

Julia Lemke & Anna Koch on CIRCUSBOY

No escape from the oom-pah-toom-pah

Documentaries for young audiences are a bit like circus artists; they come with a certain stigma, and they're only trusted for as long as the show lasts. None of that applies to **CIRCUSBOY**, in which we get to know Santino and his grandfather, a young and an old member of a circus family, who give us a glimpse into their wondrous world. "We'll never really belong," says Grandpa... But they do, at least for ECFA, who awarded Julia Lemke and Anna Koch's film as Best Documentary.

Your entire story is structured around the changing seasons.

Julia Lemke: Our audience has little experience with documentaries, so giving the story a structure makes it more accessible. We stay true to life, being a loose jumble of events that sometimes culminate and sometimes lead nowhere, but the seasons always come and go. Our characters' lives change with the seasons. The film starts in spring, when everything feels lush and easy. During the harsh winter, life becomes harder, but in the

end, we return to spring. It's a circular story, just like life itself: you are born, you live, and then you die.

The film starts with Santino's birthday. While every kid in the audience is probably thinking, "wow, he's getting a motorbike," Santino seems just as happy with a necklace, a symbol of belonging.

Lemke: This sense of belonging is a big thing in Santino's family. They live humble lives, but they know how to survive. And they can only survive by sticking together; living outside the family context is hard. If you change schools every other week, saying goodbye to everyone you met, then your family becomes the only stable thing in your life. These children know their family history. Our kids don't, but Santino does.

Anna Koch: The necklace means he's a grown-up now, and that one day he'll have his own caravan and all the responsibilities that come with it.

Lemke: But he liked the motorbike too!



That sensitive boy grows up in quite a tough world.

Lemke: The family we were looking for had to tick a lot of boxes. We needed a child and a senior from a warm family who could dispel the prejudices and stigma that circus people face. Finding that whole package was difficult. Then one day, we were sitting in a caravan with an elderly circus director, listening to his stories, when the door suddenly opened and his grandson walked in. He was open and curious; he had a sharp eye and kept asking his grandad for more stories. We melted immediately. Santino added so much to the film through his

personality and his relationship with his grandfather.

You must have felt blessed with his grandfather!

Lemke: Whenever we see something striking or moving, we tend to pinch each other's legs. That day, in that caravan, we pinched until it really hurt, because we realised we had 50% of the movie in place. In a lifetime, you meet a few truly special people, and he's one of them. He carries the lore of those traditions, and because he used to run a puppet theatre, he could translate them beautifully for children.





He is probably the only person you have ever met who can truthfully say he slept with an elephant.

Koch: Not if you spend time around circus people! Children will instantly connect with the magic of sleeping beside an elephant. Wouldn't you want to try it?

Lemke: Nowadays, the circus isn't that glamorous anymore - often, it can feel rather tragic - but once, it was. The animations help bring back those glamorous days, traveling with a world-famous elephant. When you get old, there must be a deep longing to tell your stories and find somebody who wants to listen.

Grandpa left me speechless when he started talking about the war. Especially when he says: "You'll never be one of them. You will always be an outsider."

Lemke: "They'll forget you the moment you leave." They have a long history of not belonging, and they're very aware of it. Apart from knowing they had Sinti roots, we knew very little about their background, and we surely didn't know about the war or Auschwitz. On the drive back to Berlin, we were like: What are we going to do now? We never planned to talk about Auschwitz in a children's film, but now there's no way around it.

I try to imagine your phone call to

the animator: "You know, there was all this funny stuff about elephants, but now..."

Lemke: We quickly realised we didn't have the tools to tell this story, or to explain Auschwitz to children.

Koch: His story was far too brutal for our target audience. We needed his words, his unique storytelling, but this seemed to be the one story he couldn't adapt for children - it was simply too shocking. We contacted experts from the Holocaust Education Centre and the German Sinti Association, and then went back to re-record it. It was very painful for him to tell the story over and over.

The impact of that scene is enormous.

