



Tori and Lokita

Director: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

Country: Belgium

Date: 2022

A review by Manohla Dargis for *The New York Times*:

Like most of the films from the brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, their latest — the harrowing “Tori and Lokita” — is a story about outcasts. And like most their films, it too is a suspense thriller about moral conscience, one that takes place in and around a gray, Belgian city. There, two young African migrants are struggling to make a home in an unkind world in which nearly every human exchange is transactional and carries the threat of betrayal.

Tori and Lokita — played by Pablo Schils and Joely Mbundu, both appealing non-professionals — are living at a gently chaotic children’s center and passing as brother and sister; they’re also in limbo. Tori, a young-looking 12, has his residency papers, but the 17-year-old Lokita hasn’t yet been granted hers. Faced with the specter of Lokita’s deportation, the two are intensely focused on finding a way for her to stay in the country. They pore over her story, rehearsing what she should tell immigration officers, all while trying to dodge the smugglers whom they owe money and running orders for a local (illegal) cannabis dealer.



The movie opens with Lokita in the middle of an immigration interview, the camera fixed on her in close-up — for two progressively uneasy minutes — as she responds to offscreen questions. Her face and voice are composed at first, her answers a touch canned, though everything shifts when the interviewer challenges her story. Because there are no cutaways to the questioner, your gaze, your focus, remains on Lokita, compelling you to keep looking even as the queries keep coming and she begins to crumble and then to cry, her testimony and self-possession undone by the soft droning of dehumanizing power.

The interrogation is uncomfortable to watch, which is the point. The Dardennes aren’t simply forcing you to see Lokita, to see her bravery and tremulous vulnerability, they are also making you a witness to state violence. The story’s most conspicuous villains are the drug dealer and his gang as well as the smugglers, all of whom hound and exploit the children relentlessly, demanding money and, in the case of the dealer, worse from Lokita. Yet, as the movie underscores, the larger fault here lies with a country — and by extension, its people — that treats migrants so inhumanely (some worse than others).

The interview is stopped, and the scene wraps up quickly — there’s a cut to some anxious white faces — and Tori and Lokita are soon regrouping and rushing, always rushing, toward their next move. They falter and stumble, moments of difficulty that the Dardennes intersperse with scenes of tender intimacy that fill in their back story and other interludes that insistently remind you that, however independent and resourceful the pair may seem, these are children. When Tori asks an immigration officer, “Why can’t my sister have her papers?,” the Dardennes (who aren’t above jerking tears) keep the camera at the boy’s level.

However unvarnished the Dardennes’ movies appear, however seemingly plain and obvious, their approach is refined, and the movies themselves are highly stylized. The stories tend to be fairly simple and feature naturalistic dialogue, nondescript locations and marginalized young characters; and it’s crucial to underline that Tori and Lokita are their first Black protagonists. The precarity of the lives that the

Dardennes explore give the stories feeling and tension while their directorial choices — including where they put the camera and how they situate characters in the world — give their work its characteristic ethical politics.



The story takes a turn, narratively and tonally — the rhythms seem to quicken or at least your pulse does — after another of Lokita’s immigration interviews goes badly. The dealer offers to get her counterfeit papers, if she works at a cannabis grow house tending the plants out in the boonies. She does, and there, cut off from Tori in this sprawling, windowless space, she waters and fertilizes the plants and is supplied basic necessities by indifferent minders. Lokita has effectively become a prisoner while the more resourceful Tori continues to scramble in the outside world, a bleak situation that mirrors their respective immigration statuses.

Time and again in the Dardennes’ movies, imperiled and isolated characters are saved — by themselves, by others — in moments that express the filmmakers’ humanism. It’s easy to imagine or, really, hope that something similar will happen in “Tori and Lokita,” a possibility that starts to seem more and more like magical thinking, particularly given how abjectly African migrants are often treated. Surely, you think, someone decent will step up to offer help. What I didn’t grasp when I first watched the movie is that the act of grace I was anxiously waiting for had happened before the movie began. Lokita had once saved Tori; they saved each other. Yet in a world as barbaric as this one, who else is willing to step up?.

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