADE OF SPLINTERS

“They turned their anger and aggression against themselves”

In his new documentary feature *A HOUSE MADE OF SPLINTERS*, Danish director Simon Lereng Wilmont leads us into everyday life in a Ukrainian children's home in the city of Lysychansk, about 15 kilometres from the front line, into the separatist regions. In the Donbass, a bitterly raging war between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian government forces has kept the country in suspense since 2014. Here, a small group of strong-willed social workers work tirelessly in a special orphanage, to create an almost magical safe space for kids to live.

Wilmont went to eastern Ukraine for his first and multiple award winning documentary feature *THE DISTANT BARKING OF DOGS* (2017). Following 10 year old Oleg, he documented an impressive story of a childhood spent between the fronts. His new film, shot over a year and a half until the end of 2020, tells again about children in the shadow of war. Wilmont, also the scriptwriter and DoP, was awarded Best Documentary Feature at the



Sundance Film Festival in January 2022. Only a month later, Russia invaded the entire territory of Ukraine.

How did you come across this particular orphanage?

Simon Lereng Wilmont: After the Ukrainian Civil Administration had seen my first documentary, I went to see several orphanages on their recommendation because I was concerned with the question of what would happen to Oleg if his only

caregiver – his sick grandma – would die. Fortunately this did not happen, but nevertheless I visited quite a few homes. Most of them were pretty bleak and I just can't make a film when there isn't at least a little bit of hope left. In Priyut things felt quite different. In this small run-down home, female director Olga and social worker Margarita exuded an emotional warmth and a sincere interest in 'their' children who had been taken from their homes by the state be-

cause their parents were violent, addicted to alcohol or otherwise psychologically unable to take care of them. Unfortunately, the children could only stay there for 9 months. Then, if no foster families or adoptive parents were found, they had to move on to another home. Which means that relationships that had sprouted there, were once again painfully torn apart.

How much has their fate been influenced by the struggles in 2014?

Wilmont: Quite a lot. Those events left their mark on society. Those who could, moved away. Stores closed, people were laid off, there were no jobs and there was great hardship. Depression and emaciation threatened social security. Families broke up – caused by post-traumatic stress disorder, domestic violence and too much alcohol. Often children had to take responsibility for themselves at a far too young age, missing out on a large part of their childhood.

What has happened to them after the 24th of February 2022?





Wilmont: Because of the fierce battles going on, the authorities acted quickly. The children were taken at once to safety – as far as one can speak of safety under such circumstances – by train to Lviv, to Vienna or to several European countries. Right at the beginning of the war Priyut was hit by a missile that went through the ceiling of the common room, but did not explode. It's still hanging there like a memorial to this cruel war. A psychologist explained to us that with the sounds of the sirens the traumas from the Russian attacks in 2014 have reappeared in the children. Nothing had been forgotten, only suppressed.

How should we imagine this?

Wilmont: The children, who had been through so much and were mostly more matured than their parents, turned their anger and aggression against themselves and became depressed. Now they are totally scared again.

Among them are such strong-willed, admirable kids like Sasha, Eva or 13 year old Kolya, who takes responsibility for his four younger siblings in Priyut.

Wilmont: Yes - and in the end he couldn't do anything about getting separated from them. A boy who had taken on the role of a father for them without complaint and at the same time had to assert himself in



the hierarchy of the older boys, who encourages his alcoholic mother, who smokes and cuts himself, and who had to experience how his siblings were placed in a foster family, is now in Europe - safe, but almost without contact with the people he loves. He and 12 year old Eva, who has experienced so much violence and whose best friend Sasha has also been placed in a family, haven't found anyone to take them in.

This thought is hardly bearable and deadly sad.

Wilmont: There were so many sad situations that broke my heart and made me feel powerless.

Are you still in contact with the children?

Wilmont: Yes, through the psychologists and the organisation "Voices for Children", through which we collect donations for them. (info@voices-forchildren.org)

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Uta Beth