

Volya Films & SKOOP Media present:

TOTEM

A film by Sander Burger

PRESS KIT

AWARDS

Grand Jury Award Feature Live Action

New York International Children's Film Festival 2023

Audience Award Best Film

Cinekid Festival 2022

Audience Award Best Film

JEF Festival 2023

Prix du Jury Enfants

&

Prix du Jury Jeune by Kinopolis

Luxembourg City Film Festival 2023

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SYNOPSIS

V1:

Ama is a determined young swimmer who, alongside her best friend Thijs, works tirelessly to prepare for their upcoming championships. Despite being raised by Senegalese parents in the Netherlands, Ama identifies as Dutch and doesn't think much about her heritage. However, when her family is suddenly faced with deportation, Ama finds comfort in the fantastical stories her mother tells her about their homeland, and the magical porcupine that serves as her family's totem animal. Join Ama on a journey of self-discovery as she learns to embrace her heritage and finds the strength to stand up for her family and culture.

V2:

Ama is really passionate about swimming and spends most of her free time practising for an important upcoming competition, together with her best friend, Thijs. Ama feels totally Dutch, even though her parents are asylum-seekers from Senegal. They are living illegally in the Netherlands since losing their application to stay in the country. After her mother and younger brother are arrested, Ama roams the streets of Rotterdam searching for her father. During this odyssey her totem animal appears to her – a giant porcupine.



INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR SANDER BURGER

By Maricke Nieuwdorp

> Where and how did the idea behind *TOTEM* arise?

Sometime around 2002: I was living in Rotterdam, and I read in the paper that there were something like 40,000 asylum-seekers living illegally in the city, even then. These are all people living and working here, and their children have to go to school. At first I wanted to make a documentary on this, but I had to abandon that idea because the subject was too sensitive. Some years later – I had children on my own by then – I still wanted to do something on this topic. I thought about a Dardennes-style, socialisty drama, but I thought it was really important to reach the widest possible audience. At that time, I was watching programmes like *Het Jeugdjournaal* (children's news) and *Het Klokhuis* (a current affairs programme for children) with my kids, and I was impressed by how they explain serious themes to young children. This inspired me to try to tackle an adult, complex theme like illegal asylum-seekers in the form of a family film.

> How did you settle on a family with Senegalese roots, with a daughter called Ama?

Quite apart from all the things people in the Netherlands might think about refugees, everyone understands that a child doesn't belong in a warzone. It's more difficult to explain economic migrants. So I thought that it should be a child from a country that is actually safe. This makes the argument sharper. It's an incredibly difficult subject anyway, but as a society you have to be aware that children should never suffer for the choices made by their parents. As I myself am from Côte d'Ivoire, and I have connections with West Africa and know Senegal, I could relate to this. Also, there are lots of Senegalese in Rotterdam. In Ghanian, the name Ama means 'born on Saturday', but it also stands for 'Alone Minor Asylum-seeker'. Just like a Truman or Elckerlyc, this Ama stands for all the children like her.



> Where did the totem animal come from?

The image of a girl next to an animal in the city came to me early on. I then looked at what animals are native to Senegal. I chose the porcupine because its black-and-white striped quills make it work

really well graphically. This animal also has a friendly, guinea pig-like head, which makes him pettable even though 80% of him is covered in razor-sharp spines. To make him special I decided to make him really big – this also makes it very clear that it's not an actual, real animal.

> Why did you set the film in Rotterdam?

I believe that the port city of Rotterdam has the most international allure of all the cities in the Netherlands. The dynamism of this city, full of new buildings and unique architecture, make this a great place to make films. Rotterdam has a stunning skyline and a character all of its own. It doesn't have the historic feel of Utrecht or Amsterdam, but it does have history. And the city is always in flux: if you've been away for a year, when you come back another brand new 100-metre tall building will have sprung up in the meantime. In *TOTEM* the city is not just the backdrop, but also a character in the film. Alongside the visual aspect, Rotterdam has of course always been a place where lots of immigrants arrive, work and live."

