



**European Children's
Film Association**
Association Européenne du Cinéma
pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

interviews

Comedy Queen

Sweet as

Sea Sparkle

One in a Million

Waters of Pastaza

NOJSE



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Photo: Comedy Queen

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3 COMEDY QUEEN

Interview

6 TITINA

Interview

9 SWEET AS

Interview

11 SEA SPARKLE

Interview

**14 DEAR FATHER,
YOUR DAUGHTER**

DoXSpot

**15 The works of
Nena van Driel**

Short Cut

**16 Veselka Child-
ren's TV Studio -
Ukraine**

Industry Interview

18 LOVE, DAD

Interview

**20 FILMS ON THE
HORIZON****22 Rasmus A.
Sivertsen**

Meet the Mentors

25 OINK

Interview

26 OKTHANKSBYE

Interview

**28 ONE IN A MIL-
LION**

Interview

31 NOJSE

Industry Interview

**34 WATERS OF
PASTAZA**

Interview

**37 Juvenile Prison
project GenerAc-
tion**

Media Education

**38 SUMMER
WITHOUT YOU**

Interview

Traveller, there is no road

The European Children's Film Association started 35 years ago as an initiative of a handful of people from around Europe; it has grown into a lively professional body with over 160 member organisations from around the world. Was it as easy as it seems today? Seeing where we are now, we have to trust Spanish poet Antonio Machado, who once wrote "*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*" - that is "*Traveller, there is no road; you make your own path as you walk*".

I was just 12 when those first brave travellers started this path. Today, people like myself and other younger members of ECFA and the Board, are building our whole professional and social lives around film culture and its connection with even younger generations. This wouldn't be possible without all those who managed to convince, to overcome, to innovate, to build up possibilities and create a field of action that did not exist before, at this scale and structure at least (although *there is* a prehistory with children and cinema that would be useful to know).

But where do we stand today? We live in a political-ly, financially and culturally fragile world. Cinema, audio-visual production in general, their distribution and access to audiences has changed a lot - for better or for worse. Children and youth are more informed and mature than ever. The financial situa-

tion in culture and film is challenging. And we, the members of the lively ECFA community, make bigger or smaller steps towards our goals, according to country-specific circumstances which vary - but not that much.

ECFA has always been a community of active, dedicated, creative people, not a strict professional organisation with hierarchies, bureaucracy and antagonisms within it. This is the ECFA we need today: an organisation promoting mutual understanding and collaborations, a place to meet and reflect on our changing environment, a central point of reference for our broader network. And, obviously, it's up to all of us to make our teamwork matter!

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Pantelis Panteloglou
ECFA President



Sanna Lenken about COMEDY QUEEN

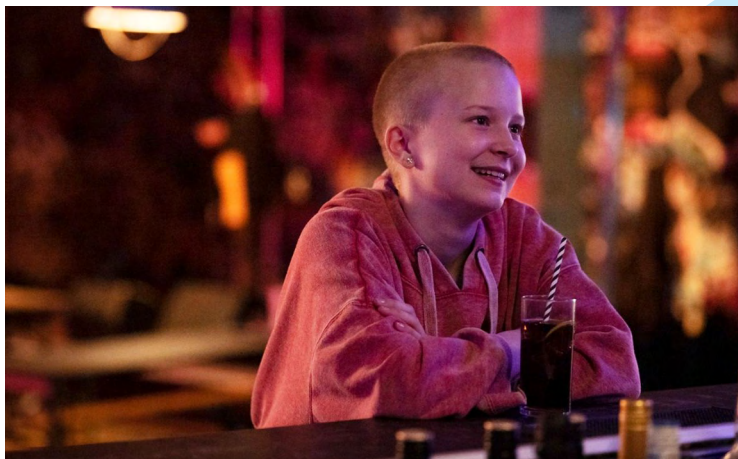
“It could have gone all cheesy and sentimental”

Everyone grieves in different ways. When Sasha’s mother dies, dad turns silent and sad, while Sasha gets rebellious: she shaves off her hair, turns her back on her best friend Märta, and wants to go on stage as a comedian. Then maybe she can make her dad smile again. COMEDY QUEEN, a heart-breakingly beautiful film about laughing and shouting out loud to hide your tears, was the winner of the ECFA Award 2023 in Berlin, where director Sanna Lenken attended to accept her award.

In stand-up comedy, performers are almost “naked” on stage, all alone with just their promise to make you laugh. I can hardly think of a more vulnerable position.

Sanna Lenken: You only have one mission, to make people laugh with your jokes, and if they don’t, you feel totally embarrassed. I’ve been thinking about trying it myself; it would have been good for the movie if I knew how it felt. When you’re new, your routine can be quite short; 5 minutes on stage is a lot for a rookie - all you need is

one good joke and three more in the same sphere to build it up. A famous comedian taught Sigrid (Johnson, playing Sasha) and me how to write jokes and how to perform, but finally I



didn’t go on stage in Covid times.

Were you familiar with the world of comedy?

Lenken: Preparing the movie, I

watched a lot of it and found out I am very picky with comedians. There are not many who can make me laugh. The ones I liked were often the most relaxed, the ones that made me feel at

ease, and a few ones that were very personal and dark. But there was one that I liked particularly. Christoffer Nyqvist was only 19 and what he said was not that funny, it was more in the

way he said it. We asked him to help us with the jokes.

Even with the terribly bad ones?

