interviews

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European Children’s Film Association
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Photo: ALONE IN SPACE
What unites us...

...is in the focus of ECFA’s work, not what separates us. In these times, now that Great Britain is about to step out of the EU and populism and nationalism are on the rise in Europe, questioning ideas and ideals is more important than ever. I am very happy that this mindset is shared by so many in the children’s film sector! A warm welcome to the fifteen new members who joined ECFA in 2018 and the five who have already joined during the first month of the new year!

A lot of work is ahead of us – especially shaping the new Creative Europe Programme, raising awareness for the need of high quality children’s media and thus for more generation-equality among other European associations (such as distributors, cinemas, producers) and politicians. Furthermore we want to continue creating opportunities for you all to meet and exchange.

The difficulties we’re having to crop all information in the ECFA Journal’s usual size and format, is an indication of the variety and richness of our members’ activities. The article on involving children in pitching sessions proves that also within our industry there is still a lot to try out and explore. Like, finding various ways to make children participate in the creative processes (co-creation, which is also the main topic of discussion in this year’s KIDS Regio Meeting Point during the Berlinale) and thus strengthening, again, generation-equality.

In this sense, we wish you a wonderful 2019. Stay curious, brave & productive!

I am very much looking forward to seeing you all at the AGM on 9th February in Berlin.

– Margret Albers
ECFA President
Ted Kjellsson about ALONE IN SPACE
“Gimme two kids, an alien and a spaceship and I’ll make a great movie”

A giant spacecraft traveling with only two passengers on board: 12-year-old Gladys and her little brother Keaton, lingering around all day, heading towards a planet that never seems to come in sight. Until an unknown object crashes into the ship... Suddenly they are not alone in space anymore.

ALONE IN SPACE has an original format: a high-profile sci-fi adventure that is both epic (a space odyssey), intimate (two siblings in a close bond), scary (aliens firing space guns) and contemplative.

Ted Kjellsson: I like the ‘Astrid Lindgren in space’ tagline. Both co-author Henrik Ståhl and me grew up on Swedish children's literature by Astrid Lindgren, Maria Gripe, Ulf Stark... At the same time we were fed with big Hollywood movies made by Steven Spielberg and Ridley Scott.

How did you make those worlds meet?
Kjellsson: It might be difficult for a none Swedish person to recognise Astrid Lindgren in this film, but she is just in our DNA. We tell stories about the same themes, making them a bit darker, but still quite enjoyable. A Swedish children's film in a sci-fi context might sound like something new, but it’s just a mashup of ingredients from our childhood. In our heads this combination doesn’t seem surprising at all.

A lot of the film’s attraction is in the setting that you created from scratch.
Kjellsson: For Swedish standards the €2 million budget was quite modest. I have done a lot of commercials and I know about set design and special effects. I know how to build stuff and how to blow up stuff. It was a matter of producers fully trusting us. I saw the images in my head and nobody thought it would be doable, but we've build the first Swedish animatronics mask Vfx for a main character, and a 600 square meters big space ship.

A spaceship?
Kjellsson: In a studio, up north in Sweden. It was important for the kids to have a set with buttons and beepers and stuff to touch, instead of green screens. And we made the alien for real, so the kids could see and feel it and talk to it.

The design of the alien was crucial for this film. It's a human figure with limbs and clothes, it laughs and apparently snores exactly like I do.
Kjellsson: We wanted a humanoid creature. Surprisingly enough, my first reference was Nosferatu, later combined with the classic Area 51 alien (that was supposedly found in the American Nevada desert), a bit of Admiral Ackbar (STAR TREK) combined with the fifties comic book visuals. We wanted him to be part scary, part cute. Some even see ET in it, but I don’t. I love ET, but he is a small nudist.

There’s two siblings, taking care of each other in a particularly touching way.
Kjellsson: We’ve put a lot of effort in making them shine. Little Keaton (Dante Fleischanderl) has quite a hard part, hitting the alien in the head and still be likeable. Gladys (Ella Rae Rappaport) carries the movie on her shoulders and she pulls it off – like a Pippi Longstocking in space! She such a cool character, in an Ellen Ripley-kind-of-way. Ripley, as the first female action hero for me, was a milestone. I want to show my daughters and other young girls that they can kick ass. To make those main characters
work, we recorded half of the movie in chronological order. That made them truly experience the story. Their first meeting with the alien, really was the first time they saw Henrik in that suit.

Henrik? You forced your co-author into a suit to play an alien?
Kjellsson: Yup. He felt honoured, but in the end he had to go through a lot of training so that his neck could lift the six kilogram heavy helmet for eight hours per day, 15 days long. I somehow stopped noticing Henrik in there, I was directing the alien and forgot about that sweaty actor inside. I saw my dream coming true to have an alien on set, which was fun for me, but not for Henrik. Meanwhile Niklas Hermansson and Oscar Wallroth controlled the eyes and cheekbones of the animatronic. Their collaboration with Henrik was one of the key elements to make the film work, together with the kids being in a real spaceship. It all related to my first pitch, when I said: “Gimme two kids, an alien and a spaceship and I’ll make a great movie”. Everything comes back to that.

You did something daring and got away with it: you made the first 15 minutes of the film about being bored, without getting the audience bored.
Kjellsson: We’re demanding a lot of our young audience, but most of them enjoy those 15 minutes, because they feel some tension and mystery underneath. The first version was like Tarkovsky in space. We trimmed it down and planned it meticulously, but still it’s a risk to take.

What about the framework of the story, the escape from planet earth?
Kjellsson: The reason why they escape is a classic chain: an environmental catastrophe leading to war leading to poverty... We never go into detail about it, but it is connected to the environmental situation we are in today. An even bigger mystery is the role of the mother. She stole a spaceship to rescue herself and her kids, which is a harsh thing to do. But now she’s gone, and nobody knows how and why, leaving behind a daughter who has difficulties to cope with it. There’s more to the mother than you see in the film, she’s complex.

The final chase through the spaceship, with aliens firing space weapons at humans, is state-of-the-art sci-fi. How did you dose that excitement for a 7+ audience?
Kjellsson: Some seven-year-olds have seen lots of stuff, but since this is in their own language, it suddenly feels very close. We’re on a thin line there between scary and too scary. In the first test screenings we had a lot of the seven-year-olds running out of the theatre, in the last screening only one went out. We’ve made the music less scary and the aliens a bit more funny, talking in a Jabba the Hutt kind of way.

There must have been a temptation to make it scary as hell, just for the fun of it.
Kjellsson: This is my first feature, and I felt well-placed to make it a children’s movie: I have five kids myself, and I can still relate to my inner child. But deep inside I’m more of a slasher guy. My time will come when I’ll do my first slasher movie.

You have ‘Johnny Be Good’ on the soundtrack, because that song is on the golden record (that was sent into space in 1977 containing sounds and images to illustrate human life and culture on earth). What would be on your golden record?
Kjellsson: Some really weird Swedish jokes, combined with a very personal environmental message, like “Hé guys, don’t do what we did. Take it easy out there.”

– Gert Hermans

watch trailer
Throughout 2018 ECFA juries have nominated films for the ECFA Award in 17 festivals in and outside Europe. This prestigious title ‘Best Young Audience Film of the Year’ is voted by children’s film professionals in three categories: Feature, Short and Documentary.

