

## Soleen Yusef about WINNERS

### “I couldn’t trust my own mouth”

Eleven-year-old Mona and the rest of her Kurdish family have fled Syria and ended up in Berlin. Mona is sent to a notorious primary school, a place of chaos and tension. Teachers are having a nervous breakdown and frustration among students is increasing by the day. Mona doesn’t speak a word of German, but luckily she can speak football. So did Soleen Yusef - talking about her film is like talking about her life.

#### **My first impression was that schools in Germany are a jungle.**

Soleen Yusef: WINNERS (original title: SIEGER SEIN) is telling a personal story about my first two years in Berlin, Germany. The atmosphere in the schools depends upon the district and the social and financial status of the people living there. I went to a school in the Wedding district.

#### **This is what a school in Wedding looked like?**

Yusef: Many refugees and socially disadvantaged families lived there. Those kids didn’t get the same chance

in life like the ones from more wealthy districts. In that school, classes were overcrowded with almost 30 kids in one room and most of them were loud, lazy and disrespectful towards our teachers. For me it was a shock how kids and teachers spoke to each other. In my school in Iraq I wasn’t used to that.

#### **You were not loud or disrespectful?**

Yusef: Not at all! I had been going to a school in Iraq that was like a military camp: wearing uniforms, nail inspection every morning. I was very disciplined... and indoctrinated.

#### **There is a scene in which teachers and pupils are arguing; the kids in the corridor and the teachers in the staffroom, shouting at each other through a closed door. Is that how it felt?**

Yusef: Schools have changed their ways of interacting with pupils. I recently visited my old school and they took great pride in showing me all the changes they have made. But in my school days getting access to the



staffroom was impossible. And the teachers were always right. While actually I think that both sides can learn from each other.

#### **Your characters are powerful women, teaming up to achieve something.**

Yusef: I would say that’s emancipation and feminism. When I grew up, my mother and her sisters - my aunts - played a key role in my life. I created the aunt’s character to celebrate all the female power that surrounded me as a young girl. These women dealt with the disadvantages of being born a girl, especially a girl from a different

culture, so you had to integrate two cultures into your world, making it a terrible mess for young girls trying to find their way.

#### **But you did!**

Yusef: Therefore I’m now welcomed in my old school as an example of someone who found her own path. They all went to see the movie! Teachers, psychologists and even the principal wrote to tell me how WINNERS makes them feel supported in their fight against social injustice in education. My film tells about things that can go wrong, and what positive impact one teacher can have.



**In one scene Mona explains how she is held back by a language barrier.**

Yusef: Through language you can explain what's going on inside your head, so that people get to know and understand you better. I constantly felt trapped, because of a language that I didn't master yet. I felt trapped in the wrong society, or in the wrong body - I couldn't trust my own mouth. That's why I used this trick for Mona - I wanted her to speak and be understood. I needed to give her a voice. She's so much more resilient than I was; she's moving forward and changing things.



**That's what you say. I guess you were pretty resilient yourself.**

Yusef: Not with words. Nowadays as a grown-up, I can use artistic ways to lend children a voice and give visibility to kids from different social and economic backgrounds. These kids are never to be seen on the big screens. Amidst all the sugar-coated entertainment, sometimes you need to deal with life's real problems. Kids get to deal with heavy issues: mobbing, not having money to buy the right shoes, having bad grades while you know you could do better if only you had somebody after school to help with your education, not seeing your parents because they are at work all the

time... All this creates a huge imbalance.

**From Mona's initial nemesis, Jasmin evolves into something else, although I don't know what precisely. She's a complex character, isn't she?**

Yusef: Jasmin is taking on too much responsibility. She has three young siblings; after school she needs to do the dishes and take care of the kids. That is too much pressure on a young girl. She can't cope emotionally because nobody really cares about her emotions. Which is why she now screams them out, hardly realising where those feelings suddenly come from.