Lenken: That was me! Or sometimes it was Sigrid improvising. Not too witty, almost embarrassing, but true to herself; that was her level of humour. That is what makes her final stand-up routine so personal. We wondered if we should include jokes about her mother too, but no... Sasha isn’t there yet. That is why she addresses her dad, the one with whom she has the deepest personal connection. I’m happy people around the world appreciate and understand that scene, because the jokes are hard to translate.

By naming the film COMEDY QUEEN you set expectations that won’t be fulfilled.

Lenken: The story is based on a novel by Jenny Jägerfeld, so the title was already there and I quite liked it. The poster shows Sasha’s face with a smile and a tear in her eyes; both happiness and sadness are there. I always thought about COMEDY QUEEN





as an “indie film” - not arthouse, not commercial, but a Swedish mixture of both.

Sasha makes up this “survival list” with plans and ambitions, which adds structure to the film.

Lenken: As a teenager I wrote many lists on how to improve my life. But Sasha’s list has no point; whatever she says or does, her mother will still be gone. In the book there was a long survival list but we reduced it to some items that actively involve her in situations that we could further develop, with checkboxes adding some playful animation to the film.

There are more tools to help us through the story and some of them are tricky, like a voice-over, voices playing inside her head, flashbacks...

Lenken: Handling those tools truthfully was my biggest challenge with this film. It could have gone all cheesy and sentimental. Usually my type of directing is rather straightforward, this new approach took me out of my comfort zone.

How did you keep it down-to-earth?

Lenken: We did the voice-over while shooting the scenes, when Sigrid was in character. Later, during editing, some extra lines were needed

but I found it impossible. I did 10 takes, used different microphones, struggled with every word and tried everything, but it was impossible to recall the same feelings. Still when watching the film I can hear which lines were recorded on set and which ones were not; they feel less emotional.

What about the flashbacks?

Lenken: They were time consuming. Every one of those short scenes needed to be built up with the actors. The scene in which mum is getting upset takes only three lines, but I needed to create a situation to frame it cor-

rectly for the actors to be more truthful. They had to go through an entire emotional build-up in rehearsal, all actors together as one family.

You created that family bond in the rehearsal phase?

Lenken: It was a dysfunctional family. We created a party scene with friends for Sasha’s 12th birthday, when her mum was still alive. I wanted them to have a feeling of what it was like to be





Director Sanna Lenken with Felix Vanginder-huysen & Margret Albers

a family when mum was sick. Acting out such situations helped the actors to create a kind of mutual intimacy.

The interaction with Sasha's friend Märta, who is growing up at a bit slower pace, is amazing. Was she casted younger or is it all in her acting?

Lenken: Her acting, of course, but it was also in her appearance. Next to Sasha she looks so tiny. Ellen Taura (playing Märta) is a bit younger and

you can tell by her eyes that she is this sweet, loving person. She told me that making this film was the best thing that ever happened in her life.

Shaving Sasha's hair makes her look older.

Lenken: We took a risk! We shaved it off, having no idea how the bald version of Sigrid would look. We couldn't tell beforehand. But she looked cool and more mature. Ella was so scared when she had to do it; you can see on screen how both are blushing, looking so stressful. That is also the moment when Sasha changes her style and clothes; she looks way more cool in her oversized clothes, with earrings and make-up.

Once inside her room, we enter a different universe, full of twinkling lights.

Lenken: Inside the house the mother's legacy is kept alive; probably she was the one doing the interior design. We asked Swedish artists to make little artefacts, curtains, paintings, to give the place a personal look. Sasha's room is full of memories of her mum, small items that she can't throw away yet. But those lamps you'll find in every Swedish girl's room - my daughter's room is full of it. They make Sasha's room more atmospheric.



There are many different ways to mourn, and there is no such thing as 'the right way'.

Lenken: The author Jenny Jägerfeld is actually a children's psychologist. We spoke a lot about grief, and how a child who has lost her mother can still be joyful, but then the next moment be extremely sad. There is no rational way to mourn and grief can take so many different shapes and forms.

There is this song that I loved to hate, but after having seen the film, it is no longer easy to dislike it the same way.

Lenken: Me too, I hated *Country Roads!*

I discussed hundreds of songs with my composer, but Oscar (Töringe, playing Sasha's father) said: *"What are you talking about? I'll do John Denver! I don't care if you don't like it, because I do, and I want to sing it."* Actually it turned out to be the perfect song, the structure made it easy to switch turns, sing it line by line, and then join together in the chorus. That worked out well.

-
Gert Hermans

Kajsa Næss about TITINA

“This is our vain vision on heroism”

In 1926, Italian engineer Umberto Nobile received a phone call from the famous Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen: would he be willing to build an airship and go on an expedition to the North Pole? And yes, his dog Titina can join. As good companions they start their journey, but as the expedition continues both proud men are more and more at each other's throats. Titina sits in her basket and observes... as the only one on board keeping her cool.

TITINA is based on historic events. How loosely could you interpret them?

Kajsa Næss: When a good friend of mine doesn't know the answer to a question, he always says that he is “78% sure”. I guess I can say that 78% of what is happening in TITINA is true. There will always be someone who's not completely satisfied with the accuracy of the facts. I never wanted to make a classic, heroic polar expedition film; I was interested in the human drama behind it. I grew fond of the small stories and anecdotes, more

than of the official truth about the expedition.

Can you give an example?