> You wrote *TOTEM* with screenwriter Bastiaan Tichler. It's your first family film. How did you handle the point-of-view, and the language, for example?

While we were writing the screenplay, we both had children in the age group 7 to 10 years. So then you're at home in that world, as you're watching films and reading books with them. So you have a pretty good idea of what their level is and what you can ask of them. The totem animal allowed us to go a bit further than just stark reality, without detracting from the seriousness of the subject matter. In spite of the seriousness, it had to be an imaginative story, somewhere on the magical-realist spectrum.



> How was it working with children in the lead roles?

You can write the best screenplay in the world, but if you don't find the right girl it'll be for nothing. Amani stood out head and shoulders above the other kids. She's funny, resilient, tough and vulnerable. As a child won't have so much in the way of formal training or experience, you cast close to the role you have in mind. I was looking for someone who was 80 to 100% Amani. So then you look at how natural she is in front of the camera and the range of emotion she can act. Our first day of shooting was also the first day of the coronavirus lockdown. So everyone was wearing facemasks, there was an international crew working and a huge set with a big fleet of vehicles. You can't prepare a child for that. This was all pretty new and strange for her during the first few days,

but she faced up to it all very bravely. In the rough cuts, I couldn't see any difference between her performance then, and later in the process.

> Is your experience making documentaries useful when it comes to making a fiction film?

In a way, yes. Those first few weeks on the streets in Rotterdam were pretty rough. We couldn't close off the main road Coolsingel, so life was just going on as usual around the set. We were working with a young girl, it was very cold and we had an enormous animatronic on the set that didn't always work. We were making fiction in an environment we couldn't control. So we had to improvise. In documentaries you know you only have one take, but also that this can result in something great. This experience allowed me to make snap decisions when we only had an hour and a half to film on Coolsingel. I had faith that that one take would be enough.

> Why did you decide to shoot with wide-angle lenses?

There were two reasons for that: firstly it brings us very close to the girl and the huge porcupine, while also showing us more of the city. We shot a lot using 12mm lenses, which are so wide they distort the image in the corners. This combines well with the magical-realism in the film. We wanted to be able to treat the material as playfully as possible, and because Rotterdam is so strong graphically, you'll always find a pattern with the right lines.



> Why did you want to work with an animatronic?

That was my biggest dream, I saw it as the pinnacle of filmmaking. As a kid I was a fan of the puppeteer Jim Henson, who did *The Muppet Show*, *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*, among other things. I also knew right away that the porcupine had to be real and not computer-generated. Firstly so that the girl had someone to play opposite, but also because an animatronic stands the test of time. *E.T.* from 1982 still looks amazing, as do some scenes from *Jurassic Park*. Computer-generated effects from that 1993 film are no longer credible, but the animatronics are. So *TOTEM* will still look realistic twenty years from now. But it was a massively difficult, complicated piece of heavy machinery to work with. And of course it attracted a lot of attention. So it was both a blessing and a curse, but I'm really really happy with the result. The porcupine was made by Rob's Prop Shop and is such a clever piece of mechanical kit. A puppeteer sits inside it, operating the head and steering the

beast. Rob also had a remote control with which he operated all the sensors, such as the ones in the mouth and the eyes. Three are 48 motors in the face.

> How did the musical score come about?

Because of the pandemic I worked with Amaury Laurent Bernier, a composer from Hamburg, on Zoom. I gave him two requests: I wanted there to be a recognisable theme, like in films such as *E.T.* And I wanted the music to develop, from European to African. So initially we hear a guitar, and as the film progresses this is taken over by a kora – a West-African stringed instrument that has a slightly different timbre. The result is very subtle, as the shift is really gradual. Eventually, there's even a children's choir from Senegal. And all this within the same musical theme. Because Ama's search for her father is at the same time a spiritual journey to her origins.

