

Nicole van Kilsdonk about OKTHANKSBYE

“What’s the use of sitting there all by yourself?”

Jamie is only just starting to get settled at the boarding school for deaf children when she gets an alarming message about her beloved grandmother being admitted to a hospital in Paris. When the family leaves for Paris in panic, Jamie stays behind, feeling powerless. Imane, the most rebellious girl in class, suggests they embark on the trip on their own. Such a journey can never be anything else than adventurous! After trekking for days through the rural Lowlands, will they finally make it to Paris?

Films like TAKING CHANCES and THE DAY MY FATHER BECAME A BUSH stood out for their quality benchmark. But Nicole van Kilsdonk’s new film OKTHANKSBYE also stands out for its remarkable target audience. And for its peculiar title, of course...

Nicole van Kilsdonk: I fought hard for it. After several silly proposals and the terrible working title *The most beautiful song you’ve ever seen*, we still needed a title song that had to be translatable in sign language, but

it needed to have one untranslatable word in it, something that sounded like a raised middle finger to the world. That was *Okthanksbye*. Because it sounded catchy, I suggested using it as the title. It says little about the film, but does tickle one’s curiosity.

OKTHANKSBYE was actually made for television.

Van Kilsdonk: In one of my earlier films my main character was a teacher at a school for the deaf. Shooting there made a strong impression on me. I was surprised how little we knew about that world. During my research, I found several elementary schools in the Netherlands, but only one secondary school for deaf students. Many children arriving there at age 12 suddenly find themselves in an environment where everyone speaks their language. I worked my ideas into a script set in a hotel in French Bretagne. One day producer Rogier Kramer called me about making a youth film for Dutch television, for which he wanted to pair me with



screenwriter Lilian Sijbesma. I sent her my script, she turned it into a road movie and together we finalised the story.

It is important to be surrounded by people who speak your language?

Van Kilsdonk: Our lead actress Mae (van de Loo, playing Jamie) never attended family parties; what’s the use of sitting there all by yourself all night? But during filming her confidence grew tremendously. When we went out for a drink at night in the hotel, she joined us. In the presence of an interpreter, she no longer avoid-

ed contact. Through a Dutch legal regulation, she can hire an interpreter, so nowadays Mae joins all family gatherings. Our interpreter taught us: always talk directly to Mae! Not through the interpreter, but look at her and use facial expressions. And the whole crew was taught basic sign language.

Did it help you in working more smoothly with deaf actors?

Van Kilsdonk: At our test casting, I was completely panicked; I didn’t know how to direct those kids. But once we started acting, it all went





naturally. I immediately recognised Mae's talent for "acting small". The search for Imane was much harder. Douae Zine El Abidine is a super sassy Moroccan-Rotterdam girl; Mae was a little scared of her at first. The dynamics between the girls were very close to what you see on screen, Mae had to learn how to stand up for herself. Although living in very different worlds, they still have sleepovers at each other's place.

Your characters' profiles are partly determined by their hearing abilities.

Van Kilsdonk: There are so many different nuances of deafness. Imane has

a CI (*cochlear implant*) and if I articulated well, I could direct her without an interpreter. But such a CI doesn't work for everyone - Mae, for example, has very little use for it. Only when we grew closer did she start talking to us. That process of gaining trust is very moving.

It seems like you used every opportunity to share the characters' aural experience with your audience. Can you unravel what exactly you did to stay true to their aural capabilities?

Van Kilsdonk: When I saw the Belgian-Canadian film *SOUND OF METAL* (by Darius Marder), about a drummer going deaf, I noticed that the aural

perspective was not at all accurate. I understood that you don't have to be 100% consistent to make a great film.

But you were?

Van Kilsdonk: Not entirely. If it works, it works. Often we stayed close to Mae's experience, but not always, for example when we included the sounds of the busy streets in Paris. We asked ourselves for each scene what exactly the audience needs to keep the story understandable. The concert scenes were a particularly complex puzzle.

To make sure the girls can hear the remarkable song being played

there?!

Van Kilsdonk: "*Sex in a cornfield!*" I wrote that punk song by The Earworms - friends of my daughter - into the script and it felt appropriate. We asked our composer Wilko Sterke to coach the band and make them sound just a tiny bit more professional than usual. I like that our score is a little different, more electronic than orchestral.

You're the type of director that filmed a very diverse body of work, but sooner or later there is always room again for children's films.

Van Kilsdonk: Children's films can challenge a director in many ways.





Some children's films I find childish and cartoonish; a story about "*where is the treasure?*" is not enough for me. And the direction of actors is often abominable. That's why movies like KIDDO and COMEDY QUEEN are such a breath of fresh air.

Then you could have justified that scene with the clown. Now everyone wonders: what is this terrible figure doing in this story?

Van Kilsdonk: We needed that scene as a turning point in the story, but not to everyone's liking. I had *SHORTCUTS* by Robert Altman in mind, in which Tim Robbins plays a police officer in far too tight pants, who arrests a

woman in a clown suit on her way to a kids party. Perhaps I should have been more subtle as a director and taken into account the distinct vocabulary that such a scene requires. The message is clear though: you shouldn't hitchhike when you're 12. And it is the first time in the film that Jamie takes the initiative.

The landscape they travel through looks rather Belgian.

Van Kilsdonk: Guess how you get to France from the Netherlands? We were looking for a rolling landscape, which we found in Southern Belgium. The country is densely populated so it was hard to find places where there



were no houses. And it was bloody hot! In Paris we only shot for a day and a half. Our van was only allowed in the low-emission zone until 8 a.m., so at a quarter to 7 we were already filming. You shoot a TV movie like this for €850,000 so we worked with a very small crew.

Yet it looks like a real motion picture!

Van Kilsdonk: Because it was made by people with a big heart for cinema. It was clear from the beginning that we wanted to show the film on the big screen through festivals.

At festivals like in BUFF and Schlin-

gel, OKTHANKSBYE is screened for a deaf audience.

Van Kilsdonk: We wanted to make the film not about but with the deaf community. We had the screenplay proof-read by people involved in the community to make sure we hadn't made any blunders. The young generation of deaf people is demanding their place in society, and this film tries to contribute to that.

–
Gert Hermans