Næss: The story about how Titina got her name. Apparently Nobile instantly fell in love with a small, hungry street dog in the streets of Rome. When they first met at a Roman piazza, in a nearby café the popular song at that time ‘Titina’ was playing. Ever since that day Titina and Nobile were always together; she joined him on his adventures around the world and at his encounters with the Japanese emperor and the American president. We even made up stories that later on turned out to be true. Like the Norwegian crew wanting to jump from the airship on skis to avoid the crash in Alaska - Norwegians in general think every problem can be solved with skis - and Amundsen indeed made jokes about keeping Titina on board as a rescue provision.

A true story implicates a possible use of archive material.

Næss: Most of the archive material



from the Norge expedition was recently restored and released by the National Library in Norway, and I collected photographs from both expeditions from the Italian Air Force Museum in Vigna di Valle. Those images were used as a source of inspiration for the art direction and cinematography. I found them quite emotional, as they are adding a human touch to the animation. We see those men, excited and proud, doing what they think is right. Look at those Italians, playing in the snow and posing for the camera. It helps to get a better understanding of the relationship between Norwegians and Italians, of the era in which

the story is set, and of the enormous size of the airship. The audience is generally amazed by the material - it is definitely an added value to the film.

The story is told within a certain political context at the end of the 1920's, a period that would have a profound impact on our history.

Næss: This was a time of nationalism all over Europe. Norway was a young nation, and their desire to conquer the Arctic and Antarctic was a nationalistic project, just like Italy wanting to prove itself as a strong and capable country. Both Amundsen and Nobile



were aware of this and played the role of 'national heroes' to achieve their personal goals. The responsibility to satisfy their nations was the first cause of their dispute, which affected their relationship on a personal level.

You decided to introduce Mussolini as a kind of clownish character.

Næss: We portray him as a dangerous lunatic: self-centred, ruthless, and unpredictable. His voice cracks all the time and he only speaks about himself. He might be small, loud and unfocused, but he is not a harmless clown. We granted him the classical symbols of power: a huge office, a marching band and a tough general doing all the dirty work. His speeches and gestures are inspired by archive material, we studied well-known caricatures like Chaplin's THE GREAT DICTATOR and the TV-series ALLO ALLO and took a closer look at contemporary leaders like Donald Trump. It is important to make fun of dangerous political characters; we should at all times look at ourselves with humour and irony to avoid becoming self-righteous.

Nothing or no one escapes from your relativistic perspective?

Næss: In Norway we love stories about our great heroes, especially



those who knew how to survive the harsh Arctic nature. This is our proud and even vain vision on heroism. Roald Amundsen is without doubt one of the biggest heroes in Norwegian history, and in his time he was among the most famous men on earth. I don't want to undermine his extraordinary achievements, but I used his character and reputation to tell about typical human behaviour, and about small remarks leading to big misunderstandings and dramatic events. You can admire a person for his extraordinary talents, but also for his flaws. Some might find my portrait of Amundsen disappointing or even offensive, but in animation you can get away with many things. And finally, we give him a worthy farewell.

The relationship between Amundsen & Nobile starts as a nice fellowship but then evolves in other directions.

Næss: Amundsen and Nobile start out like each other's equals, both being experts in their field. They are ambitious and want to achieve great things, but both are getting a bit older and in a way outdated. There isn't so much left to discover in the arctic, and Nobile's airship, plump and slow, is about to be surpassed by aeroplanes. Even the perception of heroism is about to change, from tormented loners fighting their battles towards dictators leading the masses. We made Nobile younger, more eager and flattered by Amundsen's request, while Amundsen is older, almost tired of expeditions

and more cunning. They do respect and kind of like each other, but pride and suspicion made them irreconcilable. When coming closer to victory, they don't feel like sharing the honour and end up destroying each other.

Amundsen offers Nobile a helping hand... even if that becomes his destiny.

Næss: How Amundsen went out to look for Nobile on the ice has always remained a mystery for Norwegians. He left in a plane that didn't suit the conditions, without the detailed planning that had always been the backbone of his successes. That was nothing like him. In reality Amundsen never got even close to Nobile's camp. Only when meeting Nobile again as an old man, we understand what he has lived with all his life. It helps us to forgive him for his pride and petty feelings.

Titina is mainly an observer. How did you secure her a good place in the story?

Næss: Titina is the most normal and sane character in the film. Food, warmth and comfort, that is all she wants. Norwegians would never take a small dog on a trip to the arctic; her presence is like a contradiction to us. She reminds me of Jacques Tati's character Mr. Hulot, who is portrayed



as a bizarre person, but his presence mainly makes the other so-called “normal” characters act funny and strange. Titina is always there, sometimes as an observer, sometimes as a catalyst, and sometimes as the star of the show. She got her own narrative within the story, and is the only character that really lives ‘in the moment’.

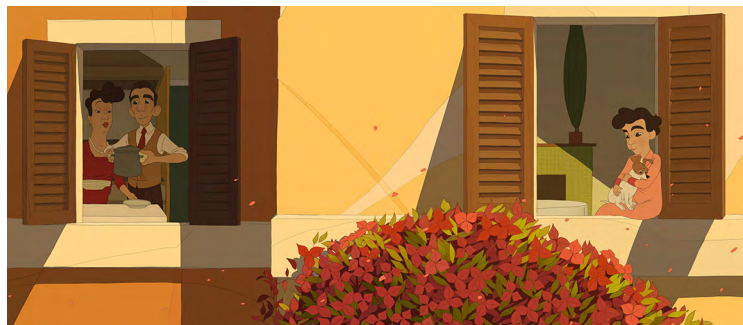
Titina makes a real “doggish” impression. Her body language is proof of profound dog-observation.

