

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON**



LOVE ACCORDING TO DALVA
(Language: French)

Director: Emmanuelle Nicot, 2022. Running time: 87 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 11 October 2023.

“Made with painstaking care and sensitivity, this debut feature from Belgian film-maker Emmanuelle Nicot is about a child victim of grooming and rape who takes the side of her abuser; this is a 12-year-old girl called Dalva (Zelda Samson), whose father is arrested at the start. It’s an intense film about trauma and its devastating consequences. Nicot ignores the perpetrator to focus on the victim, a decision that makes this film just about bearable; I can’t think of another movie I was so reluctant to watch, but after it started, I couldn’t look away.

Love According to Dalva opens with a police raid. “Jacques!” screams Dalva – not “Dad!” – as her father is bundled out of the house. Dalva is driven to a foster home for teenagers where she is furious, insisting that her sexual “relationship” with her father is perfectly natural; they love each other. The other kids laugh at her clothes, which are deeply disturbing: like a middle-aged woman circa 1987, she wears pearl earrings and lace-trimmed dress, her father’s twisted fantasy of a classy lady.

Details of what happened to Dalva come in snatches of conversations between adult professionals assigned to her case; her father kept her locked away, moving frequently. But mostly the film unfolds from Dalva’s perspective as the scales fall from her eyes; by the end she is unrecognisable in a hoodie and jeans. It is all beautifully acted by Samson and the supporting cast, playing characters who feel like real people. Dalva’s roommate in the foster home is tough girl Samia (Fanta Guirassy). Her youth worker (Alexis Manenti) seems rough and uncaring at first, but he’s got the his kids’ backs. Dalva’s hyper-sexualised response to his care is a reminder of how vulnerable she is.

The film feels like it could have been inspired by real-life stories, such as Elisabeth Fritzl’s incarceration by her father. In interviews director Nicot has said she spent a long time researching the care system in France; that attention shows in her truthful-feeling and raw film.”

Cath Clarke, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2023

“In Emmanuelle Nicot's debut feature film, we follow a 12-year-old girl, the titular Dalva, who the authorities have forcefully taken away from her sexually abusive father Jacques. "Rescued" is what you would think, but Dalva is of another opinion, and wants nothing more than to be reunited with her father. Put in a safety shelter and surrounded by care, Dalva has to start a slow and arduous process of deprogramming herself from the years of brainwashing she received, which comes on top of the regular problems teenagers have when entering puberty. And, as her father has hidden her for years, she needs to learn anew how to deal with other kids, and even learn anew how to BE a kid.

Making a film about the subject of the sexual abuse of a minor, and the damage it does, must be a minefield. You cannot sugarcoat the subject or go for easy sentimentality, as that would seriously be a disservice to survivors. But neither can you show the kind of abuse discussed here, as it will quickly be unbelievably unwatchable at best and exploitative at worst.

Emmanuelle Nicot shows a way out: same as Hirokazu Kore-eda did with *Our Little Sister*, she only shows the aftermath. No flashbacks, no nightmares, no foreshadowing either. Just the harsh reality of the now, sometimes peppered with shocks, sometimes sweetened with moments of believable humanity. Even the pedophile Jacques is not pegged as a cartoonish monster here. Dalva never leaves the image. No discussions behind her back are shown. You follow her and her alone. And her growth from a young woman to a girl, strange as that sounds, is the main reason for watching this.

I want to say so much more but that would just be spoiling things, moments best discovered while watching it. Just know the film has won a shipload of awards already, and is currently a contestant for winning the audience award at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (**UPDATE: it won**). Currently, the viewers' rating of *Dalva* is 4.8 out of 5, an unfathomably high score which would have easily made it the winner at any other edition of the festival.

How do you get audiences behind you like that? Well, Nicot's approach of the subject helps, but a film like *Dalva* would still crumble without a strong lead performance. Enter Zelda Samson, who plays Dalva, and who may just be the best child actress ever. Never not believable, she is downright chilling as a brainwashed survivor, yet so strong and resourceful that you cannot help but root for her all the way. *Dalva* also shows that caregivers can only do so much, but at some point the survivor needs to participate in the healing process or nothing can be done.