The final awards are by almost 150 ECFA members’ votes and will be presented during the Berlinale. And the nominees are…

**NOMINATIONS FOR THE ECFA AWARDS**

**FANNY’S JOURNEY**  
*France, Lola Doillon*  
Nominated at the JEF Festival (Belgium)

**QUEEN OF NIENDORF**  
*Germany, Joya Thome*  
Nominated at Ciné-Jeune de l’Aisne festival (France)

**THE BREADWINNER**  
*Ireland, Nora Twoney*  
Nominated at Cinema in Sneakers (Poland)

**I AM WILLIAM**  
*Denmark, Jonas Elmer*  
Nominated at BUFF (Sweden), Oulu Children’s Film Festival (Finland), Ale Kino (Poland)

**SUPA MODO**  
*Germany/Kenya, Likarion Wainana*  
Nominated at Kristiansand Children’s Film Festival (Norway), Olympia Film Festival (Greece)

**TONGUE CUTTERS**  
*Norway, Solveig Melkeraaen*  
Nominated at Lucas Festival for Young Filmlovers (Germany)
### Nominated for the ECFA Award

#### THE WITCH HUNTERS
*Serbia, Rasko Miljkovic*
Nominated at Kino Dcieci Kids Film Festival (Poland)

#### LOS BANDO
*Norway, Christian Lo*
Nominated at Just Film Festival (Estonia), Smile Film Festival (India)

#### MATTI AND SAMI & THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE
*Germany, Stefan Westerwelle*
Nominated at Schlingel Film Festival (Germany)

#### WILDER THAN WILDERNESS
*Czech Republic, Marian Polak*
Nominated at Zlin Film Festival (Czech Republic)

#### LENNO & THE ANGELFISH
*The Netherlands, Shamira Raphaella*
Nominated at Filem’on Film Festival (Belgium)

#### APOLLO JAVAKHETI
*Georgia, Bakar Cherkezishvili*
Nominated at doxs! (Germany)

#### THE LITTLE ONE
*Czech Republic, Diana Cam Van Nguyen*
Nominated at Olympia Film Festival (Greece)
Nominated for the ECFA Short Award

LISTEN
The Netherlands, Astrid Bussink
Nominated at Oberhausen Short Film Festival (Germany)

THE HEDGEHOG’S HOME
Croatia, Eva Cvijanovic
Nominated at BAB Festival (Slovakia)

THE THEORY OF SUNSET
Russia, Roman Sokolov
Nominated at Olympia Film Festival (Greece)

FRUITS OF CLOUDS
Czech Republic, Katerina Karkankova
Nominated at Cinema in Sneakers (Poland)

PROVENCE
Belgium, Kato De Boeck
Nominated at Filem’on Film Festival (Belgium)

The ECFA Awards Price Ceremony will take place on 9th February in Berlin, during the Berlinale.
Priya Ramasubban about CHUSKIT
“We are what forms the fabric of society”

Chuskit has a very simple dream – going to school. That dream is cut short when she is rendered a paraplegic after an accident. She’s confined to life indoors in the company of her strict grandfather, who tries to make her understand that school can’t handle her needs. As life at home gets harder, she starts rebelling against the traditions of her family members and other elders in her remote Himalayan village. In a place that is paved only by rough stones, and a school that can only be reached by crossing a river, how can Chuskit ever make her dream come true? Director Priya Ramasubban travelled up to the Kashmir mountains to make a moving film about acceptance and resistance, and came back down with stories to tell and a strong case to defend, which she does with wisdom and passion.

The film opens with a colourful mandala that gets a deeper meaning as the story evolves.

Priya Ramasubban: Buddhism knows this concept of life as a circle. Everything that happens to you, whether it is good or bad, leads towards a change. Life will go on in a circle: things carry on until they’ll be destroyed and there will be a new beginning. It takes days to create a mandala that is so beautiful, but the same people who made it are bound to destroy it, so they learn to accept that nothing lasts forever. That summarises the film, I presume the audience will understand this mandala element from their heart. Don’t get stuck in your misery forever, but look forward to a new beginning. CHUSKIT tells a simple story, that doesn’t have many subplots. All films that have inspired me had that extra layer that motivated me to seek and learn beyond the film. I wanted to leave something with the audience that goes beyond the simplicity of the story.

The film is shot in Ladakh.
Ramasubban: CHUSKIT is inspired by a true story from that region, in the state of Kashmir. There are mountains up to 5,500 meters high, as high up as the base camp for Mount Everest. People there have maintained a very simple way of living, closely connected with nature. Suddenly that started to change, because it’s such a unique place and many tourists are coming during summer for hiking, trekking. Living in the mountains, far away from everything, these people have a very complete acceptance of Buddhism. “Whatever happens, happens. Don’t question changes, let’s accept them and move on.” That’s why I’m telling the story from a child’s perspective. Adults can rationalise things, while children still allow themselves to say “I really, really want this”, not seeing anything else but that one goal in life.
This friction between tradition and modernism is not a strictly Ladakh thing. It has been seen in so many traditional, rural communities around the world.

Ramasubban: Most insular communities often don’t embrace the coming of novelties. Traditional cultures sometimes react to changes by either saying “our way of being is the best” or “let’s give up our own way and move out”. My answer is different. Chuskit believes that a change is possible within the beautiful framework of where she lives. Don’t give up the old to seek the new, but find a happy coexistence of both. That was important to me.
What is so essential about life in those villages?
Ramasubban: It’s all about diversity. I travelled the world working for National Geographic and Discovery Channel and I saw how the Western Utopia is embraced everywhere. People dreaming of a new car or smartphone, that would make them look all “jazzy and snazzy”. That sort of homogeneity in my opinion is poor. There is so much more beauty to find in every country with a diversity of small subcultures that we hardly get to see at all, far away from the mainstream. There is a lot more to Ladakh than the visually arresting beauty.

Tradition is represented by Chuskit’s grandfather. How much authority does he have?
Ramasubban: He’s losing it, as many older people do. There is a saying: “If a tree can’t bend with the storm, it’s bound to snap.” The more rigid we are, the more likely we are to break. Granddad sees himself as the voice of tradition and religion: “Learn to accept what is determined for you. Why fight it?” Until in the end he realises he is the one fighting, who instead should be more accepting. He comes to a full circle in his transformation.

I was surprised that even if the authority is with the older people, the manners in Chuskit’s family leave a lot of room for discussion and debate.
Ramasubban: When having discussions among adults, often younger people will agree with the elders out of respect. But in many cultures you’ll see that once you stop being the main provider in terms of income, you’ll shift some of your authority to the next generation. In terms of the grandfather, now it’s his son and daughter-in-law who are the main decision makers. Actually in Ladakh people are much more gentle in the way they express authority, there is lots of love in the way they talk to their children. Chuskit is an exception. Most children behave much better then she does. But that wouldn’t have worked for the film, so I made her a bit more pushy.

How was it practically to shoot a film in such a remote place?
Ramasubban: Challenging! When shooting the winter scenes, the temperatures went down to -15°C. And there was the lack of oxygen, due to the height. I had made some mistakes when shooting in Ladakh before, so this time we went by the book. When the crew arrived, they had to lie down for two days. Every half an hour someone knocked on their door with a glass of warm water (because that carries extra oxygen). Afterwards everybody was in good shape. Having an entire crew lying down, doing nothing for two days has an impact on the budget. And yet we needed extra people to carry our equipment because we ran out of breath when we did it ourselves. But all these efforts paid off in pure beauty. When shooting in Ladakh you can’t make an ugly film! The scenery is simply too beautiful.

In its essence, CHUSKIT isn’t so much a film about physical disability.
Ramasubban: The overarching need in Chuskit’s life is not to get up and walk again, but to be included. Whether we talk about disabled people, ethnic minorities or people with different sexual orientations, they all want the same: to be included. “We are what forms the fabric of society. Don’t look at us like we are freaks.” Chuskit has been sitting there with her dreams squashed, while people keep on saying: “It’s alright. Don’t worry, we love you anyway.” With so much frustration inside, now her default position has become anger.
This entire scale of emotions, main actress Jigmet Dewa Lhamo acts out with not much more than her eyes.

Ramasubban: From the script, many people told me I could never find a child that can act like that. I was just incredibly lucky. Up in the mountains 30 children came and all got the same audition scene: you come back home from school very hungry, but the snack your mum is bringing, is not the one you wanted. All kids tried arguing and shouting but Jigmet just looked at the mother, pushed away the bowl with her elbow and turned her face away. That moment I said: “Let’s not audition anybody else. She’s the one.” Jigmet was almost 12 and living in a dormitory, her parents drop her off on Sunday and then pick her up again two weeks later. For one sad scene, I asked her to recall the moments they first left her at the boarding school. When she felt that sadness again, we cleared the room and said: “Keep with that emotion and give me your dialogue.” And she did.

Initially Chuskit and her grandfather are often framed by themselves, only later we see them more closely together, setting the emotional tone of the film.

Ramasubban: In large parts of the script, Chuskit sits isolated in the window, the outside world just one step away from her but still she can’t grab it. In the same room with her grandmother, yet they can’t bridge the gap. Only after she resolves the situation, you see her surrounded by people. And there’s a bridge, literally filling the gap between the two of them. My DoP Arvind Kannabiran should take the credit for the visual appeal. As a director, I explained exactly what I wanted and he and my Associate Director Rajesh Thanickan translated this into visually engaging frames.

Were you at certain moments in your life asked to live within your limitations?

Ramasubban: I was lucky. My parents never told us what to do, and I myself am more of an impulsive person. But I have noticed around me how people might often tell you about the roles you should fulfil. Limitations are often imposed artificially upon people, especially when you’re a girl. But I found out that when people get comfortable with what they truly want, you can get away with quite a lot.

– Gert Hermans
**FILM PITCHING WITH CHILDREN**

“ABBA look like scary aliens”

Why is ‘pitching with children’ such a brilliant idea? Because producers and screenwriters can get feedback from the target audience at the perfect moment: in full script development phase, when children’s advice can help to cut the cords. During pitching sessions with children this autumn in Amsterdam (Cinekid) and Riga (IFF) pitchers were just as nervous as enthusiastic about meeting their audience.

Organisers carefully monitor the discretion of children’s pitching sessions. Children dare to speak freely in a small, serene panel; adult busybodies should make themselves invisible or stay out. The pressure of a tight schedule can never be imposed upon the panel members. Lights are dimmed and pitchers sit face to face with the panel at a table or walk among the beanbags in which kids are lying comfortably. “I pitch exclusively for the panel, not for the room,” says Magdalena Rychla (THE DAY I MET MY SUPER-HERO). Sometimes panels take turns, which keeps the children fresh and alert. Panel members get full freedom. One wobbles his legs, and that is allowed. Another one can’t keep his hands off the cookies, and that is allowed too. One has brought his teddy bear, that is warmly welcomed to the panel.

Preschool projects are pitched for very young children, other panel members are between 8 and 12 years old. They all speak English perfectly; often these are children from bilingual families, because an interpreter wouldn’t work within the concept. Co-ordinator Thijs van der Laak (Cinekid): “We know very little about the background of our panel members. Those who register first are invited and we strive for a good mix of boys and girls.” Co-ordinator Thijs van der Laak (Cinekid): “We know very little about the background of our panel members. Those who register first are invited and we strive for a good mix of boys and girls.” Co-ordinator Thijs van der Laak (Cinekid): “We know very little about the background of our panel members. Those who register first are invited and we strive for a good mix of boys and girls.”

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It is important that children know why they are here. “Every project starts with an idea. We want to know what you think about our ideas.” Children should not feel any pressure on their shoulders, otherwise they might give ‘socially desirable’ answers “because that’s what professionals expect from me”.

**WHAT CAN BE THE BENEFITS OF SUCH A PITCH?**

The benefit of such a pitch with children, the pitchers have in their own
hands, depending upon their approach. Some screenwriters tell the entire story, others only make a start and then let the children take over. Preferably they choose one or two elements on which they want to go deeper with the panel.

1. Very specific answers to very specific questions

Everything depends upon your preparation. Casual questions like “do you think this movie will be fun?” or “would you like to see this movie?” yield little result. Fiona van Heemstra (JIPPIE NO MORE): “I was mainly looking for first impressions, but what I got was clear answers to very specific questions.”

Some pitchers focus on one element. For example, Gaetana Poponcini (SLOPIE) wants to know exactly how children deal with guilt. “Suppose you knew something that you didn’t tell others, would you feel guilty?” The children’s answers show a strong moral sense. “I would rather confess my secret and live honestly, than become rich and popular with a bad conscience.” In SLOPIE, it is all about an omniscient voice that prompts little Slopie to give the right answer to every question. “I would refuse it. I like to figure out things myself.”

Other very specific questions during the sessions included:
- For the Icelandic film ABBABABB!: “Do you find it funny when somebody farts on screen?” The answer is to guess: of course!
- In ABBABABB! the villains come from a hostile country, but “which are those bad countries?” According to the children, Germany, Russia, Iraq and North Korea are rogue states par excellence.
- For JIPPIE NO MORE: “Do you find it annoying if in some scenes the adults only talk to each other without including the children?”
- The authors of WHEN FISH START FLYING want to know if “a film about death is too serious for children.”

2. Creative solutions to various problems

Pitchers can surf along on the kids’ imagination and benefit from it. In Cinekid I once saw a complete new episode of a TV series taking shape, thanks to a skilful moderator mapping the main characters and their conflict zones for the children. Fifteen minutes later a scenario was completed: “The dog hates bathing so he escapes to go rolling into the mud etc.”

Dora Šuštitić (BLOCK 5) also tickles the panel’s imagination. Her basic question: How would YOU do it? When a playground must be protected against intruders, the children come up with all sorts of fences and booby traps. Fantasizing for a greater purpose!

3. Measuring the context of a story

Some story elements sound little familiar to children, especially when recalling the writer’s childhood years. Like in ABBABABB!, depicting a society divided into two camps: punk versus disco. But what do these subcultures mean to children of today? How do they react to a mood board with photos of rowdy punks and eccentric disco freaks? Scriptwriter Nanna Kristín Magnúsdóttir wants to know: who do you think looks more dangerous? The children all agree to the same photo. Among all the pictures of mohawks and leather jackets, they resolutely choose a photo of ABBA! “They look like weird, scary aliens.” They don’t understand why all grown-ups start laughing.

Christian Lo (LOS BANDO) is pitching JENNY’S TIME, about a girl discovering a family secret. The fact that there is a horse in the film is a nice bonus, but nothing works any better than time travelling! That’s the ultimate,
the panel says! Popular themes easily come to the surface. „I love fishes but I hate football“ or „I think time-travelling is great but dying is scary“. In the light of the Belgian project HERE BE MONSTERS, about a fisherman’s daughter, an intense discussion follows about the cinematic appeal of jellyfish and cuttlefish.

4. Emotional orientation

For JIPPIE NO MORE, about a child with Down syndrome, director Margien Rogaar (SCRAPWOOD WAR) tests the emotional spectrum of her target audience. „How do you behave when you are angry? Do you want to be comforted or left in peace?“ Her most important question is: How does it feel to be different? „Some children in the panel were ‘different’ themselves. They told me: It’s not easy to fit in when you’re different, but sometimes you can make it happen.“

Line Hatland asks for advice when making her mind up on KIDS CUP, a documentary zooming in on some participants of a youth football tournament. What does the panel think is important: Football, the lives of the children or the broader context? Based on a trailer, she can even find out which characters kids want to find out more about.

Pitchings with children prove their usefulness time and time again. Some screenwriters change the course of their story on the spot, some producers add new ambitions to their checklist (Sasha Kirienko is advised by the panel to invest in cross-media applications for RING OF LIFE) or see their ideas confirmed. And the panel? After a job well-done they quickly swallow the last cookies.

– Gert Hermans

A hot summer under a burning sun... it’s impossible to escape from the heath on a film set. While working on BINTI, Frederike Migom’s first feature-length film, actors are constantly looking for shelter under large parasols. „Fortunately, I function better in the heat than in the cold. And soon the young actors will get a chance to cool off in the neighbours swimming pool."

11-year-old Binti has a special career dream. She wants to become a famous vlogger. Until one day, together with her dad, she has to run and hide from the police, who threatens them with deportation from Binti’s native country. Seeking shelter in an abandoned tree house she meets Elias and the two become friends. Binti promises to help her companion in his one-man battle for a better cause, named the ‘Save the Okapi Club’. Meanwhile an ingenious plan starts taking shape in Binti’s brain: dad should marry Elias’ mum...

Today a dance scene is recorded. According to the script, musician Baloji

© IFF – Andrejs Strokins

Dancing off the beat

We meet producer Katleen Goossens (Bulletproof Cupid) on the set in a quiet and fancy neighbourhood in the Antwerp suburbs. „This street is a popular film location. People here are used to the presence of film crews. The owners of this house are extremely relaxed about things, while actually we are turning the whole building upside down. We also filmed at the airport in full holiday season, which appeared to be rather complicated. Since 9/11 airports have become less keen on such challenges. Moreover in times of full capacity, all airplanes are in use."

BINTI Director Frederike Migom

ON THE SET

BINTI: The heat is on
should clumsily dance off the beat. Director Frederike Migom energetically shows how she wants it to be done and boosts the actors’ energy level. As demanding as passionate, she feels like a fish in water on her first feature set. Migom: “I love working with actors. Especially the children should feel relaxed on set. Bebel Tshiani (Binti) and Mo Bakker (Elias) are the best. Discipline, professionalism, perseverance, cheerfulness... they have it all. They have flair, they fit together on screen and their acting is excellent.”

Full time bogeyman

Children’s coach An Vandevelde: „Child actors might often feel a bit lost and displaced on a film set. Not with BINTI! I am their 24/7 intermediary with the director. I once worked for an English production, where rules are much stricter and children under all circumstances must have access to their private toilet and relaxation room. Here things are a bit more loose. On the second shooting day we did this very emotional scene, with an interrogation in a police car. The air conditioning had to be switched off and together with the temperature emotions were rising. Afterwards they needed a break. What is so nice about this set is that such things are possible at any time when needed.”

On the set An Vandevelde’s role is much bigger than ‘a fancy babysitter in disguise’. With her background in theatre, she helps the children preparing for their roles. „I am proud of this position, but I don’t want to be a full time bogeyman. Some days I keep more distance, actors and crew members themselves must learn to take responsibility.”

Decriminalising

For Frederike Migom, BINTI is a platform to pass on her message of social commitment. „I want to decriminalise the phenomenon of illegal immigrant workers. Often these families are striving for a normal life here.” Baloji, playing the role of Binti’s father (and actually being Bebel’s father in real life), agrees. „This children’s film brings up plenty of things that are relevant to an adult audience. It is a story about integration and about lives that are broken by political decisions. We have not won that battle yet; there is still work to be done.” In Belgium he is known as a socially inspired rapper and mentor of a whole generation of young musicians.

All the time a burning sun is hanging over the film set. But the house next door has a swimming pool and there is a promise that by the end of the day, they’ll all be allowed to take a dip in the cool water. That motivates them now. Frederike Migom: „The heat is somehow problematic for us. Last week we filmed a street party at 35°C with many extras (the whole neighbourhood showed up) costumes, dance sequences, two cameras... that was intense. A lot of hard work has been done, but I truly enjoy it. Everyone seems to feel comfortable and happy, which will surely shine through in the final result.” Look forward to the next spring season (Belgian domestic release: April 3rd), when all those shiny happy actors can be seen in a movie that is full of colour, vital energy and social empowerment.

– Gert Hermans
A wide and grey countryside, mountains, sheep, cows and potato fields – this is the scenery of Javakheti, a poor and isolated region in Georgia. Against this backdrop Bandura's horizon is so much wider: he wants to become an astronaut.

Bandura lives with his mother under simple conditions in a small village in Javakheti. Since his father’s death, he has had to take on several jobs in addition to his time spent at school. His life seems to be as grey and harsh as the environment he lives in, however, Bandura is filled with an endless imagination and great hopes for the future. Watching him building his own spaceship out of trash, hearing him talk about financing a journey to the USA in order to study cosmonautics, you will get the impression that flying to the moon is not just a naïve kid’s dream. It gives Bandura the strength to cope with his everyday challenges. Becoming an astronaut would mean escaping the drab monotony of everyday life, bad prospects and poverty in Georgia.

With only few words the film manages to give the audience an idea of the protagonist’s life and his vision for the future. The atmosphere is created by images of a bleak landscape, including the sounds in the background: bleating sheep and cows, that constitute the livelihood of the villagers. Bandura has a tough daily routine, working on the farm and in a local cheese factory. The camera follows him through his everyday activities: while going to school, milking the cows, tending the sheep, picking potatoes and shovelling dung, he always finds time to watch the moon and to continue building his own spaceship.

Director Bakar Cherkezishvili shows the protagonist’s everyday duties equally to his efforts in crafting a spaceship out of trash and scrapped stuff he finds everywhere around. This evokes the impression that for Bandura reaching for the stars is not only a dream but a realistic plan: “I will fly to the moon” – hearing his statement, you simply have to believe him.

APOLLO JAVAKHETI was nominated for the ECFA Doc Award at the doxes! festival, where the documentary award has now been presented for the third time. ECFA honoured the Best European Children’s DocumentarY at the award ceremony in Duisburg in November 2018.

The Doxspot column is published with the help of the doxes! festival for children & youth documentaries (Duisburg, Germany), www.do-xs.de.
Jens Pedersen about KIDS ON THE SILK ROAD: HORSE FEVER
“People showered in success are usually quite boring”

Daniar (12) lives on a farm in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, in an endless, open landscape. One day his father gives him a wild, young stallion to tame. Overjoyed and proud, Daniar takes on the challenge but his beloved horse has a bad temper and has to be put down after a dramatic incident. Daniar loses what he loves the most…

In a Q&A after the screening at the doxs! festival, Jens Pedersen addresses the audience in a very convincing German language. “After my graduation I worked a few months as a waiter in Hamburg.” But that was long before he took off on another, impressive journey, along the Silk Road.

Even if KIDS ON THE SILK ROAD: HORSE FEVER is a moving and deeply personal film, what makes it stand out as well is the beauty of an utterly cinematographic landscape. Jens Pedersen: You might call that a coincidence, as I didn’t consider it much. For films like this one, you only consider the character and the evolution it is going through. But I have to admit that of the five Silk Road films we made, this one is visually by far the most beautiful. When filming in these mountains and valleys, it was so calm and quiet that it felt like we were shooting indoors instead of outdoors, even if the space was so big.

When it’s all about the character, then why was Daniar the perfect one to pick?
Pedersen: In a documentary casting you meet many children that are – so to speak – just children, sons of their fathers, daughters of their mothers. They haven’t found their own voice yet. When I first met Daniar, I didn’t see much of a special character in him. Until the horse was mentioned.

“My father bought me a horse and he has great expectations! It is wild and hard to control, but I try to please it all the time.” That’s when all bells start ringing! This child is moving towards something that is not necessarily going to succeed, which makes him more interesting. People showered in success, succeeding all the time, are usually quite boring, because they never get to reflect on their defeats.

Did you see defeat coming straight away?
Pedersen: No, I wasn’t counting on the horse to die. You never plan for defeat. I was counting on Daniar to go through some hardships before finally riding towards the sunset on the back of his horse. But it didn’t turn out that way. There’s another film in this series about a guy living on a beach in Bangladesh who wants to become a surfer. He signs up for a competition he is expecting to win, and when he loses, that makes him grow a lot as a character.

This film is part of a series named ‘Kids on the Silk Road’. Pedersen: So far we made five films and we’re aiming to finance 10 more. In each country we had collaborators suggesting us children to meet. But out of every 20 candidates, often only one child seems suitable for a documentary.

So you don’t believe in the myth that every child has a story to tell?
Pedersen: Maybe every child has, but
not necessarily a cinematographic story that can be expressed through actions and pictures. It’s all about children that rise up to the challenges of life. In every individual story we’re looking for a universal element. In this case Daniar learns about the hardships of love. He thinks love (for a horse) is about always being mild, not setting any limits. But sometimes love will incite you to be strict. Otherwise – like in Daniar’s case – you might lose what you have.

All these stories are located along the Silk Road trail?
Pedersen: All throughout history there was never ‘one single Silk Road’ – it was a maze of roads connecting countries. For us this road signifies an evolution in emotions, or in maturity. We’ve taken the liberty to interpret the actual Silk Road as a trail towards the development of an individual.

Going to Kyrgyzstan, you must have been pretty sure to end up with a film about horses.
Pedersen: Not necessarily. We could as well have made films about poverty, or street vendors, or about their specific interpretation of Islam. It is indeed a horse-riding country but many people’s attention meanwhile has shifted from horses towards cars, believe me. Daniar has a warm heart for animals, but it’s not embedded in their culture, on the contrary. Like his father tells him: don’t get emotionally involved with a horse, because you might end up eating it. The scenes in which Daniar saves a dove from the hands of his classmates, are his personal resistance towards his father’s message, and we kind of juxtaposed that in the editing.

The boy has a particularly beautiful narrator’s voice.
Pedersen: It’s like all the time he is telling you a secret. Many people in Kyrgyzstan talk like that, which makes it very pleasant to listen to them.

How should I imagine your conversations with the boy?
Pedersen: We started with preliminary interviews, just sitting in the haystacks chatting around. The next step is carefully talking your way towards the film structure: What would you usually do on a day like this? Gradually you learn more about your character’s daily life and you can pinpoint certain scenes and locations. At some point you have to wait for something to happen that could be the climax of your story. And afterwards you might fill in some blanks with elements that you absolutely need to fit the story together.

Knowing that all the questions from the audience would refer to the killing of animals, you proactively started questioning them about it in your Q&A today.
Pedersen: These kids were so small, I was afraid the film could have been too scary for them. But actually I suppose that a child can tell any possible sinister story to another child, as long as there is a solution in the end. Children can tell each other gruesome things, and I can show that in a film, as long as it ends with a positive reflection on what happened. That’s why at the end we show Daniar’s new horse.

What can we further expect from the Silk Road project?
Pedersen: We have about 2/3 of the financing in place but the last bit is hard to find. As partners and stakeholders, there is our national Danish broadcaster, Arte, the Danish and Norwegian Film Institutes, and the Dutch TV channel IKON has bought some episodes. We have just started production again, together with the other directors Simon Lereng Wilmont, Kaspar Astrup Schröder and Camilla Magid. With Toolbox Film now we have a bigger production company on board. With their qualifications and enthusiasm, we can charm the birds out of the trees.

– Gert Hermans
**ALONE IN SPACE**
Feature Film, Sweden, 2018
Director: Ted Kjellsson
Prod.: Nice Drama AB
World Sales: TrustNordisk Film Int.
Sales Phone: +45 36 86 87 88
info@trustnordisk.com
www.trustnordisk.com

**THAT BOY NEEDS FRESH AIR**
Feature Film, Germany, 2018
Director: Carolina Link
Prod.: UFA Fiction, Warner Bros. Film Prod. Germany
World Sales: Picture Tree Int.
Phone: ++49 30 42 08 24 80
pti@picturetree-international.com
www.picturetree-international.com

**BEFORE THE DAY BREAKS**
Feature Film, Latvia, 2018
Director: Roze Stiebra
Prod. & World Sales: Locomotive Prod.
Phone: +371 29 29 86 67
office@locomotive.lv
www.locomotive.lv

**BILLÉ**
Feature Film, Latvia, 2018
Director: Inara Kolmane
Prod.: Film Studio Devini, Masterfilm, Magic Lab, a.o.
World Sales: Film Studio Devini
Phone: +371 67 24 16 88
devini@parks.lv
www.devini.lv

**DILILI IN PARIS**
Animation, France, Belgium, Germany 2018
Directors: Michel Ocelot
Prod.: Nord-Ouest Films, Studio O, Mars Films, a.o.
World Sales: Wild Bunch
Phone: +33 1 43 13 22 54
fbeauville@wildbunch.eu
www.wildbunch.biz

**GAME’RS RULES**
Feature Film, Belarus, 2018
Director: Igor Chetverikov
Prod. & World Sales: Belarusfilm
Phone: +375 17 267 10 02
belarusfilm@mail.ru
www.belarusfilm.by

**HEAVY TRIP**
Feature Film, Finland, Norway, Belgium, 2018
Directors: Jukka Vidgren & Juuso Laitio
Prod.: Making Movies Oy, FilmCamp, Umedia, a.o.
World Sales: LevelK
Phone: +45 48 44 30 72
tine.klint@levelk.dk
www.levelk.dk

**HOPE YOU’LL DIE NEXT TIME :-)**
Feature Film, Hungary, 2018
Director: Mihály Schwechtje
Prod.: Amego Film, KMH Film, Proton Cinema
World Sales: KMH Film
Phone: +36 1 41 40 885
info@kmhfilm.com
www.kmhfilm.com

**THE ICELANDIC GANG**
Feature Film, The Netherlands, 2018
Director: Mans van den Berg
Prod.: NOBS
World Sales: Attraction Distribution
Phone: +1 514 846 12 22
info@attractiondistribution.ca
www.attractiondistribution.ca

**THE INVISIBLE BOY – SECOND GENERATION**
Feature Film, Italy, 2018
Director: Gabriele Salvatores
JACOB, MIMMI AND THE TALKING DOGS
Animation, Latvia, Poland, 2019
Director: Edmund Jansons
Prod.: Atom Art, Letko
World Sales: New Europe Film Sales
Phone: +48 503 03 51 63
kat@neweuropefilmsales.com
www.neweuropefilmsales.com

THE LITTLE COMRADE
Feature Film, Estonia, 2018
Director: Moonika Siimets
Prod.: Riina Sildos, Amrion Prod.
World Sales: Eyewell
Phone: +4670 733 28 55
info@eyewell.se
www.eyewell.se

LOUIS & LUCA – MISSION TO THE MOON
Animation, Norway, 2018
Director: Rasmus A. Sivertsen
Prod.: Maipo Films
World Sales: Sola Media
Phone: +49 711 96 89 44 40
post@sola-media.com
www.sola-media.com

PACHAMAMA
Animation, France, Luxembourg, Canada, 2018
Director: Pierre Godeau
Phone: +44-20 72 87 19 00
info@scfilmsinternational.com
www.scfilmsinternational.com

PAT AND MAT: WINTER FUN
Animation, Czech Republic, 2018
Director: Marek Beneš
Prod.: Patmat Film
World Sales: Attraction Distribution (see contacts above)

PHANTOM OWL FOREST (aka: EVA’S CHRISTMAS MISSION)
Feature Film, Estonia, 2018
Director: Anu Aun
Prod.: Luxfilm, Kinosaurus
World Sales: Attraction Distribution (see contacts above)
www.eiafilm.ee/

POWER TO THE CHILDREN
Documentary, Germany, 2018
Director: Anna Kersting
Prod. & World Sales: Anna Kersting Filmprod.
Phone: + 49 30 23 93 07 46
info@powertothechildren-film.com
www.powertothechildren-film.com

ROMY’S SALON
Feature Film, The Netherlands, Germany, 2019
Director: Mischa Kamp
Prod.: Bos Bros., Leitwolf Prod., NDR, a.o.
World Sales: Attraction Distribution (see contacts above)

More information on all these films you will find on our website:
In this coming-of-age film Daniel starts to realise while playing ‘cops and robbers’ with his friends, that there is more to life than catching and getting caught. Like, the chance to approach the girl he likes.

When playing cops and robbers, the anxiety of getting caught causes a certain thrill. But in this case the initial situation already creates a tension among the players: Daniel is interested in Carla, who shows up at the playground with Christian, making Daniel, his best friend Kai and Christian equally jealous. A constellation loaded with excitement, which over the course of a day will discharge more and more.

Florian Maubach’s graduation film COPS AND ROBBERS (Germany, 2017) won the Deutscher Kurzfilmpreis (German Short Film Award) 2018 in the category ‘Best Animation Film under 30 Minutes’ and has been screened in festivals all over the world.

COPS AND ROBBERS is a very personal testimony, about the transition period between child and adulthood, and is available at the Shortfilm Distribution Office of the KurzFilmAgentur, Hamburg.

COPS AND ROBBERS
Director, script & production: Florian Maubach, music: Jonathan Schwenk, Germany, 8’15”.
Contact: verleih@shortfilm.com.

The Short Cut column is published with the help of the Mo&Friese KinderKurzFilmFestival dedicated to short films. As a part of the Hamburg Short Film Agency the festival aims to present documentaries and experimental films in addition to animation and short films as well as to arouse the curiosity of children and to stimulate their imagination.
Claus Räfle about THE INVISIBLES
“He said: Now make something good out of it”

Claus Räfle’s docu-drama tells about four young Jews, two women and two men going underground in Berlin, after the Nazis officially declared the city to be “free of Jews” in February 1943. Of those 7000 “invisibles” 1700, mainly young people, managed to survive in a climate of fear, insecurity and ill-founded hope. With fake identity papers, without food rations or safe accommodations, relying on their brave aides, whom Räfle commemorates with this film.

Four Jewish survivors learned that sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight, thus dodging the Gestapo and their network of informants, knowing that death was just one mistake away. Living so recklessly in the middle of Berlin, they became practically invisible to the Nazi regime. THE INVISIBLES mixes dramatic reenactment with interviews with the real survivors whose lives inspired the film.

Claus Räfle: In 2004, I made a TV documentary about a Nazi brothel, in which the young Jewish Rosalie Janson survived as a house clerk. The so-called Salon Kitty near to the Kurfürstendamm was frequented by high Nazi dignitaries such as Minister Ribbentrop and guests such as Mussolini and Count Ciano, who were systematically spied on. Janson’s story gave me and my wife, co-author Alejandra Lopez, the idea of searching for more ‘invisibles’ and tell their inherently exciting survival adventures.

How did you further develop that idea?
Räfle: We started reading biographies, most of which had been written by the persons concerned or by their (grand) children. We found many cross-references to wonderful humanitarians, who have all been honoured as “righteous among the people” in the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem, but also to a Jewish “rat” like Stella Goldschlag, who snitched on many of her fellows to the Gestapo.

Then how did you find your interviewees?
Räfle: Historians Barbara Schieb and Beate Kosmala of the ‘German Resistance/ Silent Heroes’ Memorial were of great help. After we had convinced them of our project, they provided us with information, recommendations and addresses. The first one we called was Eugen Friede, who lived in Germany after an adventurous life in the DDR, GDR and Canada – he died in October 2018 at the age of 92 years. As a typical Berliner he was a bit rough, but finally we were allowed to come,
taking some biscuits with us. Only a week later, at our own expense, since we didn’t get funding yet, we went back with our equipment, a cameraman and a sound engineer and spent two days talking about his life in the post-war period, interrupted only by a lunch. When we were done, he looked at me and said: “Man, I’ve told you my entire story, now make something good out of it.”

What about the other protagonists?
Räfle: All in all, we spoke with ten survivors - including Inge Deutschkron, whose moving story has already been adapted many times. We went for lesser-known stories: those of Eugen Friede and Cioma Schoenhaus, the orphan Hanni Lévy and doctor’s daughter Ruth Arndt. She and her friend Ellen worked as housemaids for a colonel who organised in his villa tastings for officers with black market goods. Colonel Wehlen was like a more ambivalent Schindler character who impressed his customers with French delicacies, wines and pretty girls, whom he thus offered a chance to survive. The Arndt-Gumpel family right after the war migrated to New York, Cioma Schoenhaus managed to escape by bicycle across the Swiss border where he opened a graphic agency, and Hanni Lévy was taken to Paris by an uncle who had found her on a Red Cross list of displaced persons. All of them have become 90 years and older.

How did you find your actors?
Räfle: We developed profiles according to the real-life individuals. Ruby O. Fee is an extraordinary talent I once spotted in a TV crime story. Passport forger Max Mauff had played a servile employee in a GDR ministry in Spielberg’s BRIDGE OF SPIES. He had an uncanny resemblance to the original and hid his feelings behind a “perfect cousin” facade. I thought his quick physicality was brilliant. Aaron Altaras (as Eugen Friede) already attracted attention as a child when playing the role of a German-Jewish boy on television. And Hanni Lévy recognised herself in the wonderful Alice Dwyer. We wanted the feature film to have its own power and beauty, not simply running alongside the documentary narrative. A casting agency proposed us actors that granted authenticity to even the smallest roles.

In a supporting role we see the recently deceased Andreas Schmidt in his last performance.
Räfle: He plays the wonderful humanitarian Hans Winkler, a humble justice employee, who accepted young Eugen Friede into his family, thus endangering his wife and children. Through him and his companions, we wanted to show that helping people in need was possible. This also applies to the situation today, now a populist whirlwind is drastically changing the social climate in many European countries. That is why our story has obtained a timeless relevance and the feeling about it is completely different from how it would have been ten years ago.

Did you think of a documentary from the very beginning?
Räfle: First we wanted to make a normal TV documentary. When taking this plan to different TV stations, I got nothing but refusals. Apparently that kind of film already had been done a thousand times before. ARD and ZDF had contributed a lot to that tradition, however, in 2009 and 2010 there was a general consensus that the audience had seen enough of it. Even if I could sense the uniqueness of our stories and their strong emotional impact, more and more it felt like I was trying to sell plutonium. Facing our defeat, we considered how to develop a more intense emotional power in order to reach out to a larger audience. That’s when the idea came up to combine documentary with feature
In the interview, Räfle talks about the challenges of getting the film distributed and the impact it has had. He also reflects on his background as a filmmaker and expresses his hope that the film contributes to a greater awareness of history and its lessons.

**Film to your protagonists?**
Räfle: Only Eugen Friede and Hanni Lévy were at the premiere in October 2017. Cioma Schoenhaus died a few months before filming began, but his children and grandchildren were there and Mrs. Arndt-Gumpel, who seemed so incredibly vital in the interview, died as well, but her sons were there. For these families, the movie is a true salute, and they are very proud and happy about it. Hanni Lévy is 94 now and she’s coming with us to the New York première of the film in January 2019.

**What wish do you have for THE INVISIBLES?**
Räfle: I’m already very happy about its widespread distribution. It’s fantastic how many countries the film has been screened in cinemas, on TV, as video on demand and at festivals... Many young people, four or five generations after the war, have witnessed the crimes of the Nazi era, that go so far back that they almost seem unreal to us. It is so important that history will not repeat itself. In this respect, our story feels very contemporary, now that societies can suddenly take a drastic turn, as you see in Brazil, where a right-wing populist has become president. It is crucial to protect the achievements of liberal democracy – and THE INVISIBLES might contribute to that awareness. That is the legacy of these four brave ‘invisibles’ whose interviews made it possible that many young people can see their story. In Germany, the film has reached almost 100,000 viewers with 54 copies, which is a lot for this type of film.

**What is your background as a filmmaker?**
Räfle: Since the beginning of the 90s I have made socio-political historical documentaries for public television, as well as several satirical works. I’ve always wanted to do something fictional, but once you start making documentaries, that almost becomes impossible. Due to THE INVISIBLES, now that chance has come. I am currently working on two fiction projects based on true stories: one set after the end of World War II and one contemporary story.

**Is there something more you want to add?**
Räfle: Television stations and Film Funds these days in the first place seem to look at what the major companies are producing. The whole sector has embraced a sort of industrial feel, it’s about brands and formats. I think those in charge at public broadcasters and cinemas should use their wonderful ability to create programmes in a more creative and open-minded way.

– Uta Beth
DUTCH FEATURES HITS MARKET WITH FOUR TITLES

BEARS LOVE ME
Eight year old Jip’s dream comes true when the family goes on holiday to America to spot wild bears. But too late the family realises adventures in the wild are not everyone’s cup of tea. Jip is determined to see bears, her favourite animals, and goes rogue on a solo adventure. Every time her family is about to catch up with her, Jip takes a different turn. Only in the end Jip realises she is also like a cub that needs mommy bear...
*Family adventure (85’), director: Eva M. C. Zanen, producer: Topkapi Films.*

TAIKI
The last thing Bruno wants is a family digital detox holiday! He just wants to play games with his online friends. During the road trip Bruno’s parents lose their patience, giving him a road side time out. Bruno disappears into the Swedish forest where he learns that the real world can be as beautiful and exciting as the virtual world.
*Family adventure (86’), director: Mirjam de With, producer: Fiction Valley.*

SUMMER WITH RANA
Suzan is spending the summer holidays with her grandmother while her mother goes to Syria as a war reporter. She bonds with Rana, a Syrian girl living in a nearby refugee camp, much to the disapproval of her friends.
*Family drama (68’), director: Sanne Vogel, producer: JoCo Media.*

AFTERLIFE
After a bike accident, Sam (14) is incredulous when waking up in the afterlife. There she can reunite with her mother whom she has missed so much. Sam is given the choice to stay or to return to earth. She decides to stay but then changes her mind, hoping to reverse events in this new life.
*Youth drama (93’), director: Willem Bosch, producer: Pupkin Film.*

Contact info: Fulko Kuindersma (Acquisitions & Marketing for Dutch Features), +31 23 88 80 168, fulko@dutchfeatures.com.

Holland’s leading Global Content distribution company Dutch Features is one of ECFA’s new members. During this year’s Berlinale, the sales outfit hits the European Film Market with four brand new family titles. From touching, nature-tinted coming-of-age drama to elaborate fantasies and technology based fables, each film continues Dutch Features’ tradition of bringing first-class family films to the world, inspiring young generations and making our complex world just that little bit easier for them to digest. This is what the new harvest looks like:
The doxs! festival in Duisburg this year organised an experts debate on the support for new documentary initiatives for children and youth, on the level of both production and visibility, in co-operation with the Förderverein Deutscher Kinderfilm (Outstanding children’s films, Margret Albers), the Filmbüro NW (Bettina Braun) and the GRIMME Academy (Aycha Riffi). Special guest was German filmmaker (and member of the ECFA Jury) Joya Thome (QUEEN OF NIENDORF).

The title of the event is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that the utopian society in which every individual can artistically deliver, as conjured by Karl Marx, is not a given fact. As a result, filmmakers – always depending on finances for their next film – have to earn a living through their “hobby”. On the other hand, there was positive news to share. According to Margret Albers, the “Outstanding children’s films” initiative, founded in 2013, has managed to sensitize the audience for original film content. Keeping track with the international tendencies, for instance with the ECFA Doc Award, from this year on for the first time documentary projects are also welcomed within the new tender, alongside animation and live action features. And the region of North Rhine-Westphalia grants a six month scholarship for research and development on documentary films. Not only projects in production can be submitted, but also ideas in an embryonic stage. Bettina Braun (Filmbüro NW): “The first tender showed that it’s not the content for young children that we’re lacking most, but projects for youngsters aged under 14.”

Young filmmaker Joya Thome spoke about her experience with the production and acclaim of her feature debut QUEEN OF NIENDORF, that was made without any financial support – an exception hopefully not to become the general rule. Her next project will be a documentary film supported by BKM (Federal Government for Culture & Media) and the Kuratorium Junger deutscher Film (Board of Trustees Young German Cinema) about a group of girls aged 11 to 14 that became famous as so-called influencers on YouTube. But to keep track with the age of her protagonists, she needs funders’ decisions (governmental or private) to be taken fast.

It was no surprise that in the closing debate, good quality of films was assigned as the first priority. Over the last years we’ve recognised multiple developments and achievements, most of them heading in the right direction. Meanwhile new challenges occur, due to the changes in the viewing habits, that also force cinemas to seek for themselves a new role. Especially for documentary films, production slots should be short, not to lose track with the age of your protagonist or the profile of your subject. This means that TV programmers and funders should show a little more trust and courage, and should be willing to take a risk once in a while.

– Holger Twele
ESTONIAN CHILDREN’S FILMS BEAT BOX OFFICE

Last December, PHANTOM OWL FOREST topped THE GRINCH and gained more than 100,000 admissions within less than a month. In January 2019 LOTTE AND THE LOST DRAGONS, an animated adventure having its international premiere in the Berlinale’s Generation section, saw a prolongation of that success. Puppet film CAPTAIN MORTEN AND THE SPIDER QUEEN is currently travelling the festivals worldwide. Local children’s films are nailing it in Estonia!

PHANTOM OWL FOREST, directed by Anu Aun, is considered to be the very first Estonian Christmas film. It perfectly gets you into a winter holiday mood, but stands the test in every season. 10 year old Eia spends the holidays on a farm in South Estonia. There, in a winter wonderland, Eia starts her quest to save a primeval forest. The film deals with forgiveness, love, and the importance of a family, and it’s social comments – the threats of reckless forestry – are cleverly hidden under an overall layer of sweetness. PHANTOM OWL FOREST seems to touch every single Estonian. After a screening I overheard a child that no longer wanted an iPhone for Christmas but just wanted to spend time with her granddad. I believe this sums up everything about the film.

Estonia might not seem big enough for a successful franchise. Janno Põldma and Heiki Ernits have proved the opposite. The directing duo premiered their LOTTE FROM GADGETVILLE in 2006. Now they’re back with a third title about the little dog-girl. In LOTTE AND THE LOST DRAGONS, together with her newborn sister, Lotte helps two scientists in their quest for a herd of dragons, who were considered to be extinct. The Lotte series has always been consequently non-violent. Juxtaposed with the current trends in international children’s animation, this is a rather rare move. And although days in Lotte’s village may seem calm, they are oh so full of life – full of little joys and unexpected everyday adventures. With stunning visuals, LOTTE AND THE LOST DRAGONS is heart-warming eye-candy for all ages.