Næss: She is like a real dog; not a smart super hero solving all the situations, nor a human-like creature. I really like dogs! Again I was inspired by Tati [who described dogs as marvellous actors](#). We looked at plenty of dog clips on YouTube – the amount of available material is endless. Animation director Marie-Laure Guisset

casted the perfect animators, who all did a wonderful job, making Titina a lively and carefree character. Through small gestures, like the movement of her ears, we could reveal a lot of her character.

When animating the backgrounds and landscapes, it must have been a challenge to avoid the uniformity of endless white landscapes.

Næss: When thinking of the arctic landscape, we tend to imagine that it is all white. But actually the ice comes in plenty of colours, under a light that changes every moment of the day, according to the position of the sun. Art director Emma McCann immediately understood what I was talking about when I mentioned the arctic light, which enabled us to play with colours according to every dramatic situation



or tone we wanted to convey.

This landscape lends itself perfectly to the picture of extreme loneliness or isolation.

Næss: The loneliness fits the story and is something we might fear, but also should embrace. This kind of landscape will always be magical and mysterious. *TITINA* tells about small feelings in waste landscapes. In the days of the Norge expedition, the North Pole was the last blind spot on the map, a place no one had ever seen. And now we don’t know how long it will take before this white spot will turn completely into water.

For the soundtrack you stayed true to the music of that era.

Næss: That was a blessing. I was very happy when I found out about the

song *Titina* - a big hit in the 1920s - and immediately wanted to use it. I’m especially delighted about the dream sequence in which Amundsen sings the song to Titina. Nobile has a classic Italian theme, while Amundsen’s theme sounds more Norwegian, and when both characters meet each other, the composer mixes both themes, as a part of the narrative. I have been blessed with amazing artists in all departments of the production, including the music, and I am extremely grateful for all who offered their time and talent to tell this story.

–
Gert Hermans

Jub Clerc about SWEET AS

“Highlighting the generational trauma of my people”

Jub Clerc is a Nyulnyul and Yawuru film director and screenwriter from Australia. This year, her feature film debut SWEET AS won the Crystal Bear for Best Film in the Generation KPlus section at the Berlinale. *“A film that touched us by virtue of the personal stories of the characters and its impressive backdrops. You can see how various characters grow together”, according to the jury’s citations.*

SWEET AS tells about 15 year old Murra (Shantae Barnes-Cowan) who - thanks to the connections of her uncle - takes part in a photo excursion for at-risk-kids, run by Mitch (Tasma Walton) and Fernando (Carlos Santos Jr.), through her Aboriginal homeland, which turns out a life-changing experience. Murra starts to grow a passion for photography and realises that she must tell her own story in an ever-changing world. Just like director Jub Clerc did. *“My people never had a written language. We danced, painted and sung all our stories from the first sunrise, so I guess storytelling is in my blood.”*

How did you find this particular story?

Jub Clerc: Liz Kearney and I were constantly chatting about our first feature together. After we’d done THE TURNING (anthology drama film based on a collection of short stories by Tim Winton, which premiered at the Melbourne Int’l Film Festival in August 2013) we were like... *“what’s next?”* The next few years we banded around ideas until one night I got a call from Lizzy: *“What about that photo safari story you told me years ago?”* It was like a lightning bolt going off in my head. I burst out laughing and said: *“Omg, of course, that is the story!”*

Was your initial motivation to show the breath-taking beauty of the landscape in the ancestral territory of the first-nation people in Western Australia?

Clerc: My initial motivation was to highlight the generational trauma of my people and the disparities of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. We were simply so lucky that the story originated from all through



the incredible Pilbara country.

Are all the main characters except Fernando, Kylie and Sean part of the first-nation people?

Clerc: Yes, Murra, Elvis, Mitch, Uncle Ian and Grace are all first-nation. And so am I. I am Nyul Nyul and Yawuru from the Kimberley in Western Australia.

Which helped you to find and gather these great actors?

Clerc: I personally know most of the actors, I am even related to some of them, but the rest of the amazing cast we found through a tricky Covid-19 restricted process on zoom, ha!

Also the film’s soundtrack strongly refers to your first-nation background.

Clerc: In the music selection process Indigenous artists were a priority. It was so hard finding the right songs because the film has a kind of mind





of its own! It really felt like that. We'd lay song after song over scenes and the film would throw them back at us in a kind of tantrum! It was pretty brutal choosing songs up until almost the picture lock moment, but they are amazing and it was worth the care of finding the right tunes. I LOVE our soundtrack!

Who is Sylvia, to whom you dedicated your first feature film?

Clerc: Sylvia is my most beloved mum, who has passed away. Contrary to Murra in the film, I had a profoundly amazing relationship with her.

SWEET AS won the Innovation Award at the Melbourne Int'l Film

Festival, the NETPAC Award for Best Film from the Asia/Pacific region at the Toronto Int'l Film Festival and was nominated for an Asia Pacific Screen Award for Best Youth Film. How do you explain that your film was not only understood and appreciated in Australia, but also worldwide, even by young people in Berlin?

Clerc: This is something I can't explain. I was so amazed how well the film translated to such diverse audiences. Could it be the universal story of hope and resilience? Maybe that's what has connected the audiences.

With this Crystal Bear as ultimate recognition.



Clerc: Winning the Crystal Bear was absolutely mind blowing; I couldn't quite believe what was happening! The Berlinale is such a prestigious festival and winning the Bear seemed to shift the conversations around projects being offered to me. It's a bit overwhelming, in a good way.