Dalva is the best drama I have seen in years, hands down. It tells respectfully and clearly about a difficult subject, and all pitfalls are avoided. No easy

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lynchmobbing, no unpalatable sensationalism. Just a fantastic lead performance, and an honest, detailed look. This film comes highly, highly recommended.”

Ard Vijn, *ScreenAnarchy*, 1 February 2023.

“What is it that drives Belgian filmmakers to make sad and disturbing films about children? Is it the influence of the Dardennes Brothers, who over a 20-year career have made superb features exploring how brutally society treats its most vulnerable (*Tori and Lokita*, *The Kid with a Bike*, *The Child* among others)?

My Belgian friend Anne-Marie Huby drily observes of her countrymen: “We are very adept at despair.” Is that it? Or is it that Belgian directors makes plenty of jolly action movies, costume dramas and romcoms but they just don’t win prizes at film festivals and hit the arthouse circuit in the UK? Whatever the reason, almost a year after the release of the Belgian film *Playground*, [**shown in the DFS 2022/23 season**] which immersed the audience in the perspective of two siblings ostracised and bullied at school, comes *Love According to Dalva*. The two films share a naturalistic, observational style and both films were made by first-time directors, who have coaxed extraordinarily powerful performances out of their child actors.

We first meet 12-year old Dalva (Zelda Samson) at night when the police burst into the home she shares with her father. When they arrest him, she calls out his name, Jacques (Jean Louis Coulloc’h), rather than papa. It’s the first indication that something is amiss in their relationship. After being examined by a white-coated woman for physical evidence of sexual abuse, Dalva is taken to a children’s shelter. It transpires that the child has been missing since she was five. Her father kidnapped her and home-schooled her, changing address repeatedly.

She cuts an unusual figure in the children’s home, which is filled with young people whose families have failed to care for them. With her long, dyed hair piled up in a neat chignon, Dalva wears full make-up and the kind of outfits you’d expect to see on an adult woman wanting to make a ladylike impression. She seems much older than her years and tells the adults around her that she wants more than anything to be reunited with her father. Her new room-mate, Samia (Fanta Guirassi) has been placed in the home because her sex-worker

mother wanted to put her on the game. Initially dismissive of Dalva, with her seemingly superior airs and enduring love for her father, Samia warms to her over the course of the film but not before some clashes. Newly immersed among peers her own age for the first time not only in the children's home but at a new school, Dalva has to negotiate the callous curiosity of other youngsters, reminiscent of the torments experienced by the young leads in *Playground*. In interviews, Belgian writer-director Emmanuelle Nicot has described how she researched this, her debut film, by spending time in emergency reception centres dealing with abused children. She also talked to a friend's father, a teacher who realised that one of his pupils, a six-year-old girl living alone with her father, was highly sexualised. I have no criticism of the sincerity of Nicot's intentions, she has made a film that shows the devastating damage done to a child's sense of self when love for a parent is distorted by that adult's incestuous abuse. But I found myself wishing that the camera didn't dwell so much on how attractive Dalva is. There is nothing explicit on screen, this is no dodgy *Lolita* or *Pretty Baby*, but still, the lengthy close-ups of a child in full make-up and lacy costumes provoked in me the same queasy feeling I have about the lingering adult gaze in the recent arthouse hit, *Close* which dwelt on the beauty of two pre-pubescent male actors. **[To be shown 21st February 2024 as part of Dorchester Film Society's 2023/24 season.]**

I also wished that there had been less time spent on the complex relationship Dalva develops in the children's home with her key worker, Jayden, played by Alexis Manenti who brings some of the aggression and energy he deployed as a corrupt policeman in the brilliant *Les Misérables*. I would have preferred instead longer sessions with a therapist to be shown on screen. I longed to see trained professionals help Dalva and her mother (Sandrine Blancke) come to terms with what has happened to them rather than dramatic fireworks with Jayden.

And like last year's more didactic film, *La Mif*, set in a Swiss children's home, the representations of race seem inadequately considered. Was it necessary in *Love According to Dalva* to describe Samia, played by a young black actress, as a pitbull? Or cast another adolescent male actor, clearly of mixed heritage, as the one who makes a predatory sexual overture at the children's home to Dalva? He's physically reprimanded by white male saviour Jayden. The ascribing of precocious sexual maturity to children of ethnic origin in white European society is a shameful, damaging phenomenon and one that this film fails to address. The Dardennes brothers' *Tori and Lokita*, also partially set in a children's home, had a far more nuanced approach to racism. Because of these instances of what is undoubtedly unconscious bias rather than anything more pernicious, it's difficult to wholeheartedly praise *Love According to Dalva*,

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despite the director's sensitive portrayal of abuse and trauma and Zelda Samson's outstanding performance in the leading role."

