

Lidia Duda about THE FLEDGLINGS

“Their fingers are their life”

In an institute for the blind, we meet three original characters: imaginative Zosia, sensitive Oskar and self-reliant Kinga. With endless respect, the renowned Polish documentary maker Lidia Duda delves into their lives. Until an unforeseen storyline bubbles up, telling of an overwhelming tenderness, a deep affection, and of a world in black and white where a small touch says all there is to say. AleKino! bravely put THE FLEDGLINGS on their programme, in a screening that will not lightly be forgotten.

Can you tell us about the location, the Laski Institute for Blind and Visually Impaired Children?

Lidia Duda: It's a catholic school, led by nuns, with a kindergarten, an elementary and secondary school, a music school... In this vast area, there is a swimming pool, a park, stables with horses for hippotherapy... When starting in kindergarten, you might stay there until the moment you finish your college career.

In this school they don't teach you

how to see but how to listen, how to hear the environment around you, as if every person and every room has its own sound.

Duda: These children have a form of echolocation, like bats. Oskar always looks down, listening to the sound of his feet; that is how he hears eventual obstacles on his path. They sense the smell of every person, they hear the shuffling on the floor when someone sneakily comes near. There is no person as sensitive as a blind child.

It makes this movie a confrontation with the mysteries of the human senses.

Duda: The lack of eyesight raises a need for an imaginary world, created in their minds by using all other senses. They connect music with smells, they have the ability to sense people's emotions, they feel sadness in the sound of one's voice. Different from us, they truly listen to what people are telling and how they tell it. Inspired by them, I also started noticing hidden emotions when listening to people's voices. It was interesting to



discover this ability in me.

Lying to them won't be easy!

Duda: It never works. They are like a litmus test; the chemical reaction is always correct. Things are good or bad, true or false. Only black and white makes them feel safe; they don't mess around with shades of grey.

Is it their senses that cause the uncontrollable movements they are making constantly?

Duda: They are little kids who should run, jump, play football, ride bicycles... what they are not capable of. They have tons of energy and no way to use it so they need to transmit it, especial-

ly in a new environment where they can't move freely. It changes when growing up. By the time they are in third grade they might have outgrown this habit; no longer feeling insecure, they'll know how to get from one classroom to the other. I didn't find a single scene in which this behaviour could be explained. This film is more about raising interest than about explaining anyway.

Often documentary makers want to be like a fly on the wall, remaining unnoticed. The paradox is that even if these protagonists couldn't see you, they might have been even more aware of your presence.



Duda: I made a pact with them that they would always know when we came and went, as to make them feel safe. The kids allowed us in their private conversations because they trusted us. They knew we were curious about their world. We spoke a lot outside of shooting, so that they got to know me as a person. I am curious about people in general, and apparently they often like talking to me, maybe because I'm not judgemental by nature.

Today I fell in love with fingers! They are so beautiful.

Duda: Their fingers are their life. Like when playing the piano, or when Zosia falls asleep and Oskar puts his hand on her back. That is such a massive thing! Those hands also define the frame we use, which is exactly the frame that these kids can control. The audience experiences the world only within that frame, both in visuals and in sound.

Is that why you made the film in black and white?

Duda: Honestly... I didn't plan it like this. I could say this was the result of my artistic vision but I'll give you the real reason. This school looks extremely colourful, with neon colours that were all the time on the first



plan, where I wanted the faces of the children to be. The emotions on those faces are the first thing that should catch your attention. That is why I took off the colour.

In a school run by nuns, religion seems to be an important issue in their lives.

Duda: Poland is a very religious country, but the number of churches might be bigger than the true faith with people. This dogmatic faith is more an idea than a practical immersion. No one questions what this faith really is about, but Zosia does. We recorded scenes with Zosia asking beautiful questions - which were rather confusing for the nuns - and expressing

her religious doubts, but we decided not to include them; I had to make a choice whether to make a movie about the love for God or about the first love between two kids. I chose the world of children's feelings and emotions.

I was curious if religion somehow gives them comfort.

Duda: Zosia comes from a non-religious family, while Oskar knew all the prayers by heart but didn't understand the words. These are two sides of faith you'll meet in our society. More than in religion, they find comfort in each other. They understand each other so well because they're in the same situation, experiencing the

same challenges, depending on each other.

Which becomes clear in the love story between Zosia and Oskar.

Duda: At first Zosia, being raised in a very caring family, was like a mother to Oskar. It was obvious that she wouldn't leave him helpless. When it turned out that both of them liked this fantasy world in which they can make up stories, they became friends.

My thoughts often were with Kinga, the third character who is more in the background. Who is she?

Duda: Kinga is raised only by her father as a practical little woman. She knows how to get things done and has a different kind of imagination than the other two. She likes hanging out with the older girls but she was always helping out when needed, like a good spirit, always around but never in the spotlight.

What is happening in the closing scene?

Duda: In this party the boys and girls from the dormitory are invited together, like a group date. Every girl has her dream boy, but none of them wanted to be with Oskar, except Zosia. That was the moment when Zosia and Oskar "saw" each other's faces,



touching them with their fingers

Did the kids already watch the film?

Duda: After the world premiere in Poland (with audio-description) Zosia

ure out which age group would fit the best as a target audience for THE FLEDGLINGS.

Duda: I made the film without any age limitations in my mind. The surprising



turned towards me and asked 'why is this film so short?', then pointed out all the scenes that she felt were missing. She remembered all the takes we did and the final film turned out to be too short for her. This movie was so important for them; it is their "film diary". Zosia, Kinga and Oskar are now in second grade. Zosia goes to singing lessons, Oskar is making huge progress in playing the piano and Kinga still helps them out.

In the AleKino! Festival discussions with psychologists were held to fig-

thing is that I thought it would mainly be appreciated by a female audience; now it turns out that especially men seem to like this film a lot. One thing is for sure: it is a movie about our need for closeness with another person. This is a fundamental truth, no matter our age. THE FLEDGLINGS got a 7+ qualification and I'm very happy about that.

–
Gert Hermans

Thomas Hailer (Nordic Film Days) "Bordeaux wines, Sicilian almonds and good films"

There is life before and after the Berlinale! Thomas Hailer might be known as the former face of the Berlinale's "Kinderfilmfest" (since 2002), that he renamed Generation and to which he added a youth competition. Later he became curator of the festival's international competition. Nowadays, since 2020, he is the artistic director of the Nordic Film Days in Lübeck, a festival that has – by nature – a strong connection with quality films for children.

Can you explain why so many good films for children are coming from the North?

Hailer: I can't explain it, but one indicator is that these are countries with a very intelligent approach to film funding. As relatively small countries they know that they alone are responsible for their offspring, and that they have to make sure that children get enough incentives so that their enthusiasm for cinema carries into adulthood. Denmark for example is



the only country where Tarrantino's DJANGO UNCHAINED was not box office number 1 because the film was released at the same time as JAGTEN by Thomas Vinterberg. I assume that these societies might have a different idea of childhood in general. But most of all they are not afraid of individual voices in the film industry.

Maybe they also have less bureaucracy?

Hailer: I'm not so sure, bureaucracy is part of the funding business anyway - there are good reasons why