

Aurora Gossé about DANCING QUEEN

“One of the best sensations you can feel”

The world of 12 year old Mina, a slightly pudgy, nerdy girl, is turned upside down when a young, cool hip-hop dancer named Edvin enters her school and organises an audition for a new dance crew. Blinded by adoration, Mina recklessly volunteers but forgets about one detail: she can't dance! Or can she? With the support of her grandmother and the power of her unrelenting enthusiasm, Mina plunges into practice and rehearsal. Will she finally dare to step into the unknown?

Every now and then there is a film you can't ignore. A film that charms everybody, that is wanted in every festival, and that sends audiences back home with a broad smile on their faces. This year, that film is called DANCING QUEEN, made by Norwegian director Aurora Gossé, and it brims with energy. Like in the scene where Mina, alone at home and delirious with excitement, exuberantly indulges in her first choreography. She glides and whirls around the house... until grandma enters the room.

This is Mina's moment of true awakening, when she realises: dancing is my thing! Bursting with energy, this moment marks the beginning of a new future.

Aurora Gossé: She is on top of the world, nobody can hold her back. I hope that people can relate to that feeling of being unstoppable - it's one of the best sensations you can feel. Knowing what she'll have to go through later, it is nice to allow her this joyful moment. Recording the scene with Liv Elvira Kippersund Larsson (playing Mina) was great fun. We improvised - inspired by what Liv picked up from popular media - until we found the right form and tone. Once on set, it was all about making that choreography look spontaneous, and giving Liv the energy she needed to make her feel great and inspired.

Did you ever have a similar revelation, when you realised: this is what I want to do in life?

Gossé: At the age of 18 I was interested in film, but didn't know anyone who made a living out of it. There was

this 'pupil guidance' centre coming to school, and the kids coming back from the consultation looked very determined, as if they knew exactly what to do with their lives. I was eager to hear from them that "you were born to become a film director". Two days later the results came: "We recommend you to become a children's nurse". - "Euh... thank you, I never thought about this before, but I guess you're right." Until my mum asked me on the phone "if this is what you really wanted?" I burst into tears. That was my true awakening: if I really want this, I need to find the motivation in myself, in my heart. In that period in life, kids can easily get lost; all you want is some answers and somebody who believes in you. I consider myself blessed for having a mum who knew me well enough to ask me that one, simple question.

The film opens with a scene from the end, revealing a little bit of what will happen later. Why?

Gossé: It is my way of showing what is at stake. The scene reveals that this is a serious matter - there is a lot to win



or lose. Seeing Mina on stage, you realise she has come a long way. The girl we meet at first is a completely different person in a completely different atmosphere; Mina is still a harmless kid.

Mina's initial innocence takes you into a danger zone. How innocent could you make her before she turned 'ridiculous'?

Gossé: The balance was fragile; I was aware of that risk. Things could easi-





ly turn out really bad. I knew exactly when the audience was supposed to laugh and when they shouldn't. The dancing scenes in the beginning were a challenge. The last thing I wished for was to see a 'silly girl dancing'. I wanted to show Mina's eagerness, not her eventual clumsiness. That was hard to measure. Liv didn't want to feel embarrassed, whereas the beauty and charm of her dancing is exactly in the fact that it isn't perfect.

Nevertheless we immediately feel that Mina has something... it's undefinable and under the surface, but it's there. Like in the first dancing

scene in the school yard.

Gossé: That was one of the hardest scenes, and extremely embarrassing for Liv. There were 60 kids standing around staring – some of them were experienced dancers – while it was her role to do things completely differently. We told everyone that "she is in her character", but still it was more challenging than expected. We took our time and talked things through; we acted as teammates, standing by her side, but yet I felt somehow helpless. Now Liv is extremely proud of what she has done.

It's also the first moment in the film

that you feel how the characters are loaded with hormones! Where do they suddenly come from? Is that also a kind of awakening?

Gossé: Mina never felt such a passion before, she didn't realise she had it in her, she has never been in love before. She has always been using her head a lot, but this is the first time she is so much aware of her physicality. She suddenly feels lifted up, flying, forgetting about time and space. You can hear the sound of her breathing in the score, how it is taken over... In a way it might feel sensualised, but it mainly marks the beginning of a new world, filled with feelings she isn't familiar with yet.

The object of her desire - Edvin - is not a total jerk; not as bad as he could have been.

Gossé: That is how we wanted it. It is easy to put characters in boxes - the good girl, the bad guy - but in children's films more nuance is needed. Real people are complex; they can do both good and bad things. Realising that characters are complex can encourage children to reflect or discuss them. Therefore it was crucial for them to understand Edvin's reasons and ambitions.

Also for the actor!

Gossé: In the auditions not a single 12 year old boy could deliver what we were looking for. Improvising the scene in which Edvin refuses to team up with Mina, none of them was able to surpass Liv's status - those young boys couldn't make their point and felt uncomfortable. Luckily there was one whom I found too mild, too humble for what we were looking for, but we asked Viljar Knutsen Bjaadal to come back and show us all he had - we dug deeper into his character; he is a great dancer so he knows about ambitions. We started from the hardest scene, and developed it from there on.

But the moment he said his fatal sentence - "You should lose some weight" - the audience reacted furiously. You could feel it through the entire cinema: You shouldn't have said that!

Gossé: Good to hear that! I felt the same reaction from the audience in our test screenings and at the Berlinale world premiere. I find it difficult to experience the film on an emotional level since I've seen it so many times throughout the process, but that particular scene always hits me. After Mina has been building up all these expectations - "we will finally dance together!" - Edvin kicks down that





whole world of dreams with one sentence. It is a horrible moment. Equally important is Bella's reaction. She has all the time been a bit sore towards Mina, but even she is standing there, flabbergasted and feeling sorry for Mina, with the same gaze in her eyes as the audience has.

What can DANCING QUEEN add to the 'perfect body image' debate?

Gossé: In the Berlinale I met a lady who works with children suffering from eating disorders; it made me happy to hear how much she appreciated the film. It might seem scary to address such subjects with young kids, but this debate is so important. Due

to social media, children are becoming increasingly acquainted with the theme at an earlier age; isn't it horrible to reflect on your 'perfect body' already at the age of 10? Anne Marit Jacobsen (playing Mina's grandma) often advocates for young actresses. When she started her career, she was refused for several roles because she didn't have this "standard slim body" that actresses were supposed to have. Being a 76-year-old actress, she still remembers things that were said, and how those words affected her. Now she acts as a spokesperson for the younger generation. Being held back, being told that you should change your looks, being blamed for looking differently, whether you're 10 or 90 years old, can hit you so hard and drastically influence the way you look at yourself.

Mina's parents consequently overrule their child, automatically, in every possible situation.

Gossé: They think they know what is good for her and consequently see her as someone who is not capable of taking her own decisions. They don't allow her the freedom to think for herself - which often happens to parents. Mina's mum is also affected by the relationship she had with her mother. She never experienced the



safety and care that she now wants to offer to her daughter. She has become overprotective to compensate for what she never had. At a certain moment in life, it is normal that some things you don't want to share with your parents. The same happened to me when I was Mina's age.

DANCING QUEEN is pleasing its audience. Were you willing to do everything to make the crowds happy?

Gossé: Of course the ending is constructed in a way to make everybody happy. But most of all I wanted to offer hope to a young audience, which today is needed more than ever. That

is what I've been striving for in a film that wants to make you laugh and cry and let go of your emotions.

—
Gert Hermans