> Can you say something about the adult roles?

Lies Visschedijk plays Paula, who alongside Ama undergoes the biggest development. At first Paula is not very likeable, but becomes more so. The great thing about Lies is that by nature she can never be completely unsympathetic – even if she tried. Lies is one of the few actresses I know who can play drama and comedy, and even switch during a single scene. A quality that was very useful in this film. Ama's mother was played by Céline Camara, a French-speaking, Luxembourg-based actress who doesn't speak a word of Dutch. So she learned all of her Dutch dialogue phonetically, by heart. I wanted this role to be played by a French-speaking actress, to make it credible. I thought this was really impressive. Just imagine if we had to speak Chinese phonetically: you'd never know for sure if what you're saying is right or not. Ama's father, Emmanuel Ohene Boafo, is Ghanaian-Dutch – last year he won the Louis d'Or theatre acting prize. He worked on the accent with a Belgian actor.

THE DIRECTOR

Sander Burger (1975) was born in Ivory Coast and grew up in Indonesia and Iraq before completing his education in the Netherlands. He directed his first two documentaries, *Ons Waterloo* (2002) and *In de Naam van de Zoon* (2003), immediately after graduating from the Netherlands Film Academy (class of 2001). In 2004, he made and produced the fiction short *KOEN!* which brought him a nomination for the NPS KORT! award. This was followed almost immediately by three features in quick succession: *Olivier etc.* (2007), *Panman*, *Rhythm of the Palms* (2008) and *Hunting & Sons* (2009). *Panman* won awards including 'Best Feature' at the Hollywood Black Film Festival. For *Hunting & Sons* Sander was nominated for awards including Best Director at the Sao Paulo International Film Festival.



Sander then returned to documentaries with the multiple-award-winning *Alice Cares* (2015, nomination for the 'Prix Europa' for best feature-length documentary, among others). This was followed by *Stand Up and Walk* (2017) and *Scenarios for a Normal Life* (2019). He also continued to make fiction, however. For example, he wrote and directed four *Duivelse Dilemma's*, two *NTR KORT!*s and the Telefilm *Off Track* (2017). Last year saw the television screening of the three-part series for broadcaster VPRO *The Sad Champion*, written and directed by Sander. For this series, filmed entirely on Curaçao and based both on a novel and a true story, Sander mixed documentary and fiction in his own unique way.

Last year also saw the release of Sander's long-anticipated theatrical feature *The Judgement*, which was nominated for 11 Golden Calves and won 4, including Best Film and Best Screenplay. *TOTEM* is Sander's first family film.

THE CAST

Amani-Jean Philippe

Ama

Amani-Jean Philippe (2010) lives in Hoorn, in the province of West-Friesland, with her parents and younger sister. Amani-Jean has performed on stage from a young age. She was cast for *TOTEM* at the very moment she decided to make the switch to focusing on football. She really enjoyed making the film. The moment when she had to burp on camera with Ole in particular still brings a smile to her face. Amani-Jean plays Ama, the lead role, in *TOTEM*.



Ole van Hoogdalem

Thijs

Ole van Hoogdalem (2009) was born in Blaricum and lives in Naarden with his parents, older brother and dog, Skip. He always wanted to be a police officer, until as a young boy he switched from watching cartoons to 'real' films. From that moment on, his love of acting started to grow, and the dream of becoming an actor pushed police officer into second place. *TOTEM* is Ole's first acting role. He spent a year having acting lessons; his drama teacher advised him to go to a casting session, and he got the role straight away. Lies Visschedijk and Iliass Ojja are his favourite actors. Ole is really excited to find out what this film will do for his acting career. In *TOTEM* he plays Ama's best friend, Thijs.



