

The Tribe

Ukraine/The Netherlands 2014
 Director: Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy
 Certificate 18 131m 43s



Reviewed by Adam Nayman

In his feature debut *The Tribe*, Ukrainian filmmaker Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy directs like a brilliant student who has absorbed the lessons of his

tutors – Haneke, the Dardennes and numerous New-Wave Romanians. Staged as a series of long-shot long takes alternating between fixed-camera tableaux and implacable tracking shots – with the only cuts coming in between sequences – *The Tribe* is a *tour de force* and it knows it. The scenes don't seem to have been directed so much as arranged on a platter. And, given the prevalence of revenge in the film's plot, it should be said that they're served up absolutely ice-cold.

Introduced stepping off a bus in suburban Kiev, Sergey (Grigoriy Fesenko) is a deaf-mute teenager who's been enrolled at – or banished to – a boarding school where students and staff are all similarly disabled. There is no spoken dialogue in the film, nor any subtitles to translate the conversations between the characters, which unfolds entirely in Ukrainian sign language. This is a daring gambit, of course, and like the virtuosic camerawork it feels halfway between a fully integrated ethical-aesthetic choice and an ingenious gimmick – a means of distinguishing *The Tribe* from even the most effectively alienating arthouse fare on the market. The combination of meticulously distanced camera placement (the only close-ups come when characters wander up to the lens) and determinedly opaque dramaturgy is such that the viewer feels either held at arm's length or else infected with an illicit, vicarious curiosity. Either way, the director gets his desired effect: this is one uncomfortable movie.

The question is whether Slaboshpytskiy is mobilising this discomfort or simply exploiting it. An early sequence in which the students are presented in class with a map of Europe seems to suggest a lurking domestic allegory, and the strategic placement of Ukrainian flags within the frame over the course of the film encourages this reading. The boarding school is presented as a self-contained ecosystem lorded over by older boys who bully their peers into submission and teachers who go even further: Sergey discovers that the woodwork instructor runs a prostitution business on the side, and ends up helping to pimp out his classmates at an isolated truck stop. It's not too difficult to infer a political perspective within this vision of unregulated corruption – a state-of-the-nation address that nobody dares speak aloud.

At the same time, there's something a little unseemly in how enthusiastically *The Tribe* goes for the jugular when it comes to extreme imagery. The explicit, real-time sex scenes between Sergey and his reluctant new girlfriend Anya (Yana Novikova), who works as a hooker, are superbly choreographed and acted, and yet it feels as if what we're observing is less an authentic exchange than a carefully conceived set piece. (When Sergey and Anya lie together framed against a dingy wall, the horizontal planes of the composition evoke Rothko.) That goes double for the scenes of violence, which are so skilfully achieved that the horror is crowded out by a perverse sense of admiration for what Slaboshpytskiy and his collaborators



The naked spur: Yana Novikova, Grigoriy Fesenko

have accomplished. (The literally bludgeoning finale is likely to be cited for years to come by connoisseurs of austere master-shot brutality – it's the equal of the throat-cutting in *Hidden*.)

In truth, pretty much every single thing about *The Tribe* is impressive, from the delineation of space within the school (the roving shots through long, narrow corridors are right out of *The Shining*) to the careful calibration of the sound design (small noises resound in the absence of dialogue) to the intensely gestural performances of the non-professional cast. And the place it occupies in the history of cinematic depictions of deafness

is singular: there's something authentically progressive about making a film in which deaf characters are not only not idealised but depicted as venal and even evil, as well as resourceful, sexually voracious and fiercely protective and loyal. But it can also be enervating to watch a prodigy show off so unabashedly. Slaboshpytskiy approaches filmmaking as a contact sport, and in the process transforms audiences into Olympic-style judges, with scorecards held at the ready. He belongs on the podium but it'll be interesting to see if next time out he insists on playing a game that he's clearly already mastered.

Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Valentyn Vasyanovych
Iya Myslytska
Written by
Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy
Director of Photography
Valentyn Vasyanovych
Film Editor
Valentyn Vasyanovych
Production Design
Vlad Oduenko
Sound Design
Sergiy Stepanskyi
Costume Design
Olena Gres

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Production Companies
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With the support of Ukrainian State Film Agency, Rinat Akhmetov's Foundation
Executive Producers
 Olexiy Karpenko
 Andriy Nebesnyi
 Olexandra Kostina

Cast
 Grigoriy Fesenko
 Sergey
 Yana Novikova
 Anya
 Roza Babiy
 Svetka
 Olexandr Dziadevych
 Gera
 Olexandr Osadchyi
 King
 Ivan Tyshko
 Makar
 Olexandr Sidelnikov
 Shnyr
 Olexandr Panivan
 woodwork teacher

Kyryl Koshyk
 sponsor
 Tetyana Radchenko
 principal
 Lyudmyla Rudenko
 history teacher
 Maryna Panivan
 Nora

In Colour
 [2.35:1]

Distributor
 Metrodome
 Distribution Ltd

Ukrainian
 theatrical title
 Pliymya

Kiev, the present. Sergey arrives at a boarding school for deaf pupils and is quickly initiated into a student gang overseen by a woodwork teacher who keeps his activities secret from the school's administrators. The gang dabbles in everything from petty theft to prostitution. Sergey swiftly moves up the ranks; when a young man who helps pimp out the female students is accidentally killed, Sergey takes his position. He begins to develop feelings for Anna, who is the girlfriend of one of the other boys; he offers her money for sex and afterwards they begin a clandestine relationship. The woodwork teacher has a plan to send Anna and her friend Svetka to Italy, but Anna discovers that she's pregnant and gets an abortion without telling Sergey, who has a plan of his own to flee. Using a mallet that he made in woodwork class, he attacks the woodwork teacher and steals his money. His scheme seems to be proceeding smoothly until Sergey sees Anna with her new visa and grabs it, tearing it apart and swallowing it in an attempt to stop her leaving. He's dragged away by the other boys, beaten with a broken bottle and left for dead. Later, seemingly unharmed, Sergey returns to the dormitory and crushes his enemies' heads with heavy wooden bookcases while they sleep.