

Engeli Broberg & Gabi about GABI, BETWEEN AGES 8 AND 13

“She took a sip from her coco and started talking...”

Gabi is only 8 years old and wrestles with society's stereotypes about boys and girls. When her family moves from Stockholm to a rural town, and as puberty kicks in, Gabi must decide whether she wants to fit in with the crowd or chart her own path. Director Engeli Bromberg (Sweden) follows this remarkable personality over the course of five years, creating a moving portrait of a child, averse to gender norms, who's seeking her place in the world.

When meeting both director and protagonist at the Film'on festival, all you wish for is asking the right questions to do justice to this wonderful film. I guess the director must have felt the same pressure: with all this wonderful material in her hands, she couldn't allow herself to screw up. It feels as much a privilege for the audience to be allowed an insight into someone's personal life, as it must have felt a privilege to the director...

Engeli Broberg: ... to be invited! It's simply amazing to be a part of some-

one's life from childhood to teenager. We collected so much wonderful material. Gabi, the school, the family and friends, they all have been so generous in letting us in.



How did you first meet?

Broberg: A friend who was working on a commercial told me I should meet one of the extras. I was sceptical; often when people tell me such things it

turns out not to be so interesting at all. We met for a coffee, Gabi took a sip from her coco and started talking: this is how I see the world. The first thing she told me was that according

to her, there shouldn't be a difference between boys and girls. Which is a pretty cool thing to say for an 8 year old!

Gabi: I don't remember; it's such a

long time ago. I am 16 now.

It made you realise from the beginning which direction the film could possibly go.

Broberg: Gabi inspired me. I could recognise myself as a child in many things she said, but at that age I hadn't processed my thoughts the way she had. She spoke from the perspective of a child in a way so that both adults and children could understand.

You surely got her talking...

Broberg: At the age of eight, Gabi spoke totally freely, but when puberty came, she became more introverted and more interested in doing things than in talking.

Gabi: Having ADHD, I am quite hyper and often feel more into playing hockey than into sitting and talking. We started doing crafts during our conversations. Then I told Engeli that *"maybe we should meet again and do some drawing."* My ADHD is more in control now. Sometimes I need to go walk around a bit, and I'm scrolling my phone all the time - it feels like a kind





of security to me, like a little child dragging around his blanket.

The film also confronts you with silly things that you said years ago. Once we hear you snitching on someone.

Gabi: It is rather embarrassing to watch, and silly, and honest. It's a mix of all that.

Broberg: That scene makes you remember that Gabi is just a child, as a counterbalance to all the wise things she is saying.

Talking about embarrassing moments... What is your opinion nowadays about sixpacks?

Gabi: Now I understand how hard it is to get one. It's not like The Sims,

when you just select your assets. But a perfect body image is a hard topic to deal with, and it has a huge impact on young people.

It was a brilliant idea to use the scenes at the hairdresser as milestones in Gabi's process of growing up.

Broberg: Gabi cut her hair for the first time when puberty was about to hit and she was anxious about all these new physical phenomena. When your entire body is changing, at least your hair is the one thing that you can still control and decide about yourself.

Which haircut do you like most nowadays, still Robin Van Persie's or Emma Watson's?

Gabi: I'd say Van Persie. I want my hair short, I don't want to look like a celebrity.

Broberg: When the film was screened at IDFA and the name Van Persie came up, the crowd started cheering. "Did she really say that?" It seemed like a big thing. I didn't know Van Persie was Dutch. Actually I didn't even know he was a football player.

When moving to Mora, how horrible were those first weeks. The way you got ignored by everyone was painful to watch.

Gabi: That was in the beginning, when I arrived in this small town where everyone knew each other. Afterwards it got better.

Broberg: It was heartbreaking. You didn't have anyone to hang out with. It is a small city and most of the inhabitants have known each other since the day they were born.

If it's all about acceptance, then you think things will only get easier from now on?

Gabi: In general I am a happy person. There was a year at Mora high school when I felt quite depressed due to a lot of things happening in my life, but returning to Stockholm had a huge impact on my mental health and my identity. It's difficult not to be like

everyone else, but it is harder to be different in Mora than in Stockholm. It's a diverse city - the place where I grew up - and I'm hanging out with Henry again, who is such a supportive friend. The acceptance of differences in my new school is much better - I have experienced it differently in the past.

There is this conversation in the film about the things you do to fit in. Like swearing. What would you absolutely refuse to do?

Gabi: I wouldn't have long hair or change my style of clothes. In the film you see how my mum once asked me to wear a dress, but that was a 100% 'no', I think she was kind of provoking me. Actually I was meant to wear a suit on that occasion, but I lost the pants.

Still she insists on calling you Gabriela.

Gabi: I don't mind, although I prefer Gabi. Gabrielle is mainly used to catch my attention when she really wants me to listen.

The position of your parents is not 100% clear in the film.

Gabi: My parents are very supportive, they never had a problem with anything. Especially nowadays when I'm





capable of making my own decisions. Broberg: Your parents really love you, but there is this thing with parents that many queer people can identify with. Even the most supportive parents do or say these little things they don't even think about but still can hurt you.

You mean: like making silly jokes...

Gabi: ... of which they don't understand the repercussions.

Broberg: In a screening in Copenhagen both the panel of trans or queer children and their parents admitted the way that parents are depicted is 100% recognisable. It is very generous of Gabi's parents to accept our approach. They liked and supported

our film a lot.

When somebody shows herself so openly and vulnerable on screen, a huge responsibility is with the director.

Broberg: One of the things that I decided to do early on was to have Tracy, Thomas and Gabi looking at snippets of the film. It is not possible for a family or a young child to understand what it means to be in a documentary. I wanted to be transparent with the footage we had. We went through the material and discussed it.

Was the editing the hardest part of the process?

Broberg: It was all about sorting out

which scenes we should keep as private moments and which ones we wanted to share. All I wanted was for Gabi and other children to recognise themselves in the story. My only concern was: is this scene good for Gabi, or is it just sensational to have it? If it was not good for Gabi, we skipped it. It is not because I have it on film that it should be shown to the entire world.

Gabi: I had a voice in the final cut. I pointed out elements that I thought the audience could interpret in a way I didn't feel comfortable with. Often it was about silly details, not just about what you see but about what could be suggested. I don't want people to draw the wrong conclusions about me. Other scenes were cut out because they didn't add to the story.

After seeing you growing up over the course of 5 years and spending 90 minutes in your screen presence, we might think this is the total Gabi, as if there exists no Gabi outside the film.

Gabi: There is personal stuff that is not in the film, things that I keep for myself. What you see is probably 60% of my life; for me it's enough to know that I'm keeping 40% to myself.

Broberg: For me the most important was participation in Gabi's explora-

tion. Not labelling Gabi leaves space for the character to evolve afterwards. That's why the ending is open.

Being so close and having the idea that we know you so well also means that we love and embrace you completely. People appreciate GABI, BETWEEN AGES 8 AND 13 not only because it's a good film, but also because Gabi is such a wonderful creature.

Gabi: That's lovely. Obviously people get very emotional about the film. It's quite an accomplishment to have that impact.

Broberg: It makes you a role model!

Gabi: I like that!

Do you already know more about your father?

Gabi: I have some answers, but I haven't met him yet. I don't think I want to - maybe in the future...? Right now, I am focusing on myself, my family, school... That's enough for me.

-
Gert Hermans