The comment under Murra's last picture, which she took of the farewell to the participants at the end of the trip, was "Mabu Liyan". What does that mean?

Clerc: Good well-being is the actual translation, but *Liyan* encompasses everything that makes up your soul, spirit, heart, emotional and physical well-being.

Have you already started working on a new project?

Clerc: I'm about to go into pre-production on the political drama TOTAL CONTROL, starring Deb Mailman and Rachel Griffiths for Blackfella Films. Very exciting

—
Uta Beth

Wendy & Domien Huyghe about SEA SPARKLE

“A camera that feels like the sea”

Lena's life is suddenly turned upside down when her father dies in a ship-ping accident. Together with him, two crew members went down. When Lena feels that her father might be blamed for the drama, she is captivated by a strange thought: perhaps a mysterious sea monster lurking in the North Sea is driving ships into the abyss... While SEA SPARKLE takes us from the shore deeper and deeper into the ocean, the film also digs deeper into the young girl's emotional confrontations with her friends and family.

With their feature debut, director Domien Huyghe and screenwriter Wendy Huyghe bring a very personal story to the big screen. Together they explain how their childhood experiences shaped the characters and setting of the film.

You are children of the coast. What does the sea mean to you?

Wendy: You can't influence the rhythm of the tide, but you can learn how to ride the waves. This is how you learn to accept what life is like.

Domien: You can't control the sea, you can only accept it - go with it instead of struggling against it. One of the last memories I have of my dad was when I was about 5 years old holding his hand as we walked away from the waves. The sea is always linked to that image of my father - it is the opening image of the film.

It is no secret that there is an autobiographical side to the film. There was a period of mourning in your own life, and the movie tells about a brother and sister, like you are.

Wendy: Just like in the movie, a sudden loss turned our carefree childhood upside down. Suddenly our life was completely different from that of our peers. Because no one understands what is happening to you, you feel completely alone. Young people experiencing this feel a need to talk about it.

Domien: Losing a loved one is universal, but there are numerous ways to cope with it; there is no right or wrong way. One starts dreaming about monsters, the other one immediately



writes a song about it, like Lena's brother. A lot of our own experiences oozed into how we describe the way Lena's family handles the situation.

Does Lena resemble her father? Or one of you?

Domien: In her persistence, Lena acts very similar to her father. She is the only one who points out the problems that need to be solved. That is what we ourselves have done too late when our dad passed away. Lena is a combination of how we did it and how we should have done it.

Wendy: I was the eldest child at home, I felt like I had to take care of everyone and therefore I couldn't face my own sadness. When I see Lena screaming, I can't help but think: I never did that. I've always suppressed my anger. I envy her - she isn't like me, but I wish I had been more like her.

In her grief, she is rather egocentric.

Wendy: The story is entirely told from Lena's perspective. She is angry with her mother, angry with the whole world. Yet we understand her. The only message we give is: together you



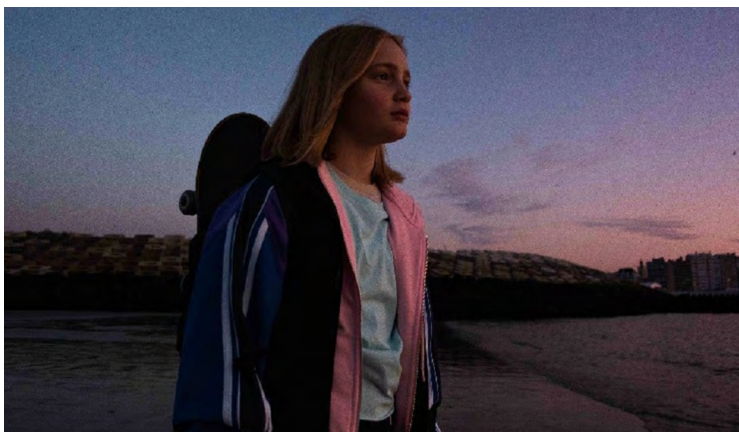
are stronger. Only when the family comes together at the end the grieving can really begin.

SEA SPARKLE is only vaguely set in time. The interiors (the shop, the living room, etc.) could just as easily date from 30 years ago.

Domien: The story is set in the summer of 2021, but many sets make a timeless impression. That is typical for Ostend, the coastal town where the story is set: time standing still and meanwhile moving on, the clash between things that remain and things that change. Surrounded by ultra-modern buildings is an old fisherman's café where fishermen still hang at the bar every day. We didn't have to change anything about that interior, and the people sitting at the bar fit perfectly with the film. Our DoP Anton Mertens knew perfectly how to capture the soul of the city.

What is the secret behind the way you direct your actors?

Wendy: Being an excellent people's manager, you give them plenty of confidence and put them at ease. You speak a lot with them, which helped Saar (Rogiers, playing Lena) and Senne (Rous, playing Vincent) to fully and completely understand their characters.



Domien: Saar chose the other actors together with me. That way we ensured there would be a mutual understanding.

Choosing Saar was maybe your greatest merit. She is an overwhelmingly 'normal' girl. How to pick such an unobtrusive, neutral

profile among all the candidates?

Domien: Protagonists are often profiled as outsiders, but also an ordinary, everyday girl can be confronted with grief and loss. During the casting we mainly asked about the candidates' attitudes to life. Although Saar was only 12 years old, she was very mature in her thinking. She didn't need much to convince me. She learned to sail, skate, dive... It's incredible what Saar has achieved in a few months. We had a stand-in for all the scenes, but she did almost everything herself.

It was Lena who controlled how the camera moved?