Lies Visschedijk

Paula

Lies Visschedijk (1974) has acted in films including *Love is All, In the Heart, Brasserie Valentijn, Loft*, as well as playing a lead role in the popular television series *Gooische Vrouwen* but is best-known to a wide audience for her title role in the *Soof* romantic comedies. Lies won a Golden Calf for Best Female Actor in a Supporting Role for her role in the feature *Love is the Word*. Alongside her work in film and television, Lies has performed with various theatre companies, including De Ploeg, Toneelgroep Oostpool and Het Toneel Speelt. She also performed in and directed, with Marcel Musters, the play *Fiftyfifty* for Mugmetdegoudentand and more recently the productions *BUIK* and *Margreet heeft de groep verlaten*. In 2021, Lies performed in the films *The Judgement* and *Alles op Tafel*, and this year she once again takes on the guise of her much-loved *Soof* character in *Soof III*. In *TOTEM* she plays Thijs' mother, Paula.



© Lin Woldendorp

Emmanuel Ohene Boafo

Babacar

Emmanuel Ohene Boafo performed with theatre company DEGASTEN in Amsterdam for 4 years, then completed the acting programme at Toneelacademie Maastricht institute of performative arts, from which he graduated in 2018 winning not only the Henriëtte Hustinxprijs award, but also the Guido de Moorprijs. He won the latter in 2017 following his internship with the production *Ondertussen in Casablanca* at Het Nationale Theater, where he was offered a permanent contract after graduation. Among other parts he has performed in *Cinema, De Hereniging van de Twee Korea's, De wereld volgens John* and *Trojan Wars*. He also performed the solo production *Sea Wall*, for which he was awarded the Louis D'or in 2021. Alongside the theatre, Emmanuel also acts in film and television productions. He played the lead role, for instance, in the film *EXIT* by director Boris Paval Conen in 2013 and subsequently in series including *A'dam E.V.A., TOON, De Maatschap*, Drew Heriot's international film *The Power of the Heart*, the short *Venserpolder, Karman*, the feature *White Berry* and the feature *El Houb* which is set to premiere in October 2022. In *TOTEM* he plays Ama's father, Babacar.



© Susanne Middelberg

Céline Camara *Jaineba*

Céline is a French actress, improviser and improvisation coach who lives in Luxembourg. She was born in a suburb of Paris, where she trained in ballet and modern jazz dance. After studying law in France and the United Kingdom, she relocated to Luxembourg in 2012, where she started working as a lawyer in the academic world. Following a beneficial existential crisis, she gave up her legal career in 2018 and focused entirely on acting and coaching. Since then she has performed in films including *An Zéro* (Julien Becker, 2020), *L'Enfant caché* (Nicolas Steil, 2021), *La Valise rouge* (Cyrus Neshvad, 2021) and *Les Intranquilles* (Joachim Lafosse, 2021). She has also performed in plays including *Le Courage* (Catherine Schaub, 2019), *Moulins à paroles* (Mahlia Theissman, 2021), *Les Nuits d'Aurore* (Fabrizio Leva, 2021), *Moi je suis Rosa!* (Aude-Laurence Biver, 2021) and *La déclaration universelle des droits de l'Homme* (Jorge Andrade, 2022). In *TOTEM* she plays Ama's mother, Jaineba.



Iliass Ojja *Yassin*

Iliass Ojja has been acting for some time now. He started at the age of 16 in the film *Hush Hush Baby!* He heard about the casting session in the local community centre, and just managed to sign up for the audition. When the director told him they would be filming in Morocco, he was totally in. His performance in the role of Driss changed his life at a stroke: this was the launchpad for his career. Over the years he has appeared in films and series including *Dunya & Desie in Marokko*, *Pizza Mafia*, *Klem*, *Joardy Sitcom*, *Zina* and *Commandos*. In recent years he is known mainly as Taxi, because of his role in *Mocro Mafia*. Alongside acting, Iliass regularly steals the show in a range of gameshows such as *De Verraders* and *Expeditie Robinson*.