Saskia Baron, *the arts desk.com*, 2 May 2023

"The title character of writer-director Emmanuelle Nicot's feature debut *Love According to Dalva* is not like other girls her age. The 12-year-old dresses like a "lady," as one of the girls at the youth shelter, she's been shipped to points out — by which she means like a woman much older. There are lace blouses and prim skirts, there are pearl earrings and a dowdy updo. Dalva (Zelda Samson) looks not so much like someone wanting to look older as she does like someone who doesn't know how to act her age. Nicot tracks the way Dalva will find her way back to being and feeling like the girl she is.

When we first meet Dalva, it's not immediately clear why she's so dissimilar from girls her age. This is because she's introduced to us as she's kicking and screaming as the police are taking an older man (her father, it turns out) away from her. "Jacques!" she yells. "Dalva!" he responds. The two are inconsolable as officers do their best to keep them apart and drop the young girl off at a youth center where all Dalva can do is wonder why anyone would want to keep her away from her father.

The answer to that question may not seem obvious to her, but it is to everyone else: To hear lawyers and social workers (and even schoolmates) tell it, Dalva has lived for years with a man who's led her to believe they are in love. The words "incest" and "pedophile" are thrown her way. She swats them away with aplomb. No one understands. She has not been forced into anything. There's been nothing untoward about her (sexual) relationship with her father. There are valid reasons, she believes, why she hasn't seen her mother in years, why she's been home schooled, why they've constantly been on the move, and why she's been kept so isolated from her peers.

Much of *Love According to Dalva* keeps audiences close to the character. Physically, for starters: DP Caroline Guimbal shoots many of the scenes at the youth center and at the school from an uncomfortably close range where Samson often takes over the entire shot. This leaves us with no kind of vantage point from which to understand what is happening around Dalva. At times it forces us to feel as disoriented as she is when accusations are thrown her way. Slowly, Nicot allows film and character alike to open up. To blossom, even. As she develops a closer friendship with her roommate Saima (Fanta Guirassy) and

begins to see her circumstances from other people's perspectives, Dalva begins to (try to) shed the worldview she's long considered natural about who she loves and, crucially, how she's let herself be loved.

Wading into such thorny territory, Nicot deserves to be commended for writing Dalva with care. There's no judgment in how she's conceived, let alone in how she's shot. The air of condemnation that sometimes greets her at school, by girls who cannot understand let alone empathize with her plight (the kind Saima suggests Dalva ignore altogether), stands in direct contrast with Nicot's interest in telling her story.

But credit must be given to Samson as well. The young performer is luminous as Dalva, able to capture the continued bewilderment that comes as this young girl reexamines everything she's ever known. It may well start with how she slowly sheds her ladylike exterior, swapping her grownup dresses for comfy sweatshirts, but it goes deeper. Samson slowly lets Dalva's skittishness mellow enough that child-like wide-eyed wonder becomes the appropriate way she starts to look at the world. It's a thrilling and gripping performance, moving just as easily toward a maturity in acknowledging what's happened to her while also retreating into the welcome and much-needed innocence of which Dalva has long been robbed.

Given its subject matter, you'd be forgiven for thinking *Love According to Dalva* would be a difficult watch. And it is, to an extent, with many a scene skirting particularly unsavory territory — especially when it comes to how Dalva interacts with the men around her. But the film also finds room for humor and laughter, for pathos and catharsis. Even as we follow this tightly wound-up girl who fears ever letting her guard down, Nicot encourages us to look at her not with pity but with grace. It's an astounding feat of filmmaking, particularly for the way it avoids facile moralistic or didactic approaches to telling Dalva's story. Instead, it does what cinema is so well-suited to accomplishing, allowing us to inhabit another person's consciousness by seeing the world through their eyes, their pain and even their trauma.”

Manuel Betancourt, *Variety*, November 22, 2022.