Domien: Our priority was: three young actors and a dramatic story. Everything else - lights, camera, costumes, etc. - came second. The technical choices never should curtail the freedom of the actors. We did almost the entire film without *découpage* - we consistently filmed from Lena's point of view. It was incredible how close she allowed the camera to be without being thrown off balance. Thanks to her talent, we were able to maintain our loose style of acting throughout the film, using long shots and then zooming close at the right moment. This allowed the actors a lot of freedom, not only in their dialogues but also in their movements.





In the editing, you could feel the undulating approach of the camera in all takes. Someone told me: *“the camera feels like the sea”*; I thought that was a very nice compliment.

One striking scene is when Lena goes diving in the dark. How did you handle it?

Domine: We went to a water studio where all the lighting was placed in the water. For Saar it was a demanding assignment: while diving, she had to keep up her mimicry, while a crew of divers with a camera swam around

her. There was a team of 40 people in the water to control lighting, safety, etc. Usually when I’m directing I’m right next to my actors, but during those two days I had to shout my directions through a microphone from 30 metres away. That was hell for me; I want to be as close to them as possible.

There is another impressive scene in the ship’s wheelhouse.

Domien: That was the most magical moment of the film for me. Such a wheelhouse is tiny; I was huddled in a

corner with my monitor and couldn’t move. We would first rehearse the scene but when Saar started acting our DoP noticed that something was happening. He got closer and closer with the camera for four minutes. Shouting ‘cut’ after such a marvellous moment felt totally cruel.

beautifully wrap up reality. Though Lena is constantly angry or sad, we make it clear that there is always hope.

–
Gert Hermans

You participated in the Cinekid Script Lab. Did that help you?

Wendy: Absolutely! It’s super interesting to ask yourself questions about what you want to convey and why. You can solve many doubts in such a lab, together with people struggling with similar problems. In one session actors came to play our scenes; I picked up a lot from that.

Domien: I learned a lot about tools to guide the actors. I think such a Lab would be very useful for any film I will ever make.

Are you happy with the movie you made?

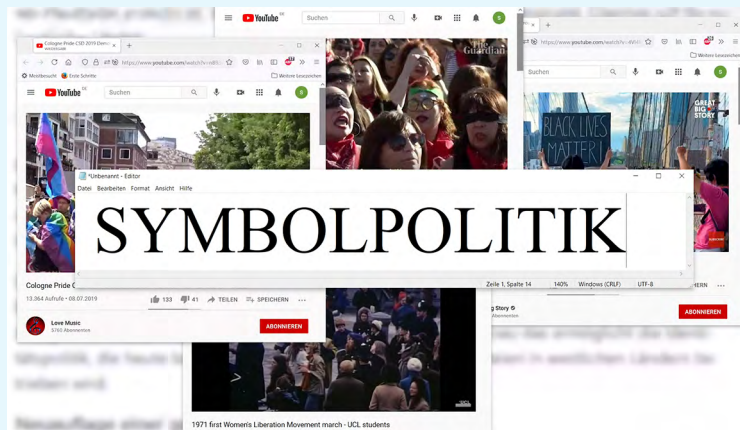
Domien: I grew up watching Spielberg’s movies and also E.T. and THE GOONIES have a poignant side. I was 15 when my father died and nowhere did I find stories for my age that showed the gritty side of grief. You could find that in films about falling in love or about divorce, but not about grief. SEA SPARKLE does nothing to

DEAR FATHER, YOUR DAUGHTER (LIEBER PAPA, DEINE TOCHTER)

Identity politics? For Karoline's father all woke and other idealistic ideas are only there to distract us from the real problems. But Karoline, who is also the director of the film, stands her ground and tries to communicate with her father about uneasy topics. Unavoidably their conversations get personal.

The film is a desktop documentary, showcasing snippets from videos made by influencers, activists and politicians, news articles and mail exchanges. Karoline's cursor moves across the screen and the viewer has to keep up with the fast-paced rhythm of footage popping up and disappearing again. It emphasises how social media has become a vessel that fuels political discourse and movements like *#metoo* and *#blacklivesmatter*. This never-ending stream of information and opinions is interrupted by the telephone signal, when Karoline waits for her dad to pick up the call.

In their conversations both choose their words carefully and try to reflect and understand each other, which creates tensions nevertheless. It takes



courage to voice what is important for them because they do not want to strain their relationship. The film does not claim that the protagonists speak for their generations because it is focused on their personal relationship and dialogues. Karoline includes old family videos that show the director as a child, looking up to her dad and getting encouraged by him.

Disagreeing with one's parents can happen easily, and even more easily about politics. With socio-economic

and environmental challenges ahead young people seem to be more interested in political subjects and demand their voices to be heard. The film underlines that it is worth listening and to communicate with each other, even or because the conversation is not over and will certainly continue.

Karoline Rößler's film was part of the *doxs!* festival programme in 2022. Furthermore, it was discussed in the intergenerational conference "Beyond age limitations: Positions and practic-

es of documentary film between the generations" that was organised by doxs! and continues with its partner festival the Duisburger Filmwoche.

