

Jenifer Malmqvist about DAUGHTERS

"Kids' grief is like a zebra's stripes: on and off"

Sofia, Hedvig and Maja are sisters with a common sorrow: their mother Carolina took her own life in 2010. Each of them is dealing with the pain on her own... until Swedish director Jenifer Malmqvist pointed her camera at them. Suddenly the girls talk about things that seemed long forgotten, like fragments from another life. The camera captures them during different phases in their life, and always stays with the girls - this is not their mother's story, it's theirs.

The film starts with the girls, still very young, playing hide and seek. One of them covers her eyes, and for a moment you'd think she's about to burst into tears...

Jenifer Malmqvist: Closing your eyes is a kind of self-defence. They don't want to face what has happened but sooner or later they'll have to. That part of the process is captured in the film. I find the image powerful - a similar picture was already used in the very first application for financing.

Can you tell us about the genesis of this project?

Malmqvist: Sweden has a strong children's film tradition, but in 2010 film researcher Malena Janson concluded that our production had become rather shallow. Therefore she summoned 10 film directors to make one short film each, not shying away from challenging topics. At that moment I heard what had happened to Carolina, whom I vaguely knew - we met once through a mutual friend. On that occasion she came across as a ray of sunshine, so happy and lively. Now I was shocked. Remembering her three daughters, I arranged a meeting with Maja - the oldest one - and asked if she would be interested in making a film. The sisters agreed and we started filming in 2011. Quickly it became clear that the potential was much bigger than a short film. When one of the girls no longer felt comfortable, we stopped filming for a while, but then picked up the idea again at the request of producer WG Film. The fact that the girls were a bit older now changed the dynamic.



When comparing the conversations in the first and the second round, 10 years later, what would be the main difference?

Malmqvist: Kids' reflections are very direct; they are completely in the here and now and don't reflect about the future. That might be a blessing at first, but hit you hard later. Only when growing older, the girls realised the consequences in a different way. Sofia and Hedvig have a one dimensional memory of their mum, while Maja has a more complete picture of who she really was.

Were you just a fly on the wall, recording conversations?

Malmqvist: I asked the girls how often they talked about it. *"Only when you are here. We wish we could talk about it more often but it simply never happens."* I interviewed them only twice, not even planning to include the footage into the film, but my editor found it too good not to use it. The interview on the boat is so straightforwardly direct. For a documentary, the content will always be more important than the cinematography.

Is comfort something you can only find in yourself or can you find it in others?

Malmqvist: Basically we are alone with our worries. But even if human



species are lone wolves, we're part of a herd. When you meet a person who speaks about things that you feel deep inside too, you won't feel so alone anymore. That was the girls' intention from day one: if this can help others, then let's do it. That is partly the strength of the film. After screenings people come to tell me: *"My father committed suicide and me and my brother never knew how to talk about it."* Then what is there for me to say? Not much, I guess.

The girls are also lone wolves, following their own mourning routine.

Malmqvist: Children's grief differs immensely depending upon their age. A 5 year old will react totally differently to the death of a parent than a 12 year old. In Sweden we say that kids' grief is like a zebra's stripes: on and off. Hedvig says: *"Now that I'm with my cousins, I don't think about it."* But when going to bed, thoughts suddenly well up. A grown-up's mind wouldn't work like that, but maybe we could try more often.

Daughters are also sisters, and sisters are special!

Malmqvist: SISTERS was on our list of possible titles, but through DAUGHTERS we can also include their mum. Carolina is a character in the film,

without being in it. The girls will always be her daughters, and all of them are funny and creative in their own way. I'm endlessly proud about these girls.

And you learned from them.

Malmqvist: A lot! Like: if you really want to help someone, then learn how to listen, without advice, without judgement. Compared to other living species, we are bad listeners. You can find comfort in a dog or a cat; animals know how to listen and they don't judge. In our world of today, before we start talking, we first need to create room, space for conversation.

While you had plenty of material in your hands to tell a sentimental story, how did you resist the temptation?

Malmqvist: My main ambition was to make an honest film. Emotions were allowed, as long as they were honest and worthwhile. I screened the final cut for the three girls - my most frightening moment! They thought everything felt right, in the true spirit of who they are.

Living rooms and kitchens in general are not the most camera-friendly settings.

Malmqvist: You need a great DoP



to succeed, and I had one. Ita Zbronic-Zajt is one of the best in Sweden. Who else would be crazy enough to provide me with 40 close ups of teddy bears? She sees things that others don't see. Remember the little dog on the table, stealing quesadillas. After I wrapped up that scene, she continued filming and shot that funny clip.

And sometimes, suddenly, a moment of beauty hits you. Like images of laundry hanging out to dry at the deck, or two horses cuddling...

Malmqvist: We made a film with three protagonists, set in different periods... How to glue all those pieces together? One of the tricks we used was opening our 'box of animals' in

the editing room - after every heavy scene, we needed the contrast.

Was this film made on the set or in the editing room?

Malmqvist: We arrived in the editing room with 80 hours of footage for which Åsa Mossberg constructed a skeleton, a framework. Editing this project was very much about diving into life's bigger questions. After the first cut I couldn't work for three days - I was devastated from diving too deep in other people's grief.

-
Gert Hermans