

## Fred Baillif about LA MIF

“Like a rushed, energetic, pounding heartbeat”

In LA MIF (aka THE FAM), self-taught Swiss filmmaker Fred Baillif tells an impressive story about seven teenage girls with traumatic *family* experiences, living in a residential shelter in Geneva. Mif is a French slang word for family; although most of the girls have parents and siblings, public welfare has put them in a home.

Born in 1977, Baillif, grew up in the countryside near Geneva, where he graduated in 2000 as a social worker and found a job in a youth detention centre. But his dream was to make films. He went to New York where he worked as Production Assistant on a documentary series and at night as a DJ in the legendary bars in Brooklyn. Back in Switzerland, in 2003 he directed his first documentary SIDEMAN, about the New York-based Swiss harmonica player Grégoire Maret. With his background as social worker he then made the documentary GEISENDORF, about kids terrifying citizens in Geneva’s Geisendorf Park. As an established documentary maker, he started working for Swiss TV station



RTS.

His first fiction feature TAPIS ROUGE was a no budget film made with teenagers from a Lausanne suburb. With them he started developing a method for directing non-professional actors. LA MIF, created in collaboration with a shelter home in Geneva, was honoured with the Grand Prix in the 14plus Competition at the Berlinale 2021. The International Jury stated: “Like a rushed, energetic, pounding heartbeat, this film pushes its char-

acters and viewers in brutal honesty through different stories and incidents. Carried by captivating and strong performances it never loses its balance between power and vulnerability.”

### LA MIF almost looks like a documentary. What is the advantage of making fiction films for you?

Fred Baillif: Freedom! There was a particular moment in my career when I understood the limitations of the documentary genre. At that time I was making a documentary series for

Swiss TV – in prime time – and there was this producer telling me constantly “we must have this, we must have that”. It felt like making a reality show. All the time I was so anxious about manipulating reality. That is when I decided: I am not going to do documentaries anymore. I’d rather try fiction and see if that might work. And it did! With this method for non-professional actors, I have the freedom to tell any kind of story, always true to my point of view.

### How was this method applied with LA MIF?

Baillif: All started with Claudia Grob, playing Lora, the director of the shelter home, which was really her profession until she retired. We worked together 20 years ago and stayed in touch. Through my documentaries about ‘the social work field’ she kept up with my career. She told me how frustrated she was about her work in the institution, especially when issues of ‘sexuality’ were involved – and they always were – and in the way politics dealt with it. Her deep anger towards





the entire youth protection system, became my inspiration for LA MIF.

**So when Lora accuses the institution, these were Claudia's own words?**

Baillif: Completely!

**What happened then?**

Baillif: I interviewed the girls and employees of the shelter. Asking them about the real 'drama' in their lives, I made up a story for each of them... but not their own stories. I asked all of them to evaluate their characters... except for Lora; Claudia agreed that she wouldn't know anything about her character and her backstory. That is how the young actresses became the

film's co-authors, without knowing the details of the overall story. Finally on the set, every day they got to know a little more about the characters and plot. Of course none of the dialogues was written.

**There was no script, no screenplay?**

Baillif: You can imagine how difficult it was to get such a project financed! That is why it took so long. Finally, after three years I said: *"Okay, we don't have the money, but the girls are growing up. We need to shoot now, otherwise it will be too late."* So we shot the film within two weeks.

**How did you keep the girls in line over such a long period?**

Baillif: We built up a relationship. I went to the shelter maybe once per month on a Sunday evening to have dinner with the girls, together with my wife and kid (who both had a role in the film). I told them from the start this project would take a lot of time.

**How much footage did you collect?**

Baillif: I haven't calculated, but maybe 5% finally made it into the movie. The story further evolved in the editing phase. It was the first edit that finally made local fundraising possible.

**Your relationship with those young people seems to be very intense. How were you as a teenager?**

Baillif: Super difficult. For me the whole world was black or white. When there was a teacher who understood me, we were best friends; when there was one who punished me or felt superior, all hell broke loose. I wanted to become a teacher, just to do better than them, to try and understand those children. And I became a social worker because I believe these kids need to be listened to and heard. Teaching is listening, but in schools or shelters there is no time for that. The problem is not with the social workers, but with the institutions and with the overregulated system.

People are always anxious; protection is our priority. I have different priorities: how can we make these kids believe in themselves? How can we help them expressing themselves – like they did in the movie? All I can do is plant the seeds – sometimes they grow, sometimes they don't; we can't control everything. This is what I have to accept, as a social worker and as a filmmaker.

**On the soundtrack I would have expected maybe punk songs, but using classical pieces by Mozart, Scarlatti and Bach works very convincingly.**

Baillif: This music takes us back to the time when shelter homes were ran by nuns. Our current juvenile system is regressive, it takes us back in time. Moreover I didn't want the music to manipulate the audience's emotions, as it happens all the time nowadays.

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Uta Beth

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