

Film

Into a Hushed and Brutal Universe

Forgoing subtitles for fierce sign language in 'The Tribe.'

By NICOLAS RAPOLD

It's not every day that a film from Ukraine is released in the United States without subtitles. But "The Tribe" is in so many ways a special case: a crime drama about a teenage "deaf mafia" in which the only words used are sign language. As conceived, written and directed by Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy, the movie tells its story of violence and love through visuals alone, withholding translations of the nonprofessional actors' passionate signing.

Even Mr. Slaboshpytskiy, 40, wondered whether his artistic gamble would work.

"Of course I was not sure when I start this film," he said in a recent Skype conversation in English from Ukraine. "I thought it was a very brave and very pretentious idea. And nobody knew who I was!"

Now more people will know Mr. Slaboshpytskiy's formidable name (pronounced slaw-bosh-PEETZ-kee): "The Tribe" begins a theatrical run on Wednesday in New York before its gradual release in theaters across the country. At festivals, his highly unusual debut feature has been a must-see, sweeping up prizes in the Critics' Week competition last year in Cannes before going on to awards at AFI Fest, Sundance, the Toronto International Deaf Film and Arts Festival and elsewhere. (When it was passed over as Ukraine's candidate for the Oscar for best foreign-language film, a subsequent controversy led to an effort to change the country's selection process.)

"The Tribe" uses its absence of spoken words to completely rethink how a film communicates, to startling effect. Jonathan Romney, a member of the 2014 Critics' Week jury, wrote in *The Guardian*. He praised Mr. Slaboshpytskiy's ability to combine "brute realism, dry comedy and a potent streak of eroticism."

The silence of "The Tribe" begins in earnest with an eerily quiet outdoor assembly at a grim boarding school for the deaf on the outskirts of the Ukrainian capital, Kiev. Soon we are immersed in a world of brutality, starting with the initiation of a new student (Grigoriy Fesenko) into the school's gang. Little is learned by these pupils beyond brutal criminal endeavors. Working as a pimp, Mr. Fesenko's character goes against the group's code by falling for a prostitute (Yana Novikova) whose services he has been selling to truck drivers.

Despite the absence of subtitles, the



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characters' actions and emotions are vividly clear. The physicality of the sign language gives the drama a bracing directness as tensions rise or moods fade.

Mr. Slaboshpytskiy has said that potent visual storytelling was his prime goal in deciding to film a movie without voices or subtitles. "I didn't mean to make a movie for deaf people or about deaf people," he said in an interview last year in Cannes. "My goal was to create a contemporary si-

lent movie. I was interested in that stylization."

Top, a scene from "The Tribe," Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's drama about a gang at a boarding school for the deaf in Ukraine. Above left, punishment for the protagonist (Grigoriy Fesenko); right, Mr. Slaboshpytskiy with Rosa Babiy, left, and Yana Novikova.

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The story, set in the present day, is observed in extended takes with the rundown school and environs as a backdrop. The sound effects are subtly calibrated, allowing us to hear taps and other noises of signing. "It helps to push the viewer deeper into the story, into the film," he said. "The viewer becomes a member of the tribe."

The idea arose from research and years of observation by Mr. Slaboshpytskiy, who attended a school across the street from one for deaf students and shot the film in 2013 and 2014 in the district where he grew up outside the capital. "From my childhood, I knew this region perfectly," he re-

said in an interview. The company is planning special screenings for deaf moviegoers and is considering releasing the film's script, which includes the signed dialogue, as a bonus after the theatrical run.

Ms. Novikova, who like other cast members communicated with Ms. Slaboshpytskiy through a sign-language interpreter, applauded the decision not to use subtitles.

"Everything in the film is constructed on emotions: Pleasure, anger, disappointment, sympathy are transmitted only through gestures and not by relying on subtitles or voice-overs," she said in an email message translated by a publicist. "The movie is universally clear to understand, for any country of the world."

Mr. Slaboshpytskiy's approach does have some precedents. Valery Todorovskiy's "The Land of the Deaf" (1998) centered on a deaf criminal milieu in Moscow; Frederick Wiseman's 1986 documentary "Deaf" also withheld subtitles for sign language. "Harmony Lessons," a 2013 Kazakh film, is set in a similarly desolate boarding school of hard knocks in the post-Soviet era.

Claire Shaw, a British scholar who writes about the ways that deaf people constructed identities in Soviet and post-Soviet society, said by email that Mr. Slaboshpytskiy's rendering is grounded in reality. "The phenomena it depicts do have their basis in historical fact," she said, citing a criminal organization of deaf people that was active in the former Soviet Union in the 1990s.

Mr. Slaboshpytskiy will delve into another subculture for his next feature, which he plans to begin shooting in December. This neo-noir film, for now titled "Luxembourg," will be set in today's so-called Chernobyl exclusion zone, which some inhabitants have refused to vacate since the meltdown at the nuclear plant there in 1986. He will draw on his experience visiting the area while working for a government ministry in the late 1990s.

"I am a member of the Chernobyl tribe," he said with a smile.

Stark visual storytelling, with emotions streaming through hand gestures.

called at Cannes. "I know all the corners, all the ways. As a child, I even knew where to hide myself to smoke a cigarette."

A movie fan from a young age, he recalls watching French action films starring Alain Delon, Bollywood movies and in particular the American political thriller "Three Days of the Condor," which he said he saw 30 or 40 times.

Mr. Slaboshpytskiy, who earlier drew notice for short films screened at the Locarno and Berlin festivals, including a dry run for "The Tribe" titled "Deafness," is enough of a cinephile now to poke fun at his own techniques. "About some art films, there is a joke: If you don't know how to do a film, you just do long shots," he said.

Alamo Drafthouse Films picked up the film at Cannes last year, bidding before it took prizes and agreeing not to add subtitles. "It's structured so well narratively that you don't need to rely on the language — that's what makes it unique," Tim League, Alamo's founder and chief execu-