

MOVIES

Berlin Hidden Gem: Underage Robotic Provocation in 'The Trouble With Being Born'

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Credit: Berlinale

'The Trouble With Being Born'

Sandra Wollner's drama about a 10-year-old android and her "Daddy" could prove to be one of the festival's most divisive.

Landing under the auspices of the Berlinale's newly introduced Encounters strand aimed at fostering "aesthetically and structurally daring works," *The Trouble With Being Born*, having its world premiere Thursday, could well end up being the most daring — not to mention divisive — film in a festival not known for holding back on provocation.

The second feature from Austrian director Sandra Wollner, the drama — which was already named one of the Berlinale 2020's weirdest films based on the synopsis alone — begins gently enough, with a young girl lazing by a pool under the summer sun, discussing memories of her mother with her loving father. But as the scenes unravel it becomes clear that all is not as innocent as it first seemed.

Despite a remarkably lifelike appearance, the child — Elli — is actually an android, her memories programmed. And it doesn't take long to realize that there's something else to her relationship with this very human, very middle-aged man she calls "Daddy."

Much of the nocturnal activity is only implied (perhaps leading many to question the depths of their own imagination), but there are moments where there's absolutely no doubt as to the rather envelope-pushing direction the film is taking.

Wollner says the story was aimed at being an "antithesis to *Pinocchio*" (funnily enough, also showing at the festival, although without so many nods toward pedophilia), or Steven Spielberg's *A.I.*, where the central characters dream of becoming human.

"What I found interesting about it is that we have an android whose only desires are the ones you program it to have," she says. "I found it fascinating to show the perspective of the world through this machine that does not judge and does not care, and doesn't need the meanings that we do."

Making such a film didn't come without its difficulties, not least around the central role, played by the 10-year-old Lena Watson (a stage name inspired by her idol Emma Watson). Wollner admits she was initially "scared" about choosing a child for the part (she had originally planned to cast a 20-year-old but then changed her mind, rewriting the script and removing several more explicit elements).

Looking for Elli was — perhaps obviously — slightly removed from your average casting call, the filmmakers not merely wanting someone who suited the part but also a child, Wollner says, that "came from a healthy environment," with the sort of open-minded family who would understand the story they wanted to tell and also allow them to do it. In the end, she says it was "pure luck" in finding Watson, whose parents were known by a friend of a friend.

"We had really honest talks with the family, who were there during the shoot. It was very open, very transparent. And of course we talked to [Watson] about the film in a very child-appropriate way."

Understandably, the few nude scenes were all created via VFX with Watson in a bikini and covered in dots ("Of course we didn't have a minor running around naked," says Wollner). The young actress also wore a silicone mask and wig, which served a dual purpose, not only hiding her real identity but also helping her resemble another actress who appears later in the film.

"She actually had a lot of fun, I think — we actually had a really good time, although one might not think that!"

Wollner says she's curious to see how audiences respond to *The Trouble With Being Born* and admits a pre-festival test screening already resulted in several walkouts.

"But with my last film [*The Impossible Picture*] a lot of people walked out as well," she laughs. "I mean, we were very lucky and it was quite successful [Wollner received the German Film Critics' Award in 2019]. But still, people walked out, so I cannot imagine it's not going to happen now."

That said, one elderly guest at an early screening did have some words of encouragement that could keep people from heading for the exit.

Says Wollner: "She was a bit confused and found it a bit provocative, but then she said, 'at least I can say it's not boring.'"

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Michael B. Jordan to Receive Male Star of the Year at CinemaCon 2020

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Arnold Turner/Getty Images

Michael B. Jordan

The annual gathering of theater owners will fete the actor ahead of his role in September's 'Without Remorse.'

Michael B. Jordan will be honored with the Male Star of the Year Award at this year's CinemaCon, it was announced Tuesday.

The award comes ahead of Jordan's next film *Without Remorse*, an adaptation of a Tom Clancy novel to be released by Paramount in September. The film will be showcased at the official convention of the National Association of Theatre Owners in Las Vegas, set to run March 30-April 2, as part of Paramount's upcoming slate.

The award honors Jordan's career so far, including his ongoing collaboration with director Ryan Coogler from *Fruitvale Station* to playing Adonis Creed in *Creed* and Killmonger in *Black Panther*. The actor also played real-life social justice activist and lawyer Bryan Stevenson in last year's *Just Mercy*.

Meanwhile, *The Hollywood Reporter* on Tuesday reported exclusively that [Jordan is set to return for *Creed 3*](#), which is in the works with writer Zach Baylin.

The CinemaCon Big Screen Achievement Awards will be presented April 2 at The Colosseum at Las Vegas' Caesar's Palace, where the annual convention takes place.

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