

Yana Titova about DYAD

“You might wonder what kind of a monster she is”

Watching DYAD might not brighten your day, but it might make the world a better place. This intense youth film hit Bulgaria like a bomb, and the way in which young people’s problems are exposed might even result in concrete governmental action, according to director Yana Titova. DYAD is above all a ‘high tension’ movie. I can’t remember a single scene offering me a moment of redemption. Scenes that start seemingly harmless, ultimately build up tension that sometimes is hard to endure, but pays off greatly in the end.

Smart, angry, self-reliant Dida has one single goal in mind: to buy a plane ticket so she can join her mother who is working in the United States. A special offer on a ticket to New York is about to expire in a few hours. Dida steals, punches and bullies for cash. As the pressure builds up, she loses her temper; Dida snaps, and now there is no way back.

We first meet Dida while she is making a drawing...

Yana Titova: A special drawing that will make sense at the end of the movie. You see her hands chained, but holding a key - we have a key inside us but it is hard to find out how to use it. This image for me has always been at the beginning of the movie, those chains that look like an umbilical cord (which is what she’ll be drawing at the end of the movie). On a metaphorical level, we closed the circle.

It introduces her as somebody with certain artistic aspirations.

Titova: As a sensible person! That is how we establish her. Even if later in the film you might wonder what kind of a monster she is.

Why would we like her?

Titova: Developing Dida’s character was a long journey. It was important for me to understand how and why a 16 year old girl would do the things she does. How could life take her that far? I didn’t want people to like her, I wanted them to empathise with her. She is not very likeable, but after what she has been through, you feel



for her. DYAD just premiered in Bulgaria and guess what... We’re number one at the box office! Teenagers love this film. They feel - for the first time – how a film understands their ways. We did many test screenings in schools and this is what we heard all the time: finally this is not another silly teen movie because this one tells about us. What more can I wish for? We have the actors speaking a kind of dialect, which seldom happens in Bulgarian films, but adds to the feeling of authenticity.

At that age, boys might be easier to understand. But this is a girl’s story.

I’m happy that you portrayed girls of that specific age and helped me try to understand them.

Titova: All that competition is so tough for girls. Women in general feel this pressure from society about being good in everything: good looking, a good mother, a good professional... So much is expected from us. At the age of 16, Dida is all alone, she more or less raised herself, made herself to who she is, and she has a dream that keeps her going.

What would be that dream?

Titova: To be with her mum, wherever she is. Sadly enough, her mother has



no idea about the girl's eagerness to come and live with her.

What also helps to embrace this girl are the moments when we pick up a glimpse of her belief in innocence: staring at a pond or at a snowball...

Titova: After all, she is still a kid. The only thing she wants is to be loved and hugged. The thing she is holding at the pond is a poppy flower doll. Making little dolls from three poppy flowers entwined, like a little princess, is a Bulgarian tradition. When throwing the doll into the water, you can make a wish. As a child I made hundreds of them.

And all your wishes came true?

Titova: Pretty much. And the ones that didn't, were for my own good.

Teenagers told you that you found a language they understand. Maybe that's also Dida's frustration: there is no ground for communication, not even with the ones who are getting paid for it, like the doctor and the psychologist.

Titova: The doctor's blood is cold; he doesn't feel for anybody, that is how doctors survive. When the doctor in the small town where we shot the film confirmed that this is exactly how it goes, I was shocked! We shot in the

local hospital - we didn't move a thing, we just put the camera there. Can you believe people still live like this? The story is set in 2011 but life in small towns hasn't changed a bit. People feel stuck there, with no solution to improve their way of life.

You mean the film is true to reality?

Titova: Yes!

I was hoping so much you would say no.