Lemke: The whole scene lasts no more than 45 seconds, but you can't just drop a bomb on your audience and then move on, leaving them alone with these thoughts.

Koch: The question was where to go afterwards. How long can you stretch that moment before the silence starts to feel artificial, and what could be the next scene? It needed to feel right. So we continue with all the kids sitting together with their aunt and Grandma, almost as proof: they are alive. These people survived, and they take care of each other.

The circus world is such a cinematic gift. Visually chaotic at times, but truly a gift!

Lemke: A gift with terrible lighting! People imagine the circus as something beautiful and glamorous. Often, it's a bunch of caravans, parked in some shitty village. If you want glamour, you have to look elsewhere. We wanted to tell the story from backstage; so often I found myself standing in the way of passing camels or galloping horses. For these people, only one thing matters: the show must go on! It may look like glamour and popcorn on the outside, but behind it, there's a hard life and a loving family.

Sitting in the crowd, you stare at those beautiful acrobats in sparkling costumes. But once you're backstage, you see ordinary people in worn-out costumes. There isn't much glamour to find in a run-down caravan.

Koch: It's the lights, the music, and the show that create the magic. It's like going to a club. The moment the lights switch on in the morning, there's not much glamour left. That is what life is like: one moment you think you're living in paradise, and the next, the lights switch on.





“You need to love being in the spotlight,” Grandpa says. They all do?

Lemke: You’re not born wanting to be in the spotlight. It’s not genetic. But they grow up with it, so it no longer scares them. Still, you’re allowed not to be in the spotlight; you don’t have to continue the family tradition. People can leave the circus, and some family members did, but it’s difficult. For Santino and his brother, it would be very hard to step away from that path. Why should they?

Koch: They can’t all be daredevils; there are other jobs in the circus. Not many, but if you don’t want to perform in the ring, you can do the lights or the music, or sell popcorn.

Santino’s brother, on the other hand, seems born for the circus.

Koch: He’s a natural - the born heir. There’s no doubt he is going to be the next director. He doesn’t ask questions; he’s doing the job. From morning till evening, he wants to go, go, go, and work for the circus. He’s completely devoted to this lifestyle and would never question it.

Can circuses still travel with animals in Germany?

Koch: We never fully understood all the legal details; these decisions are made at a local level. But our circus only had farm animals, including camels and Texas longhorn cattle.

Those cows look super dangerous, but I never quite understood what their act is.

Koch: They just run around. That’s the act. And everyone in the front row freaks out when those horns come charging past.

Lemke: It’s the ultimate excuse to criticise the circus and look down on it: *“They don’t take proper care of their animals!”* Of course, we chose a circus with animals; they’re proud of that tradition, and animals are fun in a children’s film. But we wanted healthy animals in good condition – we didn’t want to turn the camera away every time a sick camel stumbled into frame. The animals help tell all those stories from the past, about a magnificent elephant. Circuses are criticised for failing to move with the times, but they have adapted to the modern world, while still holding on to old traditions.

After just 10 seconds, I already felt sorry for you. I thought: throughout the entire film, these directors are doomed to use circus music, with no escape from the oom-pah-toom-pah.

Koch: It’s iconic! Our composer wanted to record those circus instruments live, with all the squeaks and beeps intact - because that’s exactly how the circus sounds: never perfect, sometimes slightly out of tune. We

all agreed one extra layer was missing, and we found it in the accordion, an instrument that carries a certain melancholy. When we took the result into the editing room, everybody was instantly moved.

Lemke: While travelling with the family, we heard the clown singing in the car - a song by a Sinti singer. Now he performs it as the closing song of our score, in a modern interpretation.

CIRCUSBOY was developed as the first documentary in the Outstanding Children’s Film programme.

Koch: It matched our ambitions perfectly: to make a documentary for a broad audience, like the programme didn’t have one already. The programme places great importance on the film and on the positive outlook it should carry. That lent CIRCUSBOY its final tonality and helped the film find its audience. In the end, it all came together in a very natural way.

– Gert Hermans