DEAR FATHER, YOUR DAUGHTER
 Director: Karoline Rößler
 Germany, 2021, 17'
 Production: University Hildesheim
 Contact: karoline.roessler@outlook.com

-
 Tanja Tlatlik

The Doxspot column is published with the help of the *doxs!* festival for children & youth documentaries in Duisburg. www.do-xs.de.

doxs! DOKUMENTARFILME
 FÜR KINDER
 UND JUGENDLICHE

Family Matters - The works of Nena van Driel

At this year's Berlinale, screenwriter Nena van Driel was represented with no less than three films in the Generation section. All of those films featured strong and complex female lead characters and were directed by three no less exciting female directors. Besides Zara Dwinger's (director of the terrific short films *SIRENE* and *A HOLIDAY FROM MOURNING*) refreshing feature film debut *KIDDO*, Luca Meisters' *MAGMA* and Emma Brand-erhorst's *MA MERE ET MOI* lit up the Generation shorts.

At first glance the two short fictions seem very different. In *MAGMA*, nine year old Esra's world is unhinged by her father's sudden disability. A dramatic lie to her new friends escalates and leads to a painful confrontation. In *MA MÈRE ET MOI*, 17 year old Kees can't hardly wait to move out of her family home and gain distance from her clinging mother. Together they embark on an emotional road trip from Amsterdam to Marseille.

What connects the two very different protagonists though, is an emotional journey culminating in a confronta-



MA MERE ET MOI

tion with a parent, setting in motion a shift in the fixed role patterns.

We asked Nena van Driel about this specific theme: *"I guess this was something I had a lot to tell about. At points it feels like a coincidence, but I guess it was a relationship that I felt compelled to write about for a few years. The female lead characters are no coincidence though. For my first films I felt strongly about putting out female perspectives that are not about 'finding love' in a romantic sense."*

In both films, a confrontation (in one

case leading to a separation) with a parent is the only thing that allows the characters to see each other in a new way, thus enabling a new kind of relationship. Is there a connection between the protagonists and the stories (or is this just a construction in the mind of a programmer)? *"That's interesting, I haven't thought about that in this concrete sense. But I'm starting to learn a lot about the process after writing, when stories come to tell me where I was during the writing. It wasn't intentional. But I do believe people sometimes (un)consciously*

separate themselves within a relationship to find new perspectives. Stepping out of the narrative of expectations, I think, is challenging when it comes to family, and therefore extra interesting in storytelling."

Both *MAGMA* and *MA MERE ET MOI* leave their protagonists in very different situations. In both cases, however, we leave them in positions in which a family framework can be reformatted, and a new nearness can be developed. And of course despite all commonalities *MAGMA* and *MA MERE ET MOI* are in the first place two great independent works of art realised by great directors!

MAGMA and *MA MERE ET MOI* are both distributed by the Hamburg Short Film Agency.

The Short Cut column is published with the help of the [Mo&Friese KinderKurzFilmFestival](#) dedicated to short films. As a part of the Hamburg Short Film Agency the festival aims to present documentaries and experimental films in addition to animation and short films as well as to arouse the curiosity of children and to stimulate their imagination.

Creating a children's studio from scratch... Again

The Ukrainian Veselka Children's TV Studio



Dina Ibrahimova, Head of the Children's TV Studio Veselka ("Rainbow") is a well-known personality in the Ukrainian children's television industry. Cheerful, optimistic and always in for friendly advice. Educated as a teacher, she founded the project in 2005. In 2014, the studio was forced to leave the tumultuous East-Ukrainian city of Luhansk and relocate to Kyiv. It took time and effort for Veselka to shine again in all its colours. But sometimes history repeats itself. Like on the morning of 24 February 2022... *"I needed to create and develop a children's studio from scratch two times already, and both times it was an incredibly hard job."*

Dina Ibrahimova: Years ago, when a local television station was looking for a children's programme, I was asked to create it. Shooting the first episodes took us endlessly long, but we learned quickly and I liked it a lot. Our teachers were TV professionals, like the director Dmytro Poltorin, who never drank or smoked in the presence of children, was always dressed



neatly and fashionable, and loved working with children so much that he enrolled in a pedagogical institute for child psychology. On our festival trips, we learned how programmes abroad were structured and what did make them stand out or fail.

This is what Veselka TV is about: a studio for young TV presenters, developing their own creative projects. Veselka produces TV content, such

as the DIY programme Veselka Workshop. Other popular formats are talk shows (MLAD & STAR), game shows (GAME LIBRARY or A LITTLE COUNTRY IN MY POCKET), quizzes (NATIVE UKRAINE), and all kinds of reports, cartoons and master classes with showbiz stars, that are also available on their YouTube channel.

Ibrahimova: We had 80 children constantly at work in the studio as pre-

senters or journalists. We broadcasted four morning programmes, and had our own YouTube channel with about three million views. In 2012, our students starred in the feature film TIMUR AND THE TEAM, by Natalia Galuzo from Belarus. For the first time I saw how a movie was shot.

That experience marked the beginning of a new era for Ukraine and for Veselka.

Ibrahimova: In May 2014, coming back from the film premiere in Minsk, we were taken off the train in Kharkiv. They told us the train wouldn't go any further, due to military activities. That was the start of the Donbas war, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Donbas region. In the evening we were put on another train to Luhansk, where frightened parents were waiting for us at the station.

Was this a sign to immediately close the studio?

Ibrahimova: We had our classes in the library building, opposite the office of the Ukrainian Security Service. When



huge barricades began to appear, we decided for an early summer vacation. Friends convinced me to come for a few weeks to Kyiv. I packed a small bag and left. Who could predict that a few weeks would turn into years? I arrived in Kyiv on Friday 13th June.

You immediately started thinking about moving the studio from Luhansk to Kyiv?

