

Boris Paval Conen & cast about DOJO

“There are no warning signs at every street corner”

The first time Brandon enters a dojo - a judo school - is on the occasion of a burglary. Caught in the act by the judo teacher, he can escape punishment if he promises to come and train and to distance himself from Billy's gang, involved in robberies and petty crime in the neighbourhood. The proposal sounds tempting, but Brandon does not want to let down his best friend Stefano. Making the right choices becomes increasingly difficult.

Originally made as a “Telefilm” for Dutch television (supported by the CoBO Fund, in co-production with KRO & NCRV), this sports drama holds its own among all the youth films at the JEF festival in Antwerp, where we meet director Boris Paval Conen and his two main actors.

How to generate visibility on the big screens for a TV movie like DOJO?

Boris Paval Conen: We want this film to have a long life; we were always aiming for more than just a TV film. We had something special on our hands! I discussed with screenwriters

Ashar Medina and Evianne Lamme which way we wanted to go – make it big or keep it small? I wanted to make the kind of film that I would have liked as a child. The kick I felt back then, that's what I was looking for.

Which films are we talking about?

Conen: During STAR WARS, I was bouncing up and down in my cinema seat. I came out of the theatre all twisted up, thinking: what has happened to me now?

You state in the film, “Judo is for pussies.”

Delano Watchman (Stefano): That's how I thought about it when we started. I didn't know what to expect. But when I had to learn how to fall during the first session, I was amazed at what you could do by just using your arms and feet.

For me, judo is something very technical that an outsider can hardly understand. Every four years you'll find yourself sitting in front of the TV during the Olympics without be-



ing able to grasp the finesse.

Cones: It is an extremely physical sport. It always amazes me how much judokas get into each other's comfort zone. In our society, we usually keep a distance, but judokas just grab each other in the crotch and under the armpits. The matches - *randori* - are just one aspect. The most important thing about judo is exploring your body: It's about finding balance, not only physically but also in yourself.

Were you familiar with judo when you took on the project?

Conen: I used to do judo. I was very

small, so I had to fight girls - taller than me - and then I lost. No, judo wasn't my thing. But one of my best friends is a judoka with a master's title - the 6th dan - and when I was asked for this film, I immediately ran to him. He helped me look at judo in the right way and understand its philosophy, which is mainly about mastery.

In the opening scene, we're far from talking judo yet. With one main character on the lookout for a robbery, adrenaline splashes off the screen.

Conen: We dive directly into Bran-



don's world. It had to be not only exciting, but also fun, because for Brandon and his gang, this is pure excitement. We're looking exclusively through the eyes of the youngsters; not through the eyes of adults who blame them for committing a crime.

But in the next scene, we see him in the living room as a sweet, obedient boy.

Conen: As a child, you have a whole life your parents know nothing about. Brandon seeks with his friend what he can't find at home. At his age, you no longer follow the path laid out by your parents; you discover your own world. But then where will you end up? There are no warning signs at every street corner; things can just go wrong before you realise it. Brandon is a good boy: he wants to be there for his friend and family, yet he gets off track.

Actually, Brandon and Stefano are still kids, having pillow fights.

Conen: To lend those characters credibility, we had to consult experts by experience... like our young actors. Delano and Kymani played around all day, making the line between actor and character very thin. The conversation on the bike, the wheelies, the pillow fight... we had many of such



quasi-improvised moments.

We get to know less about Stefano's family.

Watchman: I am often home alone; my mother comes and goes at her convenience. That is why more and more I want to be part of that gang. I see Billy and his fellows as my big brothers.

In Billy's gang, all nationalities and ethnicities mix loosely.

Kymani Pinas (Brandon): That's what my group of friends in Amsterdam-West looks like... very diverse.

Conen: A distinction by colour and origin is something that is taught; you don't see it in children. You can make distinctions based on money or no money, problems with the police or

not, but not on the basis of skin colour.

With all these ethnicities coming together, you need a common language.

Pinas: Street language, like when I talk with my friends.

Your camera navigates always between residential blocks.

Conen: The Molenwijk in Amsterdam North is the only district not intersected by a highway. Surrounded by car parks, you can only enter the courtyard on foot or by bike. The place looks adventurous, intriguing, not the usual grey concrete. Our DoP Joris Bulstra constantly used colour filters; all those colours were chosen while filming. You need to make the right choice; there's no colour correction possible in post-production. Each scene has a colour and a feeling to go with it; the gang scenes initially all look very bright, but that feeling changes later on.

A yellow dim light hangs in the dojo, as if we're entering a temple.

Conen: This is one of the only judo rooms in the Netherlands that were effectively built as a dojo in the late 1970s. All judokas recognise that place; it is a piece of judo history.

You must have spent a lot of time in that place?

Pinas: I trained intensively for seven weeks. In my first judo lesson, we found out I had good skills for falling. Then we worked for weeks to train how to throw well too. I got better and better, but judo is no longer a thing in my life. Acting is - I gave up football for it.

Watchman: I preferred doing wheelies, and for the film I did some extra practise. The first time on a mountain bike felt weird, but a week later it went smoothly. At first I could only do about 3 metres, but Boris said, "*I want 100 metres!*" And I finally succeeded.

How lovely it is in the film to always hear that sound again - 'pets!' - every time a person goes down on the mat.

Conen: Those sharp hits are definitely one of the elements that make judo what it is. The satisfaction you feel when you hear your opponent hit the mat is unbeatable.

—
Gert Hermans