**I don't know why I did it, she says.**

Yusef: Exactly. Imagine there is one kid on your soccer team that you're in trouble with. After you've been playing together for 15 minutes, you'll talk differently to each other. *"Hi mate, you did great on the pitch."* That's how frictions get solved. When Mona is the goalkeeper with Jasmin as her defender, you see in their eyes how their relationship changes.

**Is the football part also based on your story?**

Yusef: I was a goalkeeper. Our school team won the Berlin Championship. I'll show you a picture... This is me at the age of 12, the team with the ugly

shirts. It was 1999 and for the first time our school won the cup. We were celebrated and had our picture in the newspaper.

**We take it for granted that refugees are grateful towards our society. We tend to forget about the longing for your home country and the life you used to live before.**

Yusef: When building up a life somewhere, it's connected to the people around you, family and friends, the house you live in. When we left Iraq, I didn't know we were fleeing. My father had gone to Germany, and we could apply for a family reunion. We were already in the car when my mother told us that we were leaving. *"It's only for a short time, until things calm down. We'll use this opportunity to work and get a good education, until we come back."* My parents had a relatively good position in society. My father was an oil engineer and my mother was a civil servant in a pedagogical position, we had a car and a house, the kids did well at school... It was just the war that was haunting us.

**That was a big decision to make.**

Yusef: The threat was there all the time. At a certain point my parents couldn't handle it anymore. This decision had an impact on all of us.





Through my movies, I want to show them how much I respect and admire them for the journey that they made.

**You teach us a lesson in politics, when Mona gives a speech about democracy.**

Yusef: For many people democracy is an empty word. But it means something to the women who fought for women's rights against ISIS. Being a Kurdish girl, under Iraq's nationalist regime I had to fight for my identity, for my language. Even in Germany, I fear the risk of being attacked by nationalists. These are no street gangs; they are organised worldwide and have roots in fascism and indoctrina-

tion. This risk does not only apply to Kurds, but also to Armenians or other marginalised groups.

**What's important for you, is important for Mona.**

Yusef: Politics have always been a part of my life. At the age of 10, my parents took me to demonstrations, I was shouting against the regime, holding pictures of dead people, victims of a genocide. This had an impact on me. I think kids should be political. If you say that "politics don't matter", you must be sleeping. Our entire lives are political.

**You don't shy away from naming As-**

**sad as the dictator.**

Yusef: I wish that in one year, my movie would be outdated because Assad will no longer be in power. But that's not going to happen. Fights are still going on while Syria is broken on the inside and outside. Soon this war will go into its 15th year. We're complaining about refugees but never talk about what is causing this stream of people. It's just crazy. I don't think Syria should be forgotten about...

**Let's go back to Mona and the evolution she is going through.**

Yusef: Mona is pushing her new life away. She's on her own because she wants to. She is always in a fighter's modus; she wouldn't reach out her hand. I told Dileyla Agirman (playing Mona): you're so lonely, you can't talk to anyone, the audience is your only friend. When you talk to the camera, you talk to your people.

**And then you give her a first line in the movie...**

Yusef: She starts a fight with the audience, telling the camera: What do you want from me? Then, through the football team she becomes part of a group and - most important - learns to be a child again. She has always been obedient, trying to do and say the right things, kissing ass all the time.

Until she realises: it can be nice to do the wrong thing from time to time. People wanted me to cut out the stealing scene but I insisted on polishing her not too much. I wanted Mona to make that mistake and learn from it. She has the right to!

**The boys in school are always commenting on the girls, like a Greek theatre choir.**

Yusef: That refers to the conflict I had with the boys in my school, always being disrespectful towards girls playing football, as if we were born losers. They were so confident. Until we won the cup and they had to admit that team spirit matters.

**We do not get to see a lot of football.**

Yusef: There is a lot of football in the film, but seldom in the focus. The soccer scenes are never about skills, they are a platform for mirroring the things going on in the girls' lives. But in the moments when football was in focus, we did it right. That is how we dealt with it.

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Gert Hermans