

# Eszter Vuojala about the Abloom Festival

“Is it set in stone that our audience should live on the streets?”

The Abloom festival has a unique audience profile: people who can't afford to buy a cinema ticket. Disabled children, especially with a minority background, don't find their way easily into the cinema theatres. The 9th edition of the Oslo-based festival will take place in November, but co-programmer Eszter Vuojala has been earning her merits in the world of children's film for many years already.

Eszter Vuojala: The festival is aiming at people that seldom have access to quality cinema. Our main target audience are disabled children with a minority background. Our support is in screening them good films, but also in talking about their situation. That is where inclusion starts. The word 'Abloom' is adopted from the English language: it states that every child has the right to blossom and come to full bloom.

**Disabled children with a minority background, isn't that narrowing down your profile too much?**

Vuojala: Abloom is a very welcoming festival, attracting visitors with very different geographical and social backgrounds. There is a huge amount of vulnerable people feeling somehow excluded from our society. Even if these categories are often brought up in the political debate about 'the universal design' (everyone has access to every place), you'll find in reality this is not the case. This is what we found out in the contacts with our audience.

**How did you realise the need for a festival like Abloom?**

Vuojala: When festival founder Faridah Nabaggala gave birth to a child with a disability, she discovered that parents with a minority background know little about the services offered by our society. For Norwe-



gians it is relatively easy to find their way through this labyrinth of options and opportunities, but when you don't speak the language, you stay inside your circle and your problems will seldom transcend your own community.

**Does this make Abloom a community in itself, offering much more than just cinema?**

Vuojala: We deal with many other issues and activities, sometimes in an organised structure, sometimes popping up spontaneously. We organise activities for minorities year round. But film is the best way to bring up problematic issues, and makes it easier for people to think and talk about

them. As a filmmaker, Faridah understood this was a way to bring people together.

**What is the festival's official mission? Does your funding come from the Culture or the Healthcare Department?**

Vuojala: Both. Social healthcare is part of our core business, but our focus obviously is on film. We've set an appointment with the new Norwegian Minister of Culture, who – by the way – has a minority background. Also the Foreign Affairs Department has shown an interest in our activities. Faridah is in contact with the leaders of several small religious communities. As an articulate Muslim woman



speaking about the rights of disabled children, she stands out and has the power to make a change. Like the declaration, recently launched by Abloom, stating that disabilities are not God's punishment.

### Disability as a religious penalty?

Vuojala: People have been hiding their disabled children because they are ashamed, or even afraid that the stigma will be passed on for generations. This declaration will be one of our focus points for the next few years and it is getting attention from policy makers, ministers and religious leaders.

### How much is the community itself involved in organising your activities?

Vuojala: Deeply. We invite children into the Abloom studio to work on small documentary projects introducing us to specific problems they are facing. Like this testimony from a child with a hearing disability who took the train. When the train suddenly stopped, she was the only person who didn't know why, because she couldn't hear the information spread through the intercom. And we organise school workshops, for example we have architects working with children to plan the city of the future. What



Faridah Nabaggala & Eszter Vuojala

would 'the perfect Oslo' look like for you? It is not set in stone that our audience should live on the streets among drug dealers and alcoholics. They dream about clean parks, sports facilities and recreation centres.

### And what about the grown-ups?

Vuojala: We have only minority people as staff members, which helps to establish contact with all the individual communities. On our Conference Day we invite professionals to talk about all aspects of disabilities and we show films. In 2019 the Indian film CHUSKIT perfectly fitted the occasion, as it speaks about disability and how it can be influenced by a sense of community. That was exactly what we wanted. Now we are searching for the next



Norwegian Minister of Health signing the Abloom declaration

CHUSKIT. It is not like our audience only wants to see films about disabilities but we're always looking for films that emphasize how normal and recognisable our people are, and not how different.

### Is every Norwegian cinema complex equipped to welcome your audience.

Vuojala: Having our own cinema would be our ultimate goal. Norwegian cinemas in general are very well equipped, but not for a disabled audience. I remember those multi-functional community centres where chairs could easily be removed, for instance to turn the place into a local disco. That would be perfect for us, as you can choose to combine normal seats with room for wheel-chairs.

### But then why would you need a cinema if you can make it a disco? What would you do if you had an unlimited budget?

Vuojala: We dreamed about an amusement park for disabled children. For example for an autistic child there is not much fun to be found in a normal amusement park. To develop this, we would need true experts. Most architects that we consulted, found it very hard to understand what exactly we were looking for. Such a project could only be started from scratch.

### How did you get involved? We know you as the programmer of the children's film festival in Oulu (Finland) who retired after her 25th festival edition...

Vuojala: ... which felt like the perfect moment to pass the torch to the next generation. But I still had plans on my mind. Then for personal reasons, me and my partner moved to Oslo. Almost immediately I was contacted by a friend who told me about a festival that maybe could use my help. I met Faridah and said 'yes' to her project, but only if I could work as a volunteer. I don't want to wake up any more in a hurry to go to my job. Now I do the things that I'm experienced in, but I do them in my own way and in my own time. And that is such fun.



**Are there any other European organisations you feel connected with?**

Vuojala: I found festivals with a similar focus in San Francisco and Australia, not in Europe. I would love to network but I don't see many opportunities. Abloom's unique profile is making my work as a programmer easier. I focus on specific topics and I don't have to compete on the market. But since we want to offer only good films, we have a 'quality standard' to maintain.

**You specifically asked to combine this interview with an article about the short film TOPRAK. Why did you want us to pay extra attention to that film?**

Vuojala: It is a coming-of-age short

film, speaking about problems that minorities are confronted with. There is this boy who has to understand so many things over the course of one day, that it makes him grow up fast. Which is necessary to fully understand the tragedy threatening his family. There are so many elements in this film for our audience to relate to. We invited director Onur Yagiz for a screening supported by the Turkish embassy. They appreciated so much how their country was represented in a positive way. Now they insist on having another Turkish film in the next edition.

About the [Abloom Declaration](#)  
Watch the [festival video](#)

## Onur Yagiz about TOPRAK

### The ultrasound of an 8 year old boy

Toprak is an 8 year old boy with a Turkish background, living in Paris with his parents. His mother is expecting twins. After joining his parents on a visit to the gynaecologist, his interest shifts from his initial question 'will they be boys or girls?' to a much more important question 'will they be healthy?' As an interpreter for his parents, he is asked to pass on impactful news. Over the course of one hospital visit, Toprak turns from a boy into a man. When evening falls, the question about boys or girls is no longer on his mind.

**The hospital visit is an impactful moment for this family. Can you outline this moment in a broader time context?**

Onur Yagiz: What preceded that moment and what might happen afterwards is left to the audience's imagination. I don't want to limit their perception by giving away the details that I deliberately left out of frame. Actually, I myself served as a translator for my parents, just like Toprak, and when I was about his age, I had to

translate to my mother that my sister was suffering from a rare disability and would never be able to walk. I can't exactly recall that memory, but I still remember how I felt; powerless. The moment I started feeling that way, I knew I was no longer a child.

**How does it feel for a mother in such a moment to be surrounded by people that you don't even understand?**

Yagiz: My mother gave birth to me in France while she barely knew how to speak the language. When asking her about it, she told me the nurses were very kind. My mother would never tell me about her pain. She surely would have preferred to give birth surrounded by Turkish speaking people, but she simply had no choice.

**All adults in the film are depending upon one child.**

Yagiz: As for the parents, they are used to this situation and they accept it. The doctor at first is amused, but when he needs Toprak to translate bad news, he starts feeling embarrassed. However, neither the parents

