

Youth documentary producers Tangerine Tree

Nienke Korthof & Willem Baptist: "A substantial part of the production budget was spent on fines"



BIKELIFE

Nienke Korthof and Willem Baptist are the driving force behind Dutch production company Tangerine Tree, experts in the field of youth documentaries. This year they stood at the Berliane with their short #BULLYING STORY and with BIKELIFE a new highlight was added to their catalogue. On the occasion of receiving the ECFA Doc Award 2019 in Berlin for LENNO & THE ANGELFISH, Baptist, on stage, described their company as "hardcore children's documentary producer".

Willem Baptist: We are up to our ears in youth documentaries. Since the launch of Tangerine Tree, we've made 14 of them, and all of them "have balls". We treat youth documentaries with as much love and regards as films for adults, but we also set the same standards. We do not make films for children, we make cinema for a different target group, and coincidentally that turns out to be children. Our most important question is: Is this a strong and honest film? Does it touch

me? On our website is a quote: "*Pain is temporary, film is forever*". A filmmaker must dare to suffer and seek for discomfort. And of course we ask ourselves which ethical limits we should respect.

LENNO seems like the perfect example of all the elements you just summed up.

Baptist: Director Shamira Raphaëla deliberately strived for that rawness and did not want to sugarcoat the situation. In this film we have explored the limits of what could and could not be done. Boundaries can be pushed both on a cinematographic and ethical levels. How to deal with a child in a precarious situation? What are our responsibilities? For the rest of his life this child must live with a documentary for which he himself is not responsible.

All your protagonists are kids that are exceptional, but in an unexceptional way. Children you should look for, as they don't advertise themselves.

Nienke Korthof: These are not the kind of children that stand out.

Baptist: We are based in Rotterdam, a straightforward working-class city. We sometimes stir things up and love to be a bit defiant. When I started making youth documentaries, I had nothing to do with children, and you don't even have to. If a submitted project starts like "*I myself am a mother of four...*" we immediately lose interest. We're not looking for mothers. Our starting point is never patronising or pathetic.

How do you recognise a good story?

Baptist: That has to do with urgency and with a director's vision. You can analyse a good story academically: is there enough conflict, redemption, surprise? But our question for the director is: Why do you want to make this film? Is there a connection with your own childhood? Do you want to prove or tell something through this child? A few years ago we produced SKATEKEET. Director Edward Cook migrated from Iceland via the US to the Netherlands and found a home in the





#BULLYINGSTORY

skaters subculture. With that experience in his backpack, he made a film about a girl who doubts whether she belongs with the boys or with the girls and finds a safe haven among those skaters. Edward, who knew this world through and through, was perfectly placed to make this film, as he could dig beyond the superficial level.

The same goes for LENNO & THE ANGELFISH.

Baptist: Shamira knows that tough world, families on the edge of a criminal lifestyle. That is why she can be more than just a ‘peeping Tom’. People living under such conditions develop a special sense, a radar for who is sincere or not. They immediately recognise a bourgeois filmmaker from Amsterdam, to whom they would

never expose themselves. But if you speak their language and understand their world, they will open up much more easily.

There is a credo for fiction film directors: the trauma’s from your own childhood will not necessarily provide a good story. But for a documentary maker it helps to be familiar with the subject.

Baptist: We are not after directors making films for therapeutic reasons. But your own background sometimes allows you a certain focus, an angle. As a child I was a scaredy-cat. Later, I started looking for stories about children who are not anxious, who are in control of their fears. That is how I came across this boy who wanted to become a motocross champion. Al-



LENNO & THE ANGELFISH

though both his parents were very ill, he was trying to defuse death. Thanks to my own experience, I’M NEVER AFRAID got a certain sincerity.

BIKELIFE is another diamond in the rough. The film tells about Jose’s dream to ride with a gang of stunt cyclers, sweeping across the city on pimped bicycles. Jose doesn’t master all the stunts, but keeps on practicing. Though, growing up turns out to be a lot more difficult than cycling and both come with a few bumps and bruises.

Baptist: Director René van Zundert wanted to make a film about a child that already had some contact with the law, and who is now at a junction in his life: do I follow the path towards crime or do I choose another direc-

tion? Jose had some conflicts with the police and is now facing this crucial choice.

Korthof: You are only legally punishable from the age of 14. Isn’t it typical for a boy like Jose that he got arrested on the night of his 14th birthday? “For riding a bike, that wasn’t fair” he explains. René got to know the bike-life scene through him. These days, every major city has such a scene.

What exactly is bikelife?

Baptist: Groups of youngsters riding out on very peculiar bicycles. The police regard them as a kind of motorcycle gangs. They are not, although there’s often a few boys with a criminal background riding with them. It looks great on camera: dark-skinned boys wearing golden necklaces hav-



ing illegal ride-outs through the city. They do their stunt-riding in the middle of the road, which easily attracts police attention.

How difficult was it to capture that bikelife scene on film?

Korthof: René only brought along a cameraman, to keep the crew as small as possible. That way they could meet with the gang every day without a perfect shooting plan. They had to be flexible, because always something was going on with those boys – setting appointments was not something they agreed on easily. So we were freewheeling. The biggest problem was: those guys go terribly fast! And you can't follow them with a car. We bought two scooters, but then they went everywhere where scooters were not allowed. A substantial part of the production budget was spent on fines.

Now what's next?

Baptist: It is not the best moment to tell you, but... we are planning to decrease our efforts in youth film production. We must be more selective. Youth documentaries are often made by young directors. We need to invest a lot of extra energy in their projects, and the financial reward is limited. That balance just isn't fair.

Korthof: But since we took this decision, we already launched five new titles, so...

Are you maybe a bit saturated?

Baptist: About 50% of our projects comes from the Kids & Docs workshops and the Human Rights TV series, and I got a bit bored with the format. In the Netherlands the formula has become very fixed; give me three random words and I can on the spot come up with a film plan. When I did the Kids & Docs workshop in 2009, we felt like we were going to change the world with our films. That urge now seems to have disappeared, it all got institutionalised. Of course we are spoiled: so many good documentaries have been produced in the Netherlands. Now there is a new batch of films that are very well made, all fitting nicely in the same box to meet the broadcasters' expectations. When we propose a plan that looks a bit different, we see how broadcasters are immediately trying to mold it nicely: we need more conflict, more recognisable elements etc.

Which are exactly the kind of expectations you're trying to avoid.

Korthof: We also produce sweet and tender films, but there is a need for



LITTLE FIRE

something fresh. We're counting on an audience that wants something different than yet another film about "a girl dreaming about having her own riding horse". Nevertheless LITTLE FIRE for example is a very moving film about a moving subject: an autistic boy getting a biker buddy.

Baptist: But even in that film we encouraged the director not to show only the sweet sides. He also shows how the protagonist Noëll clumsily stumbles into a creek. For such a short documentary, the director goes on the road together with a child for about six days.

But first you have a feature young audience documentary in the making!

Korthof: Doc Junior is a new trajectory supported by the Dutch Film Fund,

in which two feature documentaries will be developed. Shamira Raphaëla is going to develop one with us, about a flat in Rotterdam. Soon we'll know whether the project will receive further funding.

You work together as a couple. How do you manage?

Korthof: We are used to it. Running a household is more challenging than producing a film! People often suppose we're spending all our days together, while in reality we hardly see each other. But together we know exactly what we do want and what we don't want to do.

–
Gert Hermans

More info: www.tangerinetr.nl