

# Joya Thome & Yara Storp about ONE IN A MILLION

## “My aim is to be a small, friendly fly”

More than a talented gymnast, Whitney is a popular YouTube star with a million followers. Among them is Yara from Germany, one of her biggest fans. The two girls - one seemingly unreachable, the other one in devoted idolatry - live in different continents but are connected by their screens. Joya Thome brings them together in a documentary about teenagers finding out who they are and what they want from life. By the end of the film, both Whitney and Yara aren't the same girls as when we first met them, while also their relationship has changed.

**ONE IN A MILLION clearly has its finger on the pulse of today. How do you think people will look at this film in 20 years?**

Joya Thome: In a way ONE IN A MILLION is about social media, but then again it is not. I wanted to make a film about growing up, and about all the hardships that brings about. I guess those hardships might remain the same in 20 years. All the bigger questions about the why and how that will continue to arise during the rest of

your life, you are confronted with for the first time as a teenager. The film doesn't contain too many elements that might soon feel outdated - we didn't adapt our cinematographic language to the visual style of social media; we developed our own perspective and looked behind the scenes. We could have made a film only using social media footage, but that would have been a totally different movie.

**Still people might easily describe ONE IN A MILLION as “that film about an American YouTube star”.**

Thome: That is the punchline, the uniqueness of this movie from a marketing point of view. While the uniqueness of Yara will only be revealed later - Yara is not a punchline. And later on you will also realise there is more to Whitney than just being a YouTube star.

**Films about similar topics are suddenly being made everywhere.**

Thome: In Germany another film about the same topic was produced simultaneously, which proves the



urgency of the subject. But the pandemic didn't make it easy for us, we couldn't fly to the US anymore and missed a lot of Whitney's growing up - suddenly she was no longer a child. We were there in 2018 and 2019 but when finally being prepared for the big shoot in 2020, they wouldn't let us fly. We were getting nervous - even if we already collected a lot of footage, our story wasn't told yet. We applied for a special visa and then one lucky day in 2021 the embassy said “yes”.

**It is obvious why you choose Whitney... but why Yara?**

Yara Storp: There have been test shootings, but I never knew why they finally picked me.

Thome: Yara's fan account was somehow different and intuitively spoke to us. Whitney has this open, friendly side to her, and then there is a more sad, shy and self-conscious side. Seeing both sides reflected in Yara's fan account was intriguing. At first Whitney comes across as more energetic and Yara as introverted, which changes throughout the movie; I like this shift in energy.

**We all appreciate Yara, but at first**





**I had a problem appreciating Whitney. There was an aversion towards this girl that initially came across as a spoiled kid.**

Thome: I don't see Whitney that way. The cultural differences between the US and Europe are huge. The way kids are brought up in the US is very much focused on a career. Parents feel the urge to offer their children all the best possible opportunities, no matter what it takes. And many of them – not just Whitney! – get a car for their 16th birthday.

Storp: I only got my drivers' licence last week and having my own car wouldn't make sense – I'm not allowed

to drive without my parents until I'll be 18. But over the last 6 months I have travelled by train to so many film festivals.

**As the American society surprises us, maybe there were moments that you were surprised by small town life in Germany too?**

Storp: Neumunster never looked like a small town to me; in our region it is one of the bigger cities.

Thome: I grew up in South Berlin, a stone's throw away from the heart of the city.

**The American scenes have a different colour palette than the German ones, like 'pink fluffy' versus 'earthly'.**

Thome: That's how I experience the difference between the two countries. The Atlanta suburbs feel more like pop culture. Probably growing up on pop culture has influenced our perception, and then the camera captures what we want it to capture. It was our choice to show Whitney's room with all this display of soft and flashy colourful elements.

Storp: There is not a lot of pop culture to find in Neumunster - it's not the new Hollywood.

**The scene in which Whitney's dad**



**has a say about the editing of her clip is profoundly meaningful in terms of understanding about her life.**

Thome: Nowadays she doesn't post as much anymore, but what she posts is completely her own work. Finally she has full control over her videos and that is how she wanted it.

