

Eirik Sæter Stordahl about LARS IS LOL

“Our teacher would have us dancing all the time”

On the first day of the school year, 11-year-old Amanda is asked to be a mentor for her new classmate, Lars, who has Down's syndrome. It's the last thing she wants. Amanda is convinced that Lars will embarrass her. But to Amanda's surprise, she and Lars develop a special friendship — one she risks losing when she's pressured to turn against him. Norwegian director Eirik Sæter Stordahl's film shows great affection for its characters and for the actors playing them - he knows how to make them shine. While he himself shows great affection for... talking about his film! Like he did during the Zlin Film Festival.

What is that buddy system all about, that marks the beginning of the story?

Eirik Sæter Stordahl: It's a Norwegian tradition that first graders in school get assigned to a special buddy who'll show them around and take care of them. Becoming a buddy is a big deal, something to look forward to.

How would you describe Amanda?

Stordahl: Seemingly ordinary at first sight. She doesn't stick out because she doesn't want to. But underneath that surface, she has a rich inner life, strong sensory abilities and a vivid imagination. Her classmates are all into TikTok videos, while she is still lingering in a playful Harry Potter-inspired universe.

Did you contact the publishing company?

Stordahl: Oh, yes. We had to secure the rights with J.K. Rowling's publisher in the UK. They were very generous and everything was settled easily.

I met Amanda out on the street today. All these ordinary school girls looked very much like her. I guess most of them are responsible girls with mainly good intentions.

Stordahl: I was quite moved today seeing the film with kids from another country, another culture. I was extra aware of their reactions. At some point there's a blog in the film, launched to bully and ridicule Lars through silly videos and GIFs. Finding



the right balance for that blog was a challenge. It had to be mean and funny, because that is why such blogs are popular. But throughout this meanness, we needed to keep our decency towards Adrian Øverjordet Vestnes (playing Lars) and towards every child in the world with Down Syndrome. The worst thing to happen would be if children thought that scene was funny in the wrong kind of way. Today I saw in the eyes of the Czech audience how indignant and hurt they felt by that scene on Lars' behalf. That gives me confidence; being human is all

about the willingness to show empathy and protect others from harm.

Then all we needed was a crazy director adding the line: “What if he drools?”

Stordahl: That's actually a line from the book by Iben Akerlie, on which the film is based. This is where I asked myself: Can I go that far, when it's a real boy playing Lars? We talked it through with Adrian and his parents. But actually, we need to hear Amanda's prejudice in order to have it reversed later on. She needs to be wrong at first so



that she can do right afterwards.

At a certain point you make Amanda the loneliest girl in the world. How much burden could you put on her shoulders?

Stordahl: Making the audience get restless because of Amanda's suffering was an important task throughout the screenwriting and editing process. Amanda betrayed her friend and now she needs to suffer for it. As a filmmaker you need to find the right pace of how long to stretch the pain before offering relief.

It has been a while since I felt so deeply for a movie character as for Amanda.

Stordahl: LARS IS LOL is for a huge part Lilly's film (Lilly Winger Schmidt, playing Amanda). As an actor, she has this ability to hide her true self socially while at the same time exposing it to the camera. As if all the things the outside world doesn't get to see, we can see them through the lens. It feels like she's constantly telling us secrets that nobody in her world knows about, and she doesn't tell them in words but through her soul.

You have a surprisingly positive approach towards adult characters in general. It's tempting to present



teachers and parents as creepy caricatures, but especially towards parents, you maintain a very respectful approach.

Stordahl: This credit mainly goes to the actors. The gym teacher probably comes the closest to the conventional 'silly adult' cliché, as there is a certain silliness about him. Adults easily forget how it was to be a child, but I remember it very clearly. It helped that the film was shot in the environment where I grew up myself.

Was it?

Stordahl: The school scenes were shot in the school that I went to as a child. The interior of Amanda's house is exactly like the one that I grew up in,

not more than 50 metres away. Even though nothing in this story is autobiographical, obviously, still there were plenty of elements that I could relate to.