Bas Keijzer

Hein

Bas Keijzer was born on 31 March 1973 in Schoonhoven. He knew from an early age that he wanted to be an actor. Since graduating from drama school in Utrecht in 1999, Bas has been active as an actor in the theatre, films and on television. On the big and the small screen, Bas has performed in *Judas*, *Ninja Nanny*, *De Luizenmoeder*, *Smeris*, *High Tides* and *Aaf*, among others. Bas has also taken roles outside of the Netherlands, in the French film *Gangsterdamn*, the American production *Kill Switch* and the Swedish television series *Arne Dahl*. Alongside his television and film work, Bas often performs on stage in the Netherlands. In *TOTEM* he plays Thijs' father, Hein.



Kenneth Herdigein

Kouyaté

Kenneth Herdigein graduated in 1982 from the drama department of Amsterdam University of the Arts (1979 – 1982). He is a child of the ground-breaking Werktheater theatre company back then, where he worked for almost 5 years. Kenneth has played many lead roles in television series, including: *Op zoek naar Yolanda*, *Zeg 'ns AAA*, *We Zijn Weer Thuis*, *Unit 13*, *Overspel*, *Good Times*, *Bad Times*, *Vechtershart*, *The Spectacular* and from 29 September, Kenneth can be seen in the new series *The Crash*. Kenneth has also performed in films including *The Johnsons*, *Looking for Eileen* and *Johnny Bingo*, which in 2010 brought him a nomination for the Beeld & Geluid Awards in the category Best Actor for his role as Johnny. Kenneth has also played countless roles in the theatre, including with Het Werktheater, Het Zuidelijk Toneel, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, Het Noord Nederlands Toneel, ZEP-Theaterproducties. A number of other productions on which Kenneth has worked include *Amandla! Mandela*, *The Color Purple*, *De Suriname Monologen* and *Driving Miss Daisy*. In *TOTEM*, he plays Kouyaté.



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THE PRODUCER

Volva Films is a Rotterdam-based film production company that produces fiction, animation and documentaries, principally in the form of international co-productions. Their films tell unexpected stories with an original style or perspective. Recent titles include *TOTEM* (Sander Burger, 2022, 90', NL/LUX/DE, opening film Cinekid festival), *The Ghastly Brothers* (Michael & Andrew van Ostade, 2021, 100', BE/NL), *Dragon Girl* (Katarina Launing, 2020, Amanda Award Best Visual Effects), *Mrs. F* (Chris van der Vorm, 2020, One World FF Prague & Golden Calf Competition NFF), *The Mole Agent* (Maite Alberdi, 2020, nomination Academy Award® Best Documentary Feature) and *A Land Imagined* (Yeo Siew Hua, 2018, Locarno Film Festival – Winner Golden Leopard).

CREDITS

CREW

Direction	Sander Burger
Screenplay	Bastiaan Tichler, Sander Burger
Camera	Sal Kroonenberg NSC
Editor	Manuel Rombley NCE
Production design	Diana van de Vossenberg
Animatronics	Rob's Prop Shop
Sound recordist	Christoph Köpf
Composer	Amaury Laurent Bernier
Sound design	Jan Schermer
Costume design	Manon Blom
Make-up and hair design	Katja Reinert
Production	Volya Films (NL)
Producers	Denis Vaslin, Fleur Knopperts
Executive producer	Roos Smitt
Co-production	Donato Rotunno (Tarantula, LU), Anette Unger (Leitwolf, DE), Robert Kievit (BNNVARA), Holger Hermesmeier (NDR)
Distributor Netherlands	Periscoop Film
International sales	SKOOP Media

CAST

Ama	Amani-Jean Philippe
Thijs	Ole van Hoogdalem
Paula	Lies Visschedijk
Babacar	Emmanuel Ohene Boafo
Jaineba	Céline Camara
Abimbola	Liam Romney
Yassin	Iliass Ojja
Hein	Bas Keijzer
Kouyaté	Kenneth Herdigein
Ibrahim	Alpha Barry

With Ranomi Kromowidjojo

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