Ibrahimova: Not at all. I didn't want to move there in the first place. But then in a bombing, our library rooms took a direct hit and everything burned down. We sat and waited for 1st September to go back to work. We are teachers, this date is subconsciously embedded in us, until one day we realised that 1st September was coming, and there was no way we could go back. We had to move our studio to Kyiv. When we started looking for a location, we didn't realise how expensive Kyiv was. Which is... insanely expensive! Renting a place would be out of the question. Friends came to the rescue; one of them made me a brilliant offer: I could pick a location in Kyiv, he would pay for the first three months, and from then on it was up to me... At once 17 pupils from Luhansk came over, with their parents looking for housing in the vicinity of the new studio.

How did the children deal with these changes?

Ibrahimova: During the spring break, we took them on a trip to the Carpathians. One of our favourite songs in the studio's repertoire was a song about home. Around the campfire in the woods, we started singing. First, one child started crying, then another one, and another one... a general hysteria broke out. Everyone had something to remember: their house in Luhansk, a crib, a pillow, a dog, a toy... The kids got so affected by the song that we decided to take it off our repertoire.

How quickly were you able to reach a satisfying number of students again?

Ibrahimova: After three years we were able to stand on our own feet again and feel confident. By the beginning of 2022, the studio had about 70 students and we even opened a branch in another Kyiv district to welcome 25 more students.

Then came 24 February... Was there a feeling of déjà vu?

Ibrahimova: There was mainly a terrible confusion: Where to run? What to do? When I woke up that morning, the city was queuing for bread and water.

But my husband and I never thought about going anywhere else; I decided to stay.

The studio resumed work in the spring of 2022. How do you manage under such circumstances?

Ibrahimova: Currently, the classes take place in a former cinema, nowadays the cultural centre Art Bratislava. We use the large basement as a bomb shelter. Sometimes, dressed up nicely, we make crafts or host a programme. The blackouts are difficult, with the place only being heated with some electric heaters. When the electricity is cut, we lose our mobile communication with the parents, who might get terribly worried. But we made an agreement with them that despite everything, Veselka will go on. Today, approximately 40 children are involved in the studio, which is not enough to operate normally. We have to count on subsidies and grants, and we cooperate with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

Nevertheless you're still making new plans.

Ibrahimova: We're eagerly awaiting the start of a new project with displaced children. We have extensive experience in working with children



Dina Ibrahimova

with disabilities, and now we're planning to build an inclusive children's media studio.

Veselka has always been extremely active with trips, festivals, etc. Can you still keep your children motivated?

Ibrahimova: In April 2023 our students went to Wroclaw (Poland) and Dresden (Germany) to film new episodes for WEEKEND ON WHEELS. Some of our students currently living abroad joined them there. This was already the third trip since the start of the full-scale invasion. This is how we try to keep up the pace.

–
Volodymyr Diagilev

Diana Cam Van Nguyen about LOVE, DAD

“We still don’t talk about it”

When Diana Cam Van Nguyen rediscovered the letters her dad wrote her from prison, she was surprised about the loving tone. That tone seemed to have disappeared now – where has it gone? She decides to write him back, in the form of a short film, that is not only stunningly honest, but also astonishing on a graphic level. No wonder she has to climb the stage at the doxs! Festival to receive her award for LOVE, DAD, and face the audience...

Diana Cam Van Nguyen: In 2005 my father was taken one year in custody for not paying taxes on the brand of tobacco he launched. When stumbling upon the letters that he sent from prison I was surprised - they were full of emotions that now I don't feel any longer. I wondered why he could only share those feelings in letters and never in person. I made my movie as if it was a letter to him.

How did your approach towards your father evolve during the production process?

Van Nguyen: It took me 1.5 years to

write the script and develop the film (the entire process took 2.5 years) and only then I understood what I actually wanted to say. In the early versions you could feel a great anger, but later I softened my tone. I understood that my father should be the first person to see this film, and when he finally did, there were no expectations on my side - the change already took place inside me. He didn't comment at all on the topic, but just asked practical questions about the actors and the budget. For me it was important that he understood the message I wanted to convey, even if we still don't talk about it.

The animation technique you used is remarkable.

Van Nguyen: It was hard to develop as I didn't have many references. The idea was to layer my footage as if it was a collage of memories. Describing this to my crew, nobody understood what I really wanted so we did a lot of tests to make my method clear. We had 10 shooting days on locations and in a studio with a green screen. Then



we took it to post production.

Was the biggest challenge in the technical or in the emotional part?

Van Nguyen: Since I couldn't distance myself from the topic, it was hard to define my position; sometimes I was the director and sometimes I was the protagonist. As I hadn't solved the issue inside myself, throughout the entire writing process it was difficult to protect my own feelings. I would recommend you not to do it simultaneously; wait until you have processed your emotions and only then make the film.

Has the film helped you to find acceptance?

Van Nguyen: I see it as a part of my life that I shared with others by making this movie. Growing older and having

my own life helped me to deal with the issue and to feel less connected to my dad. He and I are still living in the Czech Republic, while my mum and sister have returned to Vietnam. I visit him every now and then and met his new family.

You're already working on your next project?

Van Nguyen: The script is still in an early stage of development. It will be a feature fiction, combining live action and animation, inspired by my experiences with arranged marriages. Having a double Vietnamese/Czech citizenship, I got an offer to marry a Vietnamese guy for money, just to get him to live in Europe. That is the starting point of my story.

Based on a Q&A at the doxs! festival

It's almost time for CMC 2023 Live and Online! 4-6th July

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The Amazing Maurice

Animation, Germany, UK, 2023

Directed by Toby Genkel & Florian Westermann

Prