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# 'The Tribe' ('Plemya'): Cannes Review

10:12 AM PDT 5/22/2014 by Leslie Felperin

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Courtesy of Festival de Cannes

## The Bottom Line

The use of sign language, deafness and silence itself adds several heady new ingredients to the story's base material, alchemically creating something rich, strange and very original.

## Venue

Cannes Film Festival (Critics' Week)

## Cast

Grigory Fesenko, Yana Novikova

## Director

Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy

**Ukrainian writer-director Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's prize-winning feature debut must surely be the first movie about teenage gangs to feature a cast entirely composed of deaf sign-language users.**

There have been countless films over the years about teenage gangs, their rites, rituals and violent codes of ethics, but Ukrainian-made and set *The Tribe* must surely be the first one featuring a cast entirely composed of deaf sign-language users. The story of writer-director **Myroslav Slaboshpytskiy's** feature debut follows a familiar parabolic path, as it tracks an outsider who becomes major player. However, the use of sign language, deafness and silence itself adds several heady new ingredients to the base

material, alchemically creating something rich, strange and very original. Add in **Valentyn Vasyanovych**'s silky smooth steadicam cinematography, sexually explicit imagery, strong critical support, and winning the top prize and two more besides in Cannes' Critics' Week sidebar (including one to assist distribution in France), and you've got a reasonably exportable item for the specialist market that doesn't even need subtitles.

In fact, an opening title card warns viewers that the film will contain no subtitles or translation of the signing, presumably for the benefit of anyone in the audience who might think there's something wrong with the print. At first, it's almost unnerving not to be able to understand exactly what the characters are "saying" to each other as we see teenage protagonist Sergey (**Grigory Fesenko**) make his way through a rundown Kiev district to a boarding school for the deaf where he meets the school principal (**Tatyana Radchenko**).

### **PHOTOS: The Party Scene at Cannes** <sup>[1]</sup>

But gradually, as with silent films from the earliest days of cinema, the language of gestures, facial expressions and even body posture becomes almost completely readable. The effect is akin to watching a ballet like *Coppelia* or *The Nutcracker*, but with a lot more sex and violence, and slutty hot pants for the girls instead of tutus. (It would be interesting to know how much more viewers conversant in sign languages from other countries will understand, given the characters here are using Ukrainian Sign. Future commentators, please let us know.)

In any case, the story is relatively simple and easy to follow. Just like school kids at any other boarding school, the pupils here wear uniforms, sleep in dorms and attend classes. (At one point, they're clearly having a lesson about the Ukrainian government's decision not to strengthen ties to the EU, which sparked the Maidan protest riots of early 2014 and an eventual change of regime.) But at night, these teenagers are bad-ass hooligans. Lead by a charismatic leader (**Alexander Osadchiy**, called King in the credits although no names are ever spoken in the film) and aided and abetted by a corrupt woodworking teacher (**Alexander Panivan**), the boys in the gang mug strangers for money and booze, while Anya (**Yana Novikova**) and Svetka (**Rosa Babi**y) turn tricks at a local truck stop.

### **PHOTOS: The Croisette Catwalk: Cannes' Best Daytime Looks** <sup>[2]</sup>

After passing the hazing ritual tests and being inducted into the group, Sergey starts to work his way up the chain of command to pimp-protector for the girls. He scratches up enough cash to pay for a session with Anya, and the two start to become regular lovers as seen in some fleshy scenes lit with painterly care that nevertheless look faked judging by the body angles. Anya and Svetka hope to immigrate to **Italy** and apply for visas, but an unexpected pregnancy throws a spanner in the works. At the risk of spoiling some of the plot, it's worth warning potential viewers that this results in a brutal back-street abortion scene. It's upsetting not so much because of what's actually seen (like nearly every shot in the movie, the action unfolds at a considerable distance from the camera), but because of the horrible cries of pain that Novikova emits, which are all more the wrenching because it's the first time we hear her voice.

This is, in fact, not a silent film at all -- source sound is carefully if sparingly deployed throughout. It plays an instrumental role in several of the film's most shocking moments, underscoring how the characters' deafness leaves them vulnerable in a way people with unimpaired hearing would never have to worry about. Indeed, some viewers might wonder whether it's entirely credible that people with hearing loss in the

real world would embark on such dangerous criminal careers given the risks, but one can't underestimate how poverty can drive people to desperate measures.

*Production companies: An Alpha Violent, Arthouse Traffic, Garmata Film production*

*Cast: Grigory Fesenko, Yana Novikova, Alexander Osadchiy, Alexander Panivan, Rosa Babi*

*Director: Myroslav Slaboshpytshiy*

*Screenwriter: Myroslav Slaboshpytshiy*

*Producers: Valentyn Vasyanovych, Iya Myslytska, Elena Slaboshpytskaya*

*Executive producer(s):*

*Director of photography: Valentyn Vasyanovych*

*Production designer: Vlad Odudenko*

*Costume designer: Alena Gres*

*Editors: Valentyn Vasyanovych*

*Sound design: Sergiy Stepanskiy*

*Sales: Alpha Violet*

*No rating, 130 minutes*

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/photos-cannes-2014-parties-704842>

[2] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/photos-croisette-catwalk-cannes-best-704668>