



TEAM SPIRIT

Director Lisa Aschan on her controversial film debut *She Monkeys*

WORDS BY RACHAEL SCOTT

Lisa Aschan describes her debut film as “a modern Western about power, sex and creatures”. This tonally perfect, but unsettling, coming-of-age drama explores the power struggle between two teenage girls as they compete to be the best in their equestrian gymnastics team, and the emerging sexual curiosity of a six-year-old girl. Coaxing extraordinary performances from the mostly non-professional cast, STUDIO met with the Swedish director to chat about her controversial first feature.

STUDIO: *She Monkeys* is the first acting role for your two lead actresses. How did you find them?

Lisa Aschan: We had an ad in the paper and on the Internet, and we got eight-hundred answers. I speed dated one-hundred girls, and the callbacks went on for months. The two main actresses (Mathilda Paradeiser and Linda Molin) lied about knowing voltige (equestrian gymnastics), so when I picked them they had to learn it from scratch.

STUDIO: When did you realise they'd fibbed?

LA: I made a surprise callback with the ones that were

left, put them in a car and drove them to the Swedish Champions in Voltige to join a practice. The trainer showed them how to do the very basic stuff, and I asked her which of these girls did she think will be able to learn in time. She said two of my favourites were among the ones she thought could learn it in three months. What they would be doing would normally take one and a half years.

STUDIO: How was it working with a primarily non-professional cast?

LA: It's the same. It's just a matter of finding them, and that was quite a long process. When that's settled, I work the same way with the amateurs as the professionals.

STUDIO: Exploring a six-year-old's sexuality is risky. Have you come up against criticism for the way you tackled the subject, or for even broaching it at all?

LA: Yes. People don't tend to tell you the bad stuff, but I've been approached by people in the audience that don't agree with what I've done. They think that she's a six-year-old child that's been exposed to this, but I don't think she does anything that's wrong. The people who say this, it's what's in their minds – that's the dirty things. And that's usually what I tell them and then they shut up.

STUDIO: The scene about whether Sara, the six-year-old, should wear a bikini top or not was interesting. Is the sexualisation of children in the media a concern of yours?

LA: I don't mix art and politics. For me, it's about creating maximum drama between characters in a room.

STUDIO: So, if there's a political message that comes across...

LA: That's something that everything tends to become. If you're interested in sex and power, and you have a six-year-old girl in the film, then you know things happen. Nothing is a coincidence in the film. I thought about lots of things, but I don't really like to comment on them. I like to leave it to the audience.

STUDIO: I have to ask about the film you made as a student called *F*ck the Rapist*. (At film school, Aschan created a series of fictional films advertising spiked tampons designed to protect against rape.)

LA: That's something different because the issue of those films was to make a statement. I wanted to play with the commercial genre and use it as rape bait, and change the focus from the victim to the attacker. But that was three one-minute films, and this is a feature and completely different.

STUDIO: Are those three one-minute films available anywhere?

LA: You can watch them on Youtube. Google 'Femdefence' because 'f*ck the rapist' is not a good thing to Google (*laughs*).

STUDIO: I like your film because it's not clear-cut. You have think about it.

LA: When I create characters and work with my actresses I keep telling them, and myself, never to judge them. No one is only good or only evil. What I've realised is very provoking and I didn't know that before. But now I know because of the reactions I get from the audience. Many people have got upset because they don't know who to cheer for.

STUDIO: Some audience members won't be used to such ambiguity, because it's usually obvious in Hollywood films who's going to die and who isn't.

LA: I know. I always have to keep the string tight. When I direct, I try and put myself in a sadomasochistic role where I keep playing the game – what's the worst

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thing that can happen to the character right now? Even though I love my characters, I like to be very mean to them (*laughs*).

STUDIO: I'm interested to know who your influences are as a director.

LA: My influence was Shirley Temple and *Once Upon A Time In The West*, because I wanted to make a Western. I call the film a modern Western about power, sex and creatures. I also like to create rules and I usually use genres. I knew that every scene should be a dual, either physical or psychological. There are rules for the sound design, the music, language, costumes, pretty much everything.

STUDIO: Did you break your own rules?

LA: No. I'm the one who decided on them, and if it's good rules you stick to them.

STUDIO: It must make you more disciplined...

LA: No, it's just because I don't like freedom.

STUDIO: Why do you say that?

LA: I think it's more interesting to have a structure. It's about taste – is this beautiful or ugly? Good or bad? It's important to me to be loyal to the film I want to make, and making rules is a way to do that. **S**

She Monkeys opens in cinemas May 18th