

Khalil Ghazal about BULLETS

"A cocktail of explosive madness"

When his best friend starts dealing drugs for a local gang, 12 year old Abdel has no other choice than helping him when he gets in trouble. Against his will Abdi gets drawn into criminal activities and is held responsible for the death of a gang member. Catching up with normal life no longer seems an option, but you might wonder what 'normal life' really means in the segregated area where he grows up.

Actor Khalil Ghazal grew up in a rough neighbourhood. More than about BULLETS, he wants to express an opinion about the context of the story: the social emergency that gives Stockholm a bad reputation, and the way in which the government and the community choose to close their eyes to an alarming situation.

Khalil Ghazal: This film was made two years ago. Ever since, this plague of gang violence in Sweden has spread even further and reached a level that we never realised was possible. This sounds so un-Swedish in many ways; it's a side of the country that we pre-

fer not to show. That is why BULLETS comes with a 15+ age limit, cutting us off from our initial audience.

Did you have any hesitations about playing a character that promotes gang violence?

Ghazal: After I played a gang recruiter in the TV-series SNABBA CASH, I thought I wouldn't accept such a role again. But the script for BULLETS had an authentic feel - I was born and raised in that place. The movie was made by this community and kept everything in the community: jobs, rental spaces, catering... For director Peter Pontikis it was a project from the heart; he had worked in this community for about 20 years and based his story on interviews he did with young people, criminals, politicians... The story shows how even children with a stable background can get involved with gang violence. Kids get recruited as child soldiers already at age 12 or 13 and they're ready to kill. Nowadays a lot of our human essence has been depleted. Combined with the romanticisation of a gangster



lifestyle, this becomes a cocktail of explosive madness.

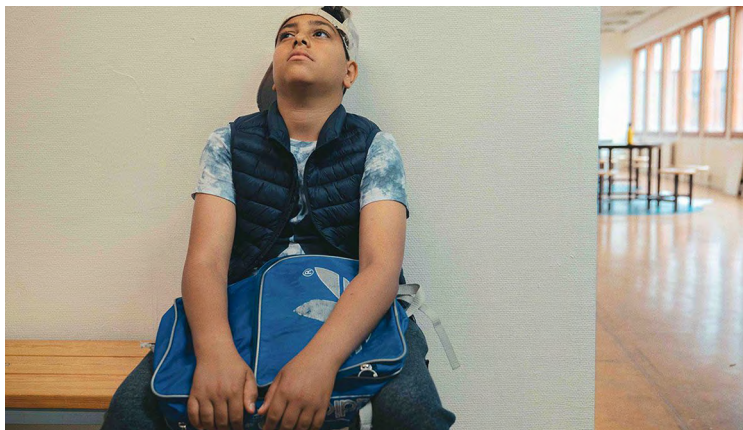
In what way is it romanticised?

Ghazal: Where I come from, many kids don't have father figures to look up to. If the neighbourhood gangster is the only role model you have in your vicinity, because he has a gold watch and chain and drives a fancy car, he is going to be the one that you want to be like. Violence was never glamorised in this film, neither was it exaggerated - it was even toned down a bit.

On the set you might have been more than just an actor. A role model perhaps?

Ghazal: SNABBA CASH was a huge success on Swedish TV. The first season was glorifying a certain morality - everything for the gang! Suddenly, everybody wanted to be a gangster and uphold a lifestyle that is unattainable by any other means than by money earned on drugs and violence, which could lead to getting a lot of kids killed some day. That is not what I wanted; I want to direct them towards something more positive. I show them: you can act the role of a gangster without being one. The last 10 years I have close to 50 friends who have been stabbed, shot, killed, but the Swedish government prefers to turn a blind eye. BULLETS could have been used to teach police officers,





doctors, social workers... but they decided not to use it to teach people under 15! That is why we ourselves go around, speaking about the movie. Meanwhile kids keep on dying and the government doesn't know how to handle it. Their latest suggestion is to bring in the military, as if we're living in a police state.

Could the story have taken place in any Swedish town, or is it strictly related to Stockholm?

Ghazal: Stockholm is where the gang conflict began; nowadays it has spread over the entire country. Stockholm is leading in gun violence in the entire of Europe! We're holding

up the perfect image, but what we gain in organisation and efficiency, we sometimes lack in humanity. Our society is becoming more and more individualistic: You do you and I do me; you sit on your space in the bus and I sit on mine. Economically suffering communities have a stronger tendency to stick together. And once you've been indoctrinated by the clan, you can't escape from it. Finally, most of these kids are simply looking for a family, for solidarity.

Are friendship and solidarity the same?

Ghazal: Solidarity often doesn't come from a sense of companionship but

from fear or loneliness. But while your neighbourhood and the kids you're with grow tighter as a group, they also make you more vulnerable to the recruitment of the older kids. All the decency that we still had in the nineties and early twenties, isn't there anymore. You'll see 13-15 year old kids drugged out, every day. You hear about a 13 year old carrying a gun, a 14 year old who shot somebody, a 15 year old serving life in prison. A child soldier taking a hit for the team and killing someone will serve a few years in a juvenile prison and then be a part of the gang. But by the time he comes out, there might be no more gang left, because everybody is dead or in jail. These are the harsh realities that we're telling children about.

Where can such children go for better prospects? To school?

Ghazal: Schools nowadays are understaffed and a lot of youth houses have been closed down. If kids don't have a place to go after school, where will they go? They'll go hang around the hood, where gangsters can easily approach them. *"Can you keep this bag for me?"*, *"Can you deliver this message for me?"* and then finally *"Can you hide this gun for me?"* This movie wants to reach those kids before that happens.

Where to situate the main character Abdel in this spectrum?

Ghazal: Meeting Abdel, I recognised myself. As if I was looking into a time machine, seeing myself 15 years ago. Tomas Samir (*playing Abdel*) had a lot of weight on his shoulders, and I wanted him to feel comfortable. To this day, we are still in contact. I try to be like a big brother to him, pushing him not to give up on this career.

Do we all have a wrong image of the Swedish nation?

Ghazal: Socialism died with Olaf Palme in 1986. He was one of the last great humanitarian voices in Sweden. Now when the UN decided about humanitarian aid in Gaza, Sweden has put down its foot. They didn't vote for humanitarian aid - that's the first time I feel politically ashamed to be Swedish. In today's society, not speaking up is like choosing the side of the oppressor. Did you know that 'per capita', Sweden is a world leader in the manufacturing and selling of weapons. Who are we selling to? Follow the money, and you'll see what the political agendas are leaning towards.

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Gert Hermans