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Cannes Review: Shocking Sign Language Drama and Critics Week Winner 'The Tribe' is an Unprecedented Cinematic Accomplishment



Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's "The Tribe."

There is no spoken dialogue in "The Tribe," Ukrainian director Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's ambitious first feature, but it's noisy in other ways. Exclusively set in and around a boarding school for deaf students, Slaboshpytskiy's story never bothers with subtitles, forcing anyone unversed in the gesticulations to pay close attention to each passing gesture. That might sound like a daunting task, but Slaboshpytskiy manages to craft an engaging experience through the heated movements and whispered exchanges of his characters. As a concept, "The Tribe" has more in common with silent cinema, but its specific rhythms are unprecedented.

The narrative, however, has a comparatively simple arc. Deaf-mute student Sergey (Grigory Fesenko)—like the rest of the cast, his name only appears in the credits—arrives at the school in its opening minutes and quickly gets drawn into the rebellious antics of an anarchic clique led by a confident hustler (Alexander Dsiadevich) who ventures into nearby parking lots after hours to pimp out two fun-loving female students ([Rosa Baby](#) and [Yana Novikova](#)) for horny truckers. After a sudden accident cripples their operations, Sergey gains control of the group, eventually forming an unexpectedly tender rom



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They court danger wherever they can, stealing and mugging when they aren't enduring class work. Slaboshpytskiy brilliantly develops a suspenseful core through the mysteries of their conversations and, eventually, the added visceral kick of graphic sex (as well as one particularly unnerving abortion). By turns exhilarating, horrific and sad, "The Tribe" eventually turns into a tale of romantic heartbreak that sets up its lethal finale with no sugarcoating of its ingredients. All we can do is watch.

The director not only gives his real-life deaf actors the opportunity to emote in their own vernacular, a spectacular technical challenge that largely holds together. He also provides them with meaty roles that never condescends or pities them on the basis of their disabilities. He allows us to get lost in the chatter between his two female characters as they put on makeup before their next night out, shows the boys fighting among each other and playing pranks. They guzzle booze during a clandestine outing and strategize about their next set of criminal antics. While the specifics remain uncertain, it's never particularly difficult to keep up with the movie's pace, since their actions speak plainly enough—and sometimes add far more expressiveness than any verbal exchanges could provide.

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Early on, Sergey's body movements convey his introverted personality, which slowly changes as he falls for Anna and gains confidence in his abilities. (Anna ultimately receives enough screen time to become as an even more tragic figure later on.) Since Sergey can't speak for himself, many scenes are dominated by precise details, particularly those including explicit sex. These aren't the only blatant instances of shock value as the plot grows steadily darker, sometimes to the detriment of material that already holds enough appeal without the added subversive edge. However, the use of sexuality as a storytelling device has a certain underlying narrative power, rendering these seemingly foreign characters—at least for anyone unable to comprehend their works—in intimate details. Already using their bodies to communicate, their only mode of communication takes on its rawest manifestation when they're frolicking in the nude.

Slaboshpytskiy and director of photography Valentin Vasyanovych use the steadicam approach to glide through each scene in lengthy, unbroken takes, capturing the actors' exchanges in their full-bodied entirety. Devoid of a soundtrack, "The Tribe" compliments its visuals with drab sounds that draw out their disconnect from the rest of the world—humming car engines, rustling clothes, and thudding footsteps. By avoiding closeups, the filmmaker makes it clear that their entire bodies define their identities. It's an appealing device from the outset, but "The Tribe" reaches the apex of its strengths during a party scene featuring nearly two dozen students standing around outside, as the screen fills with activity even as it remains essentially quiet.

As the story of the "The Tribe" adopts a cavalcade of grotesque twists that would stun viewers even without the sign language gimmick, it's hard not to wonder if Slaboshpytskiy has underserved his protagonists with a series of disturbing events that distract from the movie's chief strengths. However, from one mesmerizing scene to the next, "The Tribe" never loses its flow. Even its harshest moments are defined by vibrant motion.

Grade: A-

"The Tribe" premiered this week at the Cannes Film Festival's Critics' Week, where it won the top prize. It does not currently have U.S. distribution.



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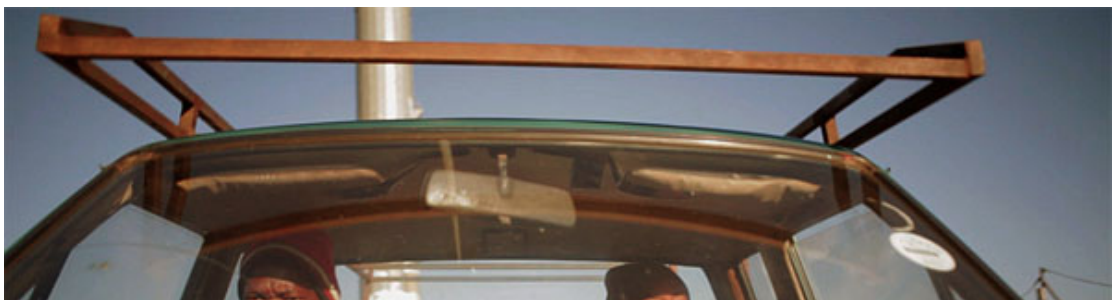
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