

Raymond Grimbergen about LIONESS

“You chase her into a tree and throw stones at her”

In Suriname, Rosi can be found every day on the football pitch with her friends, standing out in the game. But all that suddenly changes when her family moves to the Netherlands. Luckily she makes friends with Jitte and enrolls in a local Dutch team. Talented as she is, Rosi quickly plays her way to the top of the team, which easily evokes envy in her teammates...

Once again, an exciting Dutch young audience film has been made about football. And director Raymond Grimbergen is eager to tell me all about it.

Does the penalty trauma really exist?

Raymond Grimbergen: It does. The Dutch team has failed in several tournaments due to penalty kicks. They have nothing to do with the beauty of football, but they do provide the most suspenseful moments. At the beginning of the film, Rosi misses a penalty kick, which causes an accumulation of dramatic moments throughout the story. The deeper she sinks, the higher she has to climb.

The film starts under Surinamese palm trees.

Grimbergen: Several Surinamese football players have been super successful in the Netherlands, such as Frank Rijkaard and Ruud Gullit; LIONESS is also an ode to them. Suriname is located in South America. Due to colonial history they speak a very pure form of Dutch; we didn't even have to provide subtitles. We cast grandpa, grandma and some young actors on the spot. LIONESS is not only coming-of-age, but also fish-out-of-water; from the city in Suriname, Rosi lands in the Dutch countryside, amidst the cows, where it's windy and it's raining. I make it an abrupt transition. Enter late, get out early; that's how you get the pace into a film.

Hormones are raging fiercely at her school.

Grimbergen: At the age of 15, it's all about girls and boys; who do you like and why. I'm a fan of John Hughes' high school movies; in the 80s I grew up with FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF, SIXTEEN CANDLES, THE BREAKFAST

CLUB... I aimed for that vibe. Experts can even spot some references to those films: a girl wears a shirt that says "Save Ferris" and Jitte wears a red shirt with the number 17 - both refer to FERRIS BUELLER.

Rosi and Jitte have such a sweet bond. They find each other, there is a dip in their relationship, but they reconcile with a heart-warming pureness.

Grimbergen: Even if the conflict is actually very small, in the eyes of the girls it seems huge: losing her place on the team is no small feat for Jitte. Both girls seem to be opposites in every way, but they share similar dreams. Decent doesn't matter to those who follow their dreams.

Then there is Rosi's brother Ryan. At first we are angry with him: Why do you kids act like this? You're making each other's lives miserable!

Grimbergen: He's the classic antagonist - there has to be friction, someone making her life a living hell. Ryan slams the door on her - what a total



jerk! But that reconciliation dialogue on a pitch in Suriname is so beautiful. *"Of course I never cried myself to sleep."* Only then will we understand Ryan. Usually it's *"show, don't tell"*; here it's *"tell, don't show"*.

The film thrives on the current popularity of women's football.

Grimbergen: I was looking for an arena for my story when I realised how many girls love football. In an international report it was appointed the fastest growing sport in the world. That became my pitch! There are a lot of football films being made, but nev-

er about girls. Anyone who says that “every story has already been told” is wrong. There is no shortage of stories. You choose a hero, you take her out of her natural environment, you chase her into a tree and throw stones at her. That is when she needs to save herself.

However, canteen boss Henry claims women’s football to be slow and boring.

Grimbergen: He expresses public opinion. *“It looks like they all ate snails beforehand.”* He’s a dumb idiot.

You needed to know the atmosphere in the locker room, but as a man you are not allowed in there.

Grimbergen: Both the screenwriter and I played football; we are familiar with that atmosphere. It’s not that different for girls than for boys.

Did you need sophisticated choreography for the football scenes?

Grimbergen: We hired an experienced trainer. We came up with situations and she set them out based on the camera’s position, coaching the girls according to the required images. And every time we were done, we had them playing freely for 15 minutes, to collect more spontaneous, dynamic shots. With a stabilised camera in a



bracket - a ronin - the operator ran after the players. We also had a cart from which our DoP could make travel shots along the field. And we used drones.

Especially for the last shot, in which the camera flies in from a distance.

Grimbergen: 17 takes! That is how many we needed. Our drone pilot operated through VR glasses and the actors were not allowed to move; you don’t want to get hit by such a thing. That drone came flying in really hard and then it was a matter of timing. Sometimes we were just too late or the ball missed. It flies so fast and you have to get it back into the air in time. You don’t want to see it crash into the

nets.

Music is rhythm, football is rhythm... In many scenes the music follows the rhythm of the ball.

Grimbergen: My editor was also the composer. After cutting the film together, he wrote the score to the rhythm of the edit. With existing songs we worked the other way around: we edited the football to the music.

Like in the scene in which she holds up a ball under a street lantern at night. Only then I noticed how many different variations of lighting you use.

Grimbergen: I loved that orange glow

of street lanterns. We were short of one, so we created an extra lantern ourselves and placed it at the back of the row. We wet the entire street - all neighbours lugged buckets - as for creating a nice reflection. Every time Rosi hits the ball with her shoe, you see splashes flying up. That is the magic of cinema. At each moment we wondered what was most suitable for the story. We made the Netherlands look a bit colder and Suriname a bit warmer.

Like for the funeral parade you recorded there.

Grimbergen: That scene was not in the initial script. When I was checking locations in Suriname, our local fixer also worked as a funeral director. She told me what a Surinamese funeral looks like, with men dancing with a coffin to chase away the ghosts. I realised: this is the perfect way to accentuate the contrast between both cultures. I wanted that in the movie! What you see are no actors but real pallbearers in a funeral procession, only this time the coffin was filled with sandbags.

—
Gert Hermans