



Martial arts as metaphor – Semran Turan fights for selfhood in the Danish youth drama *Fighter*

Fighter – The immigrant's struggle between tradition and emancipation

“We are used to thinking of ourselves as a ‘nice little country’,” says Danish director Natasha Arthy. “But in fact, our integration policies are failing and we need to face up to the problem.”

Natasha found out about Denmark's immigration and integration challenges while conducting research for her teenage drama film *Fighter*. “A lot of the young have a profound lack of interest in each other. Everyone lives in his/her small circle, within their own ethnic communities.”

Contemporary Denmark has an immigrant population of under 500,000. But in a small country of just 5.4 million, this is almost 9% and immigration from outside Europe is a relatively new phenomenon in Denmark. It's no wonder therefore, that Danish youth across the cultural spectrum should be feeling confused and lacking directions as to how to adapt to change.

Natasha's reputation as a European filmmaker exploded after she directed the critically acclaimed *Old, New, Borrowed and Blue*. She made the film under the aesthetic rules of the Danish *Dogma*, a manifesto for *vérité* filmmaking launched by Lars Von Trier's circle of friends in the early nineties. When she approached development for *Fighter*, she had no intention of making a didactic movie on the subject of integration. “The appeal of the story to me was that it was very universal. It was about a young woman finding out, then setting out, to do what she wants to do and the impact on family relations,” says Natasha.

In the film, Aicha, who is played with grace and conviction by the non-professional actress Semran Turan, comes into collision with her traditional Turkish-Danish family system as she tries to find her own self through the practice of Kung Fu. Aicha lives a double life - obedient daughter and sister by day, self-possessed martial artist by night - and the drama reaches its crescendo at the point when circumstances blow this schizoid arrangement to pieces.

As a young ethnic Danish woman, Natasha was fascinated by the study of a sub-culture in sharp contrast with the one she was raised in. "I was raised to do what I wanted. But this is not the prevalent value in some of the immigrant cultures. Many of them are very family oriented and place a lot of importance on being inter-dependent and on pleasing one's parents," she says. "What I wanted to show is that there are consequences to following your heart. We all experience these consequences but they are more dramatically in evidence in these communities for whom family is at the centre of life." *Fighter* beautifully dramatises a core paradox of the immigrant's experience; although Aicha has been raised in a country that exalts individual freedom, she does not necessarily think it is morally alright for her to do what she wants. Her inner conflict drives the film as much as the kung fu fight sequences.

Choreographed to a breathtaking standard by Chinese film martial arts expert Xiang Gao (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), *Fighter* had an extended production and post-production schedule, due to its technical complexity. The young cast were submitted to a gruelling and extended period of martial arts training six months before principal photography began.

Natasha admits to a fondness for quality Chinese martial arts films. She's at pains, however, to debunk the idea that martial arts genre aesthetics were her primary consideration. "This is a coming-of-age film in which martial arts is featured as a dramatic device. In that sense, it is closer to *Billy Elliot* than to a Hong Kong action movie."

Though untypical of most current Danish youth films, *Fighter* also represents a crowning achievement of the Danish Film Institute (DFI). In 1982 a Danish Parliament statute committed DFI to devote 25% of its funding to film production aimed at children and youth. This was as an outcome of many years of political debate. The one sentence in the National Film Act had an enormous impact – and it still has. There is a continuity in production and a certain volume of films. Since 1989 the DFI established a consultancy system for the young audience - one in position for shorts and documentaries and one in position for feature films. They undertake personal artistic evaluations of the proposals from the film industry. In 1998 the Centre for Children and Youth Film (now Children and Youth) was established. The task of the centre is to ensure knowledge, development of strategies and activities. Its target groups are children, and teachers at a national level, as well as the professional film industry at a national and international level. Its core activities are film-education, teachers training, seminars for professionals, regional school and pre-school cinema programmes, cooperation with film festivals, (the running of an) interactive film studio and international cultural exchange.

"The idea that drives our work is also a matter of 'democracy for children'," says DFI Head of Children and Youth Charlotte Giese. "On the one hand, we do everything we can to broaden their film cultural repertoire through cinema and school. And we promote film as a key educational tool as well as developing their skills in the field of film art and

filmmaking. It makes the young audience more critical, more selective and more creative. On the other hand, we make it attractive for directors to make films for children and youth – in new and original ways.” An important part of the DFI youth mandate is to use film to reflect the growing diversity as an integral part of the contemporary Danish experience.

The legal obligation to set aside a quarter of its budget means that at least six out of 24 Danish films DFI supports (or subsidises) each year, must be films for children and youth. “This has had a strong virtuous effect. Because they can count on the films being (partly) financially and professionally supported by the DFI, serious filmmakers are prepared to take a chance on those films – and sometimes to go for more experimenting genre films etc.”

Natasha Arthy is a strong supporter of the DFI approach. Throughout the writing process, she was nurtured by DFI consultant Mette Damgaard Sørensen. “At each stage of the process, from synopsis to shooting script, I would send the material in and Mette would respond with detailed notes.” A former editor of the successful Danish culture magazine EKKO, Mette has a degree in film studies combined with a lifelong professional commitment to youth and children themes.

Fighter is a movie at the confluence between a whole host of cultural influences; made by an ethnically Danish woman and starring a cast of non-professionals from the country’s Turkish community, it integrates the typically Danish Dogma aesthetics with the balletic codes of Chinese kung fu cinema. The result is a potent drama about the emotional turmoil of a young woman struggling to individuate by conjugating the conflicting values of two cultures.