Kaspar Jancis is known for his abstract and often surreal animated films. His shorts have won several awards, including the Cartoon d’Or. CAPTAIN MORTEN AND THE SPIDER QUEEN, an Estonian-Irish-Belgium-UK co-production, is a full-length puppet animation that premiered last year at the Zagreb International Film Festival, and then travelled to Annecy. This visually stunning road-trip over sea and land pays homage to a traditional animation technique.

Why children’s films matter?

The Estonian filmmakers’ interest in producing children’s films has increased tremendously over recent years. In 2015 THE SECRET SOCIETY OF SOUPTOWN was a box-office hit. A year before that, the youth film ZERO
films are often universal. According to Tibbo, PHANTOM OWL FOREST is one example of an Estonian children’s film with a far-reaching topic. “An Estonian journalist stated that the film raises a belief among the audience that harvesters are devilish machines, that must be stopped before they destroy all our beautiful nature and kill our birds and animals. That’s a true remark. Especially when thinking about the environmental crisis that today’s children – tomorrow’s grown-ups, must face,” she adds.

Both PHANTOM OWL FOREST and LOTTE AND THE LOST DRAGONS are part of the ‘Estonian 100’ film programme (celebrating the Baltic Centenary), just like the THE LITTLE COMRADE, by Moonika Siimets. Based on the autobiographical novel by Leelo Tungal, this is not a classic children’s film, yet, it tells the story of Soviet occupation through the eyes of a child. In that way, the film bridges the gap with the young audience and has the power to unite generations. THE LITTLE COMRADE is Siimets’ full-length feature debut, PHANTOM OWL FOREST was Anu Aun’s second feature. The ‘Estonian 100’ programme did not only provide us with excellent films but also gave voice to emerging directors.

What’s next?

No doubt that 2018 was a fruitful year for the Estonian film industry. Even with the anniversary year behind us, we have more surprises up our sleeve. The Estonian-Danish co-production RAGGIE will premiere in 2020. This animated feature tells about little Anu and her brother Mart. When Mart has to go to school, Anu has to spend long days by herself. To cheer her up, Mart makes her a rag doll called Raggie. However, this turns out not a regular doll… Based on a children’s book by Eno Raud, RAGGIE tells about an honest childhood friendship. For Estonians, who all have read the book, this will be a nostalgic trip down Memory Lane.

So, with LOTTE soon to premiere at the Berlinale, MORTEN hitting the domestic cinemas in spring and RAGGIE being released next year, there’s definitely a lot to look forward to. Not a bad start for 2019.

– Aurelia Aasa (Estonian Film Institute)
InTervIew

MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE

Stefan Westerwelle: “Being special is the luxury every child has”

MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE starts with a flashback: a bunch of people stuck at a lakeside. We have no clue how they ended up here in the middle of nowhere... until we’re introduced to a family with two sons – Matti & Sami – and plenty of problems. Mum can’t hold things together anymore, while dad is longing for his native country Finland. Matti decided it’s about time to give luck a little push: how about a winning lottery ticket that grants you a house in Finland? But the dream ends where the lie begins... In the Schlingel Festival, MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE won the ECFA Award. We met with German director Stefan Westerwelle at the Filem’on festival in Brussels.

Your movie was able to present a totally impossible absurdity as a credible story. How did you get your audience willing to believe?

Stefan Westerwelle: In my heart I’m still that five year old boy believing that everything can be sorted out if you wish for it hard enough. For me the situation is totally credible, otherwise the movie couldn’t have worked. Finding a balance between realism and fantasy was my ultimate challenge.

There’s another important balance: between optimism and pessimism.

Westerwelle: I believe every problem can be solved if you have the necessary persistence and positivity. It sounds a cliché but if you follow your heart, things will work out. I spiced the story with problematic situations that at first glance seem unsolvable. But if a family sticks together as one, miracles can happen. In this family unfortunately it’s up to a young boy to create a situation in which his parents have to start communicating and take care of their children together.

How did the family situation get so tense?

Westerwelle: This family constellation is not exceptional, it is on the contrary a rather common thing. Mum is at the edge of a burn-out, father is haunted by depression, and suddenly a 10 year old child has the idea it’s his responsibility to save them, thus getting into the position of overtaking responsibilities. You see it happening more often.

What happened to the father that he lost track? Probably he doesn’t even know precisely what he’s missing so much, and therefore calls it ’Finland’.

Westerwelle: Being rootless is not just about geography, it’s about what home feels like to you. Dad doesn’t know what happened to the love he once felt, that made him move to Germany. He and his wife must have known happy times. But things have changed. For Matti visiting Finland has become a symbol for his longing to get closer to his father.
What does Finland have that Germany doesn’t have?
Westerwelle: It’s one of the craziest countries I’ve ever seen. Both the language and the culture, especially in the North, are very different from what we are used to. It felt like we were shooting somewhere in Montana, USA. I was always told Fins don’t talk much, but the Fins I met were the most talkative people I’ve ever seen.

You were shooting in the North?
Westerwelle: We had six days in Kokkola, which is like the Finnish Hollywood. When arriving in Helsinki, rain was pouring down. But the very first day of the shooting, the weather got hot and it stayed like that for the full six days, up till our final take. One week later it started snowing.

Nick Holaschke, playing Sami, is remarkable.
Westerwelle: You should observe him in the scenes where he only appears as a side character: without further directives, he got drawn into those scenes and became part of them. When we were working with him, he hadn’t started at school yet. He was completely natural, not yet formed by schedules and frames.

Your statement seems to be that average people are boring. These kids are definitely not boring!
Westerwelle: ‘Being special’ is the luxury every child has. Only when growing up, you learn to adapt, earning a living. You learn to ignore certain parts of your character that make you special, while children still can explore all their potentials and interests. I think Matti is a totally normal 10 year old boy, full of hopes and expectations. I never wanted to tell a story about ‘special people’.

Nevertheless there seems to be something wrong with adults in general in this movie. They all seem a bit crazy.
Westerwelle: For making my first children’s film, I had this credo: everything should be 3% over the top. It’s a matter of taste, I’m sure some people won’t like it, but I thought it was the right dose. Do you think we went more than 3% over the top?

Let’s say it was a 3+...
Westerwelle: On the third day of the shooting Sabine Timoteo (playing Matti’s mum), who is known for her strong, tormented women’s roles, said: “Now I understand what we’re doing. We’re making a children’s movie. I can exaggerate and be funny and I enjoy it so much.”

The film sets sparkle with colours. Your set designer was working overtime?
Westerwelle: When telling a rather dark story in a children’s film, you need to lift it up and keep it light. We easily switched from one tone to another, like in my favourite scene: Sami’s cooking looks funny, but the scene flips over to the other side of the spectrum as soon as the parents get involved. It’s that switch from ‘light’ to ‘heavy’ that creates the tension, the emotional impact of the film.

According to the title, lying is what causes all the world’s catastrophes.
Westerwelle: Telling lies is bad, but sometimes helps you solving problems. Right and wrong are always intertwined. You’re born as a part of a family, and it takes time to realise you have an identity outside that family, with your own thoughts and feelings. For positioning yourself as an individual, lying is a practical tool. It all goes back to that cheesy phrase: if you follow your heart, all bets are off to do the right thing.

From all staircase scenes I’ve seen in my life, yours was one of the most ingenious.
Westerwelle: We had a great location scout, who found us the most beautiful staircase in the entire city of Hamburg. Even if people warned me that green walls make the actors’ skin look pale, I still think it looks marvellous.

- Gert Hermans

watch trailer
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