**You had to negotiate with all the parents about filming their daughters.**

Thome: I simply asked. Whitney's parents were really open to it - they are not media professionals, they are basically a normal family.

Storp: I don't think my parents understood why Joya wanted me - nobody did - and they were mainly surprised that I said yes. They didn't expect that! But I felt safe; Joya and I always spoke about what I wanted to share and what not. Finally they were happy that I did it; it had a big impact on me and I grew so much throughout the process.

**What's the profile of your parents in the film?**

Storp: It's mainly my dad discussing my plans for the future. He wanted me to already know how to plan my life, and I wasn't ready for it yet. I am



still convinced that I don't need to plan it yet.

**Whitney is used to being a role model for many young people. But in a way, Yara is a role model too.**

Storp: It is totally weird how on some occasions people make me feel like I'm a celebrity. While it is just me, a girl living a normal, everyday life. Often parents come to tell me how I helped them get a better understanding of their daughter's behaviour.

Thome: As a teenager I was an obsessed Avril Lavigne fan; for a while I couldn't think or talk about anything else. And then some day it was over. One of the film's goals was to show what it actually means to be a fan, or to find comfort in someone's online presence - there's so much more to it than just screen time.

**Joya had to become a fly on the wall, all the time present without being noticed.**

Thome: My aim is to be a small, friendly fly and not an annoying mosquito. Actually that 'fly on the wall' is a myth; I don't think it's helpful for filmmakers to presume that we are completely invisible. Our presence has an impact on every scene. Sometimes I even have conversations with the protagonists, which is something a fly wouldn't do.



Storp: We talked like friends, even after the camera stopped rolling. Overtime I got used to the filming and I looked forward to the crew coming over. I felt more pressure when friends were around and I needed to socially interact with people; I'm just not that kind of girl.

**Recently a new wind started blowing through the world of sports. Several professional athletes in gym, tennis, athletics, like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka - rang the alarm bell that the pressure to reach excellence in sports is no longer justifiable.**

Storp: That pressure was entirely with Whitney; I never experienced it. For

Whitney it was an important part of her life; for me it is just a hobby. If I fail, it wouldn't have an impact on my life.

Thome: Through Whitney's journey you can sense how much sacrifice is needed to reach that level. In Germany we send our children for a small charge to a local club, where they do sports for fun most of the time. But in the US sports clubs might be a career opening in the race for scholarships. Being in a college team on a scholarship doesn't only save you a lot of money, it also offers you public exposure - these competitions are sometimes even on national television! Nevertheless Whitney recently quit gymnastics. She didn't feel like it anymore and released a very interesting video about her decision on her YouTube channel.

**All we know from the film is that afterwards Whitney and Yara met in person, and now I don't know whether I should even ask about it or not.**

Storp: It felt unreal to actually meet the star that you've been adoring for so long. I sometimes forgot she was a real person, and then suddenly she was sitting next to me. But when we met again, we spoke like normal girls; it feels more like a genuine friendship now, even if we don't see each other

often. All the time Whitney has been so kind; it was an overall very positive experience.

Thome: I think Whitney appreciated that not all eyes were on her; she liked sharing the attention with Yara. We had planned a whole festival trip for the girls together, but after two days Yara got Covid. That was a bummer.

**The three feature films you made were each so very different. QUEEN OF NIENDORF was a low budget indie drama, LAURA'S STAR felt like a blockbuster, ONE IN A MILLION is a documentary. What makes all three of them truly Joya Thome movies?**

Thome: My interest in the lives of young people and my curiosity to see the world from their perspective. My next movie, again, will be about youngsters but it is going to be a dark drama, taking you to a slightly unrealistic world. The idea has been a topic of interest for me for a long time and finally I feel ready to pursue it. It's more like a genre film, which is something I haven't done before.

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Gert Hermans