

René van Zundert about TALK IS CHEAP

"It goes on and on until it gets out of hand"

Wherever Darlin goes, his mother chugs along in admiration. Only on stage, Tamia is not afraid to share her thoughts with the audience. Sitting on the couch, Selena will never stop arguing with her father. Three children from South Rotterdam want to be noticed and are given a forum in TALK IS CHEAP to make their unfiltered voices heard. For this Dutch documentary, director René van Zundert bundled four episodes of his TV series of the same name.

Can you try to explain to the world what exactly Rotterdam means?

René van Zundert: Rotterdam suffers from a 'second city' syndrome. The city is in full bloom, it is a lot safer than it used to be, it is also a raw port city, a working-class city with abundant passion for the local football club Feyenoord. The typical saying "Act, don't talk" typifies the inhabitants. Actions speak louder than words is also Feyenoord's slogan.

And what does the city mean to you?

van Zundert: The place where I was

born and raised, the city that formed me. I have always been involved in street culture and Rotterdam was a fantastic breeding ground in the 90s, where a lot of creativity was to be found on the streets. There was a rivalry going on between subcultures - skaters and gabbers - which I found utterly fascinating. Nowadays everyone looks more or less the same.

Your stories are set in South Rotterdam.

van Zundert: It is a neighbourhood with a specific profile, with a lot of problems, but also with many creative individuals. But to what extent do they get opportunities to develop? Rotterdam South It is a diamond in the rough, not so brushed off, and also a very cinematic environment.

Your movie was actually a TV series in which you follow three children over four episodes.

van Zundert: The original idea was a TV series about themes related to the mouth: dental hygiene, language, love... Then Covid came and everyone



wore mouth masks, speech therapists and dentists kept their doors closed... That's when we decided the emphasis should shift to children's articulateness and how it creates both opportunities and obstacles for these three.

In what sense?

van Zundert: Darlin has already lived in five countries, and he knows that learning the language is the key to making friends. In the beginning he has difficulties speaking Dutch; in the end he is already giving language courses to newcomers. Tamia has ambitions as a spoken word artist. And

Selena verbally bickers with her father all day long.

Tamia says: Children with an opinion will be bullied.

van Zundert: If you are not a hanger-on, you can be excluded from the group or even become a target. Sometimes this works to your advantage, very often to your disadvantage. Tamia is tough, she talks about her pain, but you don't really feel what is her burden. It is a challenge for the viewer to understand that this girl is hurt. You might think: she has it all. She looks cool, she moves cool... but

eventually she breaks. It's only in that one scene that you feel the urgency. By the way, that was on our first shooting day!

The essence of the story is: Am I being seen? Will I be heard?

van Zundert: And each of them is fighting that fight in a different arena. Darlin wants to find a place in society, and he succeeds. Tamia's arena is the school. She confesses how she hides herself. *"If I show myself, they will catch me."*

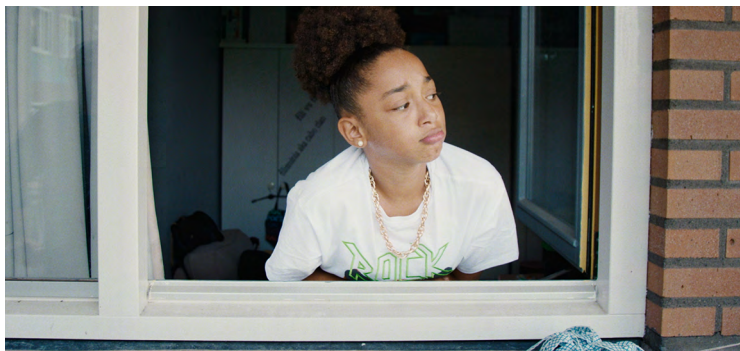
She suppresses her character at an age when you should be looking at the world with an open mind. Selena fights on all fronts: at home, at school, on the streets...

While her dream sounds very simple: I want a family where it is cosy.

van Zundert: I think it's great how she was able to reflect on her situation at her age: *"This is how I feel and this is what I need."* There is a lot of love in her home, but not the love that most children recognise.

Boredom might be one cause of the problems.

van Zundert: Especially in Selena's family. Even the street in front of their house is not safe, because of bullying, fights, hostile relationships with



neighbours... In full summer vacation everyone goes out to do fun things, but her life takes place indoors. Her world is very small and isolated. If you spend all day together in that small house with nothing to do, you get into each other's throats. Darlin has no time to get bored. He has reasons to go out and is very ambitious. But he has problems cutting bonds with his mother.

In documentaries, filmmakers often choose to portray the parents as little as possible. In your film, they can claim their place.

van Zundert: We couldn't ignore Darlin's mother, and Selena's parents are the ones defining her world. There is a 'tough love' within that family, but it will only become clear later how that

will have shaped the girl's personality. *"My father was not raised properly,"* she says. There is no one in that family who ever says *"and now stop it"* - it goes on and on until it gets out of hand.

You had to work with those parents though.

van Zundert: Parents also have reasons to participate in a film, whether it is to support their child in her career, or to break with routine, or... There is always a reason to let us into their lives. You must first get to know the parents and gain their trust. With Selena I sat on the couch for a few hours every week, a whole year long. It seems like a huge investment of time, but that way you already know before you start shooting how the

family is organised and how the story might develop.

What is the role of your producer Tangerine Tree?

van Zundert: We work closely together during the development phase; they are very good in planning and building up. But once the shooting starts I work very autonomously.

For your film 180 CC, they told me that the biggest cost in the production budget went to your traffic fines. Now it seems as if they have mainly invested in the music.

van Zundert: Because we worked for a public broadcaster, I was allowed to use all possible music. In addition to obscure tunes from Soundcloud, I was allowed to use a song from Cypress Hill or Kendrick Lamar. Our editor had a magnificent ear for what tune could go with which scene. I gave him a list of music that made it clear where I come from - hip-hop and house, Notorious B.I.G., Monie Love - and he went to work with that. I did not choose music from the world of my characters, but we picked timeless music that I like myself.

—
Gert Hermans