

Tori and Lokita: The new film by the Dardenne brothers

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The newest film by Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, *Tori and Lokita*, concerns two African immigrants in Belgium. Eleven-year-old Tori (Pablo Schils) from Benin and 16-year-old Lokita from Cameroon are struggling in difficult conditions.

They pretend to be brother and sister, as well as orphans, to make headway with the Belgian government bureaucracy. Lokita is attempting to get a work permit, thus far without success. She peddles drugs for a restaurant owner, also an immigrant, Betim (Alban Ukaj). Meanwhile, she owes money to the African gang who smuggled her and Tori into the country. And her mother in Cameroon is pressuring her to send more money home so her brothers can attend school.

Lokita and Tori feign being siblings, but in fact they have become that close since they met on a boat as refugees, traveling from Africa to Sicily. She looks out for him, and he is devoted to her.

Tori has been able to obtain residency in Belgium because of his status as a persecuted “sorcerer child” in Benin. When his mother died in childbirth, his uncle claimed the infant was responsible and had “the powers of a witch.”

Lokita maintains that she found Tori in an orphanage in Benin. The only problem is, since he was abandoned at birth, how did she know what he looked like? When asked this question by immigration officials, Lokita has a panic attack, for which she has special medication.

The pair, who live in a youth center, sing in Betim’s restaurant to make a little money, five euros for 10 minutes, but drug dealing is their prime source of income. Betim pays Lokita for sexual favors, which he extorts from her. Police harassment is another problem.

The smugglers are ruthless too. When Lokita explains that she has to send 100 euros home, the chief of the gang, some sort of cleric, tells her, “I don’t care about your mother. I brought you both here, you have to pay.” They

search her and steal virtually all her money. She still owes 600 euros more. Tori wants to start dealing too, but Lokita wants him to go to school.

Again, she is turned down by the immigration department. Tori asks a polite but unyielding government official, “What am I going to do here without her?”

To get the papers illegally through Betim, Lokita agrees to tend marijuana in his secret growhouse for three months. During that time, she won’t have a phone or be able to communicate with anyone, including Tori. Betim tells her, “You have a bed, food, and when you finish, the papers ... On the market they cost a minimum of 10,000 euros.”

The separation is unbearable for Tori, who moves heaven and earth to find and join Lokita. Once he does, the two fatefully decide to steal some of the marijuana and branch out on their own. This leads to a tragic conclusion.

We have written a number of times about films by the Dardenne brothers (*Rosetta*, *The Son*, *The Child*, *Lorna’s Silence*, *The Kid with a Bike*, *Two Days, One Night*, *The Unknown Girl*, *Young Ahmed* and more) and we interviewed them in 2008.

They are generally credited with making “humanist” or socially realistic fiction films, dealing with the hard-pressed and marginalized. Their films usually take place in rundown conditions in Belgium’s decaying industrial towns and cities (the present film was shot in Liège and Condroz in the Wallonia region). Matter of factness and directness are the order of the day. The final line in *Tori and Lokita* is “Now you’re dead and I’m left all alone.”

The conditions that the film exposes are appalling and widespread. They constitute an indictment of European “democracy”—and the brutal war being waged on refugees and immigrants worldwide. Two essentially defenseless human beings are preyed upon by criminals and lowlifes, as the by-product of government cruelty and indifference.

In their directors' statement, the Dardennes describe their protagonists as "exiled, solitary, exploited and humiliated adolescents" and assert that "our film has also become a denunciation of the violent and unjust situation experienced by these young people in exile in our country, in Europe." Moreover, they write that their "dearest wish" is that at the end of the film, the audience "will also feel a sense of revolt against the injustice that reigns in our societies."

These are praiseworthy comments. But *Tori and Lokita* suffers from some of the problems that recur in the Dardenne brothers' films.

First of all, it is rather drab and dull, without many compelling moments. Earnestness and conscientiousness are no substitute for artistic flair. The directors misguidedly assume that if they take non-professional performers and put them into harsh circumstances, arrange a few minimally dramatic encounters, this will by itself ignite a meaningful drama. Scenes of people going about their daily business are only gripping if the particular is deliberately imbued with a universal content and interest. A viewer can only draw something important from a work if something important has been built into it.

Italian neo-realist films in the postwar years had small budgets and limited resources, often amateur actors, but they were propelled by social and artistic urgency. Each was an argument for organizing social life in a radically different manner.

It is one thing to wish that an audience will "feel a sense of revolt," it is another to organize dialogue, action, camera work and editing so that becomes a reality.

It is precisely a "sense of revolt" that is generally missing from the Dardenne films. *Tori and Lokita* exudes pessimism.

The Dardennes, as we have explained, began their film lives as leftists in the early 1970s in Belgium, collaborating with anarchist writer Armand Gatti, before striking out on their own with a series of documentaries aimed at working class audiences. Over the intervening complex and difficult decades, however, their radicalism and belief in the possibility of social change eroded.

We argued in 2006 "that they have allowed events to wear down their ideological defenses, that they carry their disappointments (in the working class, in radical change) with them, semi-consciously, and insert those in their studies of the present. They maintain their orientation at this point toward the plight of ordinary people, but they don't see that the *content* of that orientation has shifted dramatically."

One of the ways in which those problems find reflection in *Tori and Lokita* is the utter separation of the immigrant youth from the larger reality of Belgian society and working class struggle in particular. The only native-born Belgians we see are a couple of helpful shelter workers, in addition to the government official.

As the WSWs reported, Volvo workers in Ghent went on a wildcat strike in July 2021 (and expressed solidarity with striking Volvo workers in Virginia). In June 2022, a one-day general strike by public sector workers, as the WSWs explained, "paralyzed Belgium. ... The strike brought together Flemish- and French-speaking workers across this country of 11.5 million inhabitants, hitting train and mass transit, logistics, postal and other public services." In November 2022, an even broader nationwide general strike against price hikes saw workers "in public transport, airports, hospitals, and many private companies" stay off the job. Also, "workers in the country's three main ports, Zeebrugge, Antwerp and Ghent, struck 'en masse' and stopped shipping. ... The education sector was hit, with students, teachers and staff all participating in the action."

The Dardennes, of course, are not obliged to acknowledge any of this, directly or indirectly, but in an atmosphere of rising social tensions, it is misleading and self-defeating to paint the plight of immigrant youth, one element of the attack on the rights of the entire working class, as an isolated, hopeless condition. In the directors' statement they refer to the friendship of *Tori and Lokita* "that allows them to resist the trials of their difficult condition as exiles and proves to be the refuge of a precious human dignity preserved in the midst of a society increasingly won over by indifference, if not by the cynicism of its own interests."

Unfortunately, one feels that the Dardennes have largely given up on this "indifferent" and "cynical" society, including its working population, and this on the eve of enormous upheavals. They continue to go through the motions, but without a great deal of conviction or commitment.



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