

Zara Dwinger about KIDDO

“They never arrive and they never stay long”

How cool can a youth film look? **KIDDO** explores the boundaries of the genre in a story about a mother and daughter on an adventurous road trip towards Poland, in a blue Chevrolet with a broken CD player that constantly plays the same song. Along the way, they stop at roadside restaurants and motels. Lu, growing up in a foster home, barely knows her mother Karina, and her loyalty is profoundly tested. But to make their dream come true, she is willing to do a lot.

KidDO boasts several assets: a dazzling and stylish art design, two wonderful main characters, Lu’s lovable travelling companion Henk the snake, and a host of dubious life lessons. Like: you should scream loudly at least once per day.

Have you already been screaming today?

Zara Dwinger: No, not yet. I probably should have tried. It’s important to have an outlet for all those feelings that are raging inside you. For some people that could be screaming, for

others it may be something else. For me, it’s cuddling my cat. But maybe screaming could work for me, too.

I once read that you can tell by the body language of people coming out of the theatre what kind of movie they have seen. When I came out of the theatre after KIDDO, I think my walk looked particularly cool and swag.

Dwinger: That sounds good, but I also saw people crying. I don’t care what exactly the movie does to you, as long as it does something.

KIDDO looks like a genre movie... but I can’t exactly define which genre.

Dwinger: The style is called ‘lovers on the run’, in a mix with road movies, coming-of-age etc.

Consequently, much of the film is set in gas stations, motels and diners.

Dwinger: When I made the first location briefing, I got the reaction: this is not possible; we are in Poland,



not in America. But for me, it didn’t all have to be perfect; it was also allowed to look imperfect. The location scout found a lot of awesome places, and if necessary our cameraman searched for hours on google maps. If he saw something interesting, we drove there and often it looked great. That’s how we found half of our Polish locations. But the street near the foster home is in the Netherlands. That neighbourhood would be demolished six months later, so it was like a movie set where half of the houses were abandoned.

How to explain this romantic appeal of gas stations?

Dwinger: The relationship between Lu and Karina is volatile - she is not there for her and when she is, she can be gone in a second. I was looking for that in the locations, too. They never arrive at a place and they never stay long. In a motel, you barely unpack your luggage because you’ll be gone right away.

More than film scenes, those locations remind me of photographs.

Dwinger: Correct. Photography was





an inspiration, especially American photographs from the 50s and 60s. William Eggleston took beautiful pictures of such nitty-gritty places. Through those iconic images, we tried to connect with “lovers on the run” movies like *BONNIE & CLYDE* and *THELMA & LOUISE*.

One location stood out...

Dwinger: The dinosaurs! I wanted to break a certain monotony in our locations. In Poland, apparently, there are many dinoparks. Some of them are very classy; ours was downright ugly... but also a little funny.

Do Poles people in general seem to be happy with your choices?

Dwinger: They do! Polish people in the audience often come and tell me that they really liked the film, but that they have never seen such places in Poland. Even our Polish crew constantly wondered: where the hell did you guys find this? But I didn't want to focus specifically on Poland; the story could take place anywhere. It's about the place Karina comes from and where she projects her fantasies onto.

Then why Poland?

Dwinger: For a road movie, the op-

tions in the Netherlands and Belgium are rather limited. And there is a link to reality: in terms of parent-child abductions, Poland is in the Dutch top 3; it happens relatively often that one Polish parent takes a child to Poland without the consent of the other parent. By the way, 75% of parent-child abductions are carried out by mothers.

Do you ever tell Karina's real story?

Dwinger: No, we stick to Lu's perspective. *KIDDO* is about a parent who deviates from the norm, and how a child deals with that. At that age, you don't always understand why an adult behaves in a weird or unconventional way. You can like it or not like it, but you can't frame it yet. Lu understands it a little, but not completely. We're not very specific about Karina; we did research on borderline and bipolar, but I didn't want to give exact information. In life, we always want to label - and sometimes that's good - but we don't venture into that. Karina doesn't like labels anyway. She struggles with her mental health, but everyone is allowed to make their own interpretation or diagnosis.

What does your film say about motherhood?

Dwinger: We wrote from a child's per-

spective; so it's not so much about “being a mother” but about “having a mother,” a mother who can never be there for you completely. Karina struggles with the responsibility for a child and prefers to run away. *KIDDO* asks for understanding and empathy for all mothers and children who are in such a relationship.

Together in a hotel room, they don't have much to say to each other.

Dwinger: They don't make small talk. They haven't seen each other for years and have to explore things a bit. They hardly know each other and both have wrong expectations. Lu has a romanticised, idolised image of her mother, but it is difficult to create a real bond with someone like Karina.

Dialogues are mostly sparse; often everything is said in one or two words. But that sentence “In life it is all or nothing” takes on a life of its own.

Dwinger: This attitude to life is often found in people with borderline, ADHD etc. You either go for it completely or you run away from it. But such a life is unsustainable; Karina has to learn that it doesn't always have to be all or nothing. There is also an air of perfection about motherhood. That's why she says: *“It's better hav-*



ing no mother at all than having a bad mother.” I am also a kind of ‘all or nothing’ person - I recognise that black and white thinking - but it has a destructive influence on Karina.

I liked that you painted a positive picture of foster care: warm and understanding, very different from the usual bogeyman image.

Dwinger: Lu has found a warm, stable place, although not with her mother, but with someone who is sweet and where she has built a life with other kids around her. I understand that you would rather be with your real mother - children often show great loyalty to their (absent) parents - but for many children such a foster family is an excellent solution.

You were unlucky with your soundtrack that the CD got stuck in that CD player in the car!

Dwinger: In a road movie you can go in many directions with music, and that idea of the CD always playing the same song fits with the clumsiness of their journey. I started looking for the right song with the music supervisor. *Stay Awhile* by Dusty Springfield is a beautiful song, with a sixties feel that fits perfectly with the car and with the fantasy world that Karina has created for herself.

The film is divided into chapters.

Dwinger: A road movie often tells a meandering story, a linear sequence of small incidents. That’s why we worked with chapters in the editing, creating a framework, adding some fairytale-like quality and giving the story an extra drive. I like style figures like that.

That’s what I thought - your film is full of them!

Dwinger: I wanted some of Lu’s thoughts and fantasies to be depicted in a childlike way. We found inspiration for the colours in photography, and for the camera we looked, among other things, at films by Jim Jarmusch. In the editing we accentuate that fantasy world even more through sound. Many movements come with sound effects, like in a cartoon. Everything was magnified, as the journey looks like in the fantasies and daydreams of the main characters.

The vintage colour palette leaves a profound mark on the film.

Dwinger: The cameraman worked with colour filters, so that while shooting I already got an idea of how beautiful it would look. This nostalgic aspect was further explored in the colour grading. We considered jokingly putting on the credits that we had shot



on “original Kodak film”, which - to be clear - we did not do.

The true hero of the film is Henk, Lu’s snake. What was Henk like as an actor?

Dwinger: Very relaxed. Rosa (van Leeuwen, playing Lu) had looked after the animal for a few weeks, and they really got along. Even before she met him, she had already decided: “*He should be named Henk*”. Together with the ‘back-up Henk’ he lived in a gigantic terrarium that we dragged across Poland. In the Cinekid Script Lab we were suggested to give Lu a sidekick. A pet sounded good, as long as it wasn’t too sweet or cute. Such

a snake makes her a little ‘different’ and proves that Lu - unlike her mother - can take care of someone. Henk got lost once, on the last day of shooting. There was panic! He was probably hiding under the carpet we were all standing on. He got out unscathed and we found him behind a cupboard.

—
Gert Hermans