Titova: I heard parents asking: Is it really that bad? The kids replied: It's even worse. Parents can't believe it - they prefer to keep their eyes shut. That is why I wanted to make this film so badly. Now everybody in Bulgaria is talking about it. Some teachers feel offended, but others agree that we've correctly portrayed the current situation. Soon we'll be launching a campaign, supported by several foundations and by the government. It has always been my vocation to do something like this, and suddenly it's getting bigger than I could have ever imagined.

Is that why you were the right person to make this film?

Titova: Because my films don't judge. I believe that in general we are all born good people; it is the society that



shapes our different personalities. We are all born capable; what defines us finally are the ones we grow up with: our parents, friends,...

Neither schools or families are able to provide a good framework for young people. Let's take a closer look at both of them. Is the situation in schools that problematic?

Titova: 50% of the kids who graduate in Bulgaria can't write properly. We lack an appropriate education system - you can no longer teach children the same way you did 50 years ago. In the film you see how pupils react differently to different types of teachers, but in general you could say that teachers no longer have the nerve to

cope with kids. I spent three weeks as an observer in the school where we'd shoot the film. I was allowed in classrooms and staff rooms, and whenever a problem occurred, I could hear the reactions from both pupils and teachers. That was an eye-opening experience.

And what about families?

Titova: In each extended Bulgarian family, you'll find at least one family member working abroad. In small towns, it is often the grandparents raising the children, in absence of the parents. With devastating results - things have become truly problematic. Dida's father is around, but he is absent too. He doesn't even open



his eyes to understand his daughter's abusive situation. I wrote the script 10 years ago and the story is set in 2011, as it was important to keep Dida as far away from her mother as possible. Nowadays with all the online options, that story wouldn't stand any longer.

How do these 16 year old girls experience and value sexuality? What does it mean to them?

Titova: It's definitely not something they might treasure, and I'm not sure how much they enjoy it. Sexuality is simply something to show off with and gain popularity - if you want to be someone, you have to be cool with everything. For Dida, sexuality is a chance to make her way out. She knows that through sexual favours, she can achieve more than through anything else. This is the message she passes on to her classmate Zori - that's where the endless circle starts that we need to break.

What's this thing about crying? Dida will often tell herself and others: don't start crying!

Titova: Crying is forbidden; that is a rule in her world. Every time she cries, she will punish herself. Showing your feelings in general is considered a sign of weakness. On social media you should look happy all the time

and act like you're having the time of your life. Dida expects people who spot her weak side to eventually use it against her. Understanding that crying and showing your emotions is not a weakness, is another thing to learn from your parents.

You're not very optimistic! Where is the hope for this generation?

Titova: The hope is with people coming out of the cinema, feeling they should do something to bring about some changes so that the next generation will not end up like this one.

Did you save money on costume design by having kids wearing their own clothes?

Titova: We had a costume designer, although it looks like we didn't. We made Dida's T-shirt according to how I imagined it from the first draft of the script. The challenge was with the adult characters, played by some of Bulgaria's finest actors. Gergana Galabova, playing the English teacher, is known for her stylish outfits - she is like a fashion icon. Wearing her silly teacher's outfit, she told me at least five times she wanted to quit... And the gym teacher is known for always playing the good guy... until you see him in DYAD in this most disgusting role.



Margarita Stoykova (Dida) is a newcomer?

Titova: For Petra Tzarnoretchka (playing Iva) this was her first appearance on camera, whereas Margarita did some TV-series. Their film debut was a sensational experience, working with great actors on a professional project. Even the smallest roles we've prepared very carefully over five months of rehearsing, because we only had 17 days to shoot the story. This was a very low budget production.

How is the situation for filmmakers in Bulgaria in general?

Titova: I have waited 10 years for my film to be funded. Meanwhile I made

my debut film A DOSE OF HAPPINESS and I did some TV-work. With a new director at the National Film Centre, we might see some changes. A few months ago a new section was launched in support of children's films. Every system has its own ways, so from the moment I started working in this industry, I told myself: I will do it my own way. And apparently it worked!

—
Gert Hermans