

Laura Vahtre about THE SLEEPING BEAST

“Things could drop on our heads”

Kristjan and his friends, living in a grey Estonian hamlet, try to escape from summer boredom, hanging around playing in an abandoned old factory. Carried away by their fantasy and the gossip stories about the security guard on the terrain, they lure the old man into a trap. Despite its playful setting, *THE SLEEPING BEAST* story is rather dark and gritty, because of the children's unscrupulous actions, and the oppressive power dynamics among them. Director Jaak Kilmi brings the naivety and innocence of childhood at odds with questions of morality and responsibility. At the Film'on Festival, we met the young actress Laura Vahtre.

The opening scene is pretty intense. If there are scared kids among the crowd, they will run out immediately.

Laura Vahtre: That scene in which Kristjan is chased by the others, is really frightening; he is hurt and looking for help in the middle of the night. But I think kids will find it exciting. I like watching horror movies because

always something unexpected happens.

But THE SLEEPING BEAST is not a horror movie.

Vahtre: Even though in the film I'm telling some stories about zombies and vampires, it is not a horror movie. Neither is it a fairytale. Because this story is more realistic; it is based on true events and things that could actually happen for real when children do something by accident and then don't know how to deal with it.

Throughout the story, the roles and dynamics in this group of kids are drastically changing. What about your role?

Vahtre: When Kristjan loses his position, I try to take over from him and lead the group. I start telling the others what to do and they believe and follow me, because I have a point. You can see it in my body language; I am acting more confident.

What can you tell about that neighbourhood where they're living?



Vahtre: It's neither a big city nor a small village, it's something in between. It looks abandoned, there's junk everywhere, and for children it must be such a dull place to live. When the kids in the film feel bored, their mothers answer *"go play with your smartphone"*. My mother would never say a thing like that. I think that is the biggest problem for those kids: their parents simply don't know how to communicate with them.

The only things that looks fancy in this poor place are cars. There is a scene in which a bunch of fathers

are returning home, and you see all those fancy cars lined up.

Vahtre: These fathers work in Finland where higher salaries are paid; it's a pretty common thing to do in Estonia. Only now and then they come home, which makes it difficult to develop a solid relationship with their children. Kristjan's dad gives him money all the time *"to buy candy"*, but never involves him in what he does, like going to the rally, even if Kristjan is longing for it so much.

Tell me about those scenes in the old factory.



Vahtre: That place was real; it looked as if it has always been like this. All the scenes in and around the factory were shot there. We had to reconstruct it a bit to make it a safe film set. It was a fun place to work; there were a lot of spaces to explore, but it was dangerous to go on our own. Things could drop on our heads. Once some rocks came falling down; we were really spooked and didn't dare to come out. Unfortunately that day was the first time we were wired with microphones and we didn't realise that the sound guy could hear every word we said. And what we said was really embarrassing. Don't ask more about it - it was a shameful experience.

There's two universes in the film: the exciting world in and around the factory, and the boring little village. Could you feel the difference on set between those two worlds?

Vahtre: The factory was much more fun, there was always something to do. On the apartment complex set, we even didn't have WiFi.

Then how did you survive?

Vahtre: We talked a lot and ate a lot, we played cards and Uno, and we had our own spot where we could gather between the takes to sit together and go through the script.

You did script reading on the set?

Vahtre: Before filming a scene we went through our script all together, with the help of one person explaining to us about the story. We needed to understand how characters relate to each other and what dynamics are playing in the group. Before filming we had two weeks to go through the entire script and fully understand the story. So during the shooting I already knew what was coming and how I would say and express it in my body language. And whenever I was in doubt about how to express a certain emotion, I would ask the director. Sometimes he simply advised me to improvise.

What was the most fun scene to record?

Vahtre: It was all very much fun, but my favourites were the night scenes. We were tired but then there came this burst of energy - I don't know from where it came - but it was really fun. We were all sitting together all the time, hiding from the cold under blankets. But the day after was usually tough, feeling very tired as we didn't get enough sleep.

These kids are carrying a big responsibility, playing with a person's life. Can you imagine this would happen



to children in reality?

Vahtre: I can imagine it happens to kids all the time, but at a different level, not with a person's life at stake. But power games like this are played all the time, for instance in a school environment. Some people take advantage of their popularity, while others are too scared to talk or raise their voice. These roles can change easily, like they do in the film.

The film came out in April in Estonia.

Vahtre: I felt really proud about myself, and so did my mum (she cries every time she sees the film). At first I was wondering how the film would be shaped by the editing process, as we didn't shoot the scenes chronological-

ly. And I never realised the result was going to be so terrifying. It is a story for young kids, from 9 years and up, but it's not simply a "kids only" film. Even adults sometimes found it particularly frightening.

–
Gert Hermans

