

Mirjam Marks & Julia Schellekens about ZARA AND THE MAGICAL FOOTBALL BOOTS

Zara wants to play football with the AZC team (Asylum Seekers Centre), but her brothers don't agree. Until Little Angel appears, from whom Zara gets a special gift: a pair of magical football boots. Suddenly she can play like a pro. ZARA AND THE MAGICAL FOOTBALL BOOTS is a Dutch TV series in which children living in AZCs participate.

Mirjam Marks: Children living in AZCs can get bored a whole summer long. They have little money, no passport, they can go nowhere. Luckily there are organisations trying to cheer up those long summer months. As a filmmaker, I often do workshops with Foundation 'De Vrolijkheid', that has been organising cultural and creative programmes in AZCs for many years. And with Cinekid we organised pop-up film festivals on the spot.

In this TV-series AZC inhabitants are in front or behind the camera?

Julia Schellekens: They were the actors. Those kids who didn't want (or were not allowed for reasons of secu-

urity) to get in the picture, could work on props or short animated scenes. In the crew were mainly professionals, but some of them had a background as asylum seekers and in every AZC we found a lot of skilful helping hands. From the young actors, only main actress Liz Heijnemans and her close family do not live in an AZC – that would have been impossible in terms of organisation and permissions.

And you were the one keeping it all tied together?

Marks: Together with Julia and many fantastic colleagues. I came up with the idea, and won the trust of Dutch broadcaster VPRO and several well-known scriptwriters, directors, actors and crew members. They all said: *"We don't have time to do it but we will."*

The story in itself is not about asylum seekers.

Marks: Our first task for the screenwriter was to deliver a story that continued over six episodes in which as many kids as possible could participate every week. Plenty of mass

scenes included! For instance the same soccer team in every episode is played by different kids. The shirts are the same, but the kids wearing them aren't. Luckily the audience doesn't notice.

This was a logistical tour-de-force!

Schellekens: Six weeks in a row we worked in a different AZC. Shooting only two days is very little when working with inexperienced actors. We needed to find all locations within the AZCs, improvising with what we found on the spot.

The value of the project is also in the way you considered how to do it so dignified and respectful.

Marks: Besides 300 children, 160 volunteers and over 80 crew members participated. Most of them had never been to an AZC before. This had a huge impacts on all contributors.

Schellekens: We've worked extremely hard, but got so much in return. At the premiere when those kids were looking at themselves on the big Cinekid screen, something kind of snapped



inside me.

Can this series be exported?

Marks: It has an adventurous story and good production value and a completely non-white cast. English and Arabic subtitles are available. And the idea is universal: women's football is on the rise nowadays, and in many countries football is the only platform for a natural form of integration.

–
Gert Hermans

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