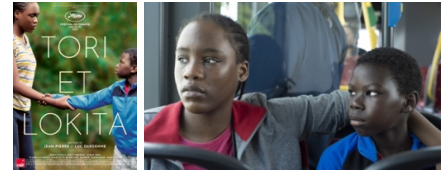


REVIEW

Review of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Tori et Lokita*

2022, Les Films du Fleuve, 88 min

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The precarious web of life is not painted but unabashedly hammered into sheet metal by the Dardenne brothers in their most recent film. Winner of the 2022 Cannes Film Festival Prix spécial 75th Anniversary Award and nominee for the Palme d'Or, in *Tori et Lokita*, the Dardennes continue their realist depictions of Belgium and their documentarian expression of life, as they follow two young African immigrants in their attempts to establish a life for themselves together in Seraing. To the audience, the relationship between the eponymous imagined siblings is one of true familial love, while their questionable actions and choices introduce a foreboding sense of uncertainty and ambiguity to the unfolding narrative. The resulting web of entrapment holds both the audience and the young faux-sibling pair captive through a mixture of motif and empathy.

From the outset, the Dardennes' signature tight, close-up cinematography creates an instant empathetic link between the audience and newcomers Tori (Pablo Schils) and Lokita (Joely Mbundu), with the claustrophobic shots making the latter's panic attacks all the more realistic and her captivity especially harrowing. Indeed, over the course of the film, the Dardennes' camera chooses to focus exclusively on these two main characters, with only a couple of key moments that isolate them individually, forcing the audience to develop the story based on the perspective and perceptions of each member of the "sibling" duo. As the two navigate an inescapable reality, this tight, perspectival framing shows how uncomfortably snug their fit is within the film's world.

However, the mimetic nature of Lokita's claustrophobic anxiety is only one reflection of the various trappings that affect the film's protagonists. An interesting thematic motif that is engaged throughout the film is that of a chain of command, something to which both Tori and Lokita, as well as other characters, almost mechanically defer when making decisions. This raises questions pertaining to authority and to the debts and fundamental imperatives that rule the sub-legal underworld in which Tori and Lokita are forced to live and operate if they ever wish to escape its fetters and exist in modern Europe – a dream to which both doggedly hold.

Pitting desperation with an abiding hopefulness, *Tori et Lokita* examines the weight of human relationships, good or bad. It ties the lives and fates of its young protagonists to each other and the new world in which they struggle. In a karaoke scene that recalls their 1996 *La Promesse*, the Dardenne's include a song performed by Tori and Lokita early in the film, "Alla fieria dell'est," which becomes a motif and key. Having learned the song while traveling to Belgium through Italy, this musical folk tale of a mouse, eaten by a cat, chased by a dog, etc., recreates the growing ladder of authority until finally the Angel of Death finishes it all. All lives are connected, in a hierarchy, until a fateful finality ushers the song to its end.