We still have two tough topics to address. The first one would be social media! Amanda asks her peers at least three times to "stop filming me".

Stordahl: She surely sets an example, but I would say that it's less about integrity and more about being afraid to be exposed. For today's audiences, this is their world; they will get filmed all the time because their phones are on all the time. Since the book came out in 2016, cell phones got

even more integrated into the lives of children and became a (un)natural extension of their bodies. Not for the better, I would say. This clarifies the relation between Amanda and her antagonist Anna. They both struggle with the same weakness: they don't want to show themselves as they really are.

Please explain...

Stordahl: The cell phones, cameras and screens are a cinematographic motif in LARS IS LOL. They define how the world will see you. The film's universe is full of cameras that capture and screens that reveal, and a single change of perspective of a cell phone camera can potentially ruin a whole life. The tagline of an online post to bully Lars, says 'Marked for Life'. That line was an idea of the prop department; it was a shock to realise this is so true. That is indeed what might happen, and a child at that age is completely defenceless against the consequences. Back when I grew up, if something terrible happened in school, that would be hard to bear, but at least you could come home to a sort of safe space. Nowadays, what happens in school can be filmed and can haunt you for the rest of your life. What was the other tough topic?



Love! You make a really good depiction of what love feels like at that age. How realistic did you want those feelings to be?

Stordahl: I remember clearly how it was to be that age, and I remember how it felt to be in love. The dancing scene wasn't in the book; we wrote it in the film because when I went to school, our teacher for some reason would have us dancing - swinging! - all the time. The scene in which Amanda and Adam are forced to dance together is one of my favourite moments. They don't even dare to look at each other, and then they have to hold hands - the horror! Slowly but surely, however, they make eye contact for more than a split second, and they actually start to enjoy it.

Adam is a pretty cool love interest.

Stordahl: In the book her love interest is indeed called Adam, but they never even talk to each other (although the book ends with a kiss!). The author and co-scriptwriter Iben Akerlie and I elaborated much more on his character in the screenplay. Yes, he is sweet and responsible - the sweetest of them all. After making a mistake, he is even brave enough to stand up for it and say sorry.

There's actually a lot of meaningful

"I'm sorry's" in the film.

Stordahl: It's such a simple thing to say, and it can heal so much. But it's not always easy. At some point in our lives, we all do things that we regret, and if you're lucky enough to get the chance to say sorry, you cannot undo what you've done, but you can generally fix a part of the damage. This film is about Amanda finding the strength to stand up for what she has done. Therefore, she first needs to find the strength to stand up for who she really is. That's possibly the most difficult thing to do as a person. Amanda ends up in a lot of trouble because she's not able to do that, and she gets the reward of forgiveness when she's finally able to do it.

How did your costume department feel about ending the film with a Christmas show?

Stordahl: LARS IS LOL has put them under a terrible pressure. They might have felt pretty desperate at some time - I remember the costume designer calling me at night, two days before shooting the Christmas scene, saying that *"I cannot guarantee that the costumes won't fall apart while we're filming"* because they were under such a time pressure. But everything went wonderfully; they did an amazing job. All those costumes were handmade,



Eirik Sæter Stordahl at the Zlin Red Carpet

they have such lovely textures and colours, and they're somehow true to real costumes used in school shows... but slightly elevated. That was the code word throughout the entire production design: elevated realism.

As we can see in Lars' house. What a cool location!

Stordahl: We had been looking at photos from at least 150 houses and visited at least 30 of them. The place where we would shoot the interiors needed to be the expression of Lars' soul, it had to feel magical in a realistic way. When we finally found the right house, the colours and overall feel was spot on. There was still quite

a lot of set dressing to do, especially in Lars' magical room — but the art department did a wonderful job. As a child, my biggest dream was to have a secret room, hidden behind a mirror, and guess what I found there... We filmed Amanda's room in the same place. Actually, Anna's room is the same as Amanda's, but with all set decorations taken down – which I find quite a poetic idea.

–
Gert Hermans