



## Venice 2019 review: Beware of Children (Dag Johan Haugerud)

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Lies, half-truths, and things withheld. After any traumatic event, communication is key to get to the truth, to closure, and to regaining balance. Norwegian director Dag Johan Haugerud makes communication the central element of his third feature film, *Beware of Children*. And children are among the prominent recipients of communication in this film, as it centers on how the way we as adults communicate will inform the way our children grow up. Haugerud, a former novelist, also penned the screenplay that is dialogue-heavy but creates real people having real conversations and discussions, reasoned and almost devoid of drama. But what we say and how we say it depends on who we talk to, on differences in status, class, age, gender, religion and so on, and we bend our way of communicating around all those aspects, making our personalities more fluid than we may like to think. And as *Beware of Children* shows, children pick up on that.

The film starts with a tragic event at a school in a middle-class suburb of Oslo. Lykke (Ella Øverbye) seriously injures her classmate Jamie, who shortly after dies of complications. She is the daughter of Sigurd (Hans Olav Brenner), a prominent member of the left-wing Labour Party. Jamie is the son of high profile right-wing politician Per Erik Lundemo (Thorbjørn Harr). It is up to school principal Liv (Henriette Steenstrup) to figure out what exactly happened and to guide a community coming to grips with the tragedy before it starts to unravel. Complicating things are Liv's secret love affair with the boy's father, and that her brother Anders (Jan Gunnar Røise), a school counselor, was responsible for the children at the time of the event. Is Liv up to the task of getting everybody on the same page and keeping the community and her own conflicted emotions together, while also being responsible for the well-being of the children in her school?

*Beware of Children* is essentially nothing more than two and a half hours of people talking. No melodramatic scenes, nobody so much as raising their voice except for one impactful instance late in the film, and a lot of arguments, counter-arguments, careful negotiation, and a fierce will to eschew a traditional protagonist/antagonist dynamic. This is an ensemble piece from the outset. Haugerud easily could have made the right-wing Lundemo a one-dimensional variation of similar leaders popping up all over Europe this decade. But the portrayal and treatment are starkly nuanced, painting Lundemo as a character with very questionable ideas about immigration, but also as a loving and caring man overcome by grief for his son. His politics are certainly called into question, and not everybody understands why Liv would start a relationship with him, but *Beware of Children* opts to show the man behind the rhetoric, a choice that might make it controversial.

Haugerud consciously situates the story around parents, teachers and children in a school setting, because school is crucial in forming society, which makes all the conversations and discussions around the incident between Lykke and Jamie gain importance, as each adult balances their own personal and political interests with what is best for the children on an individual level. *Beware of Children*, indeed. The meetings of Liv and her teaching staff show what kind of tightrope those working in education have to walk, certainly at a time of high crisis as presented in the film. At these moments communication matters, the choice of words, the inflection and tone. Haugerud has a keen eye for the lines such conversations tend to follow, and the film is mostly interested in how this shapes them and less in what is said. Even if emotions don't run high, *Beware of Children* milks every drop of drama from its dialogue, and this works because the cast uniformly makes said dialogue believable and natural.

The film begins and ends with virtually the same shot, subtly referencing the circular nature of school life from the point of view of a teacher. Each new school year will bring new crises, some as serious as this, others less so. Their task is to guide the children under their wings through these crises as well as possible. *Beware of Children* shows that good communication is crucial in this process, and it shows this with such a certain hand that despite its long runtime it never loses the audience, even if it boils down to two and a half hours of Norwegians talking to each other. The fascination lies in how they talk, and how this shapes lives, their own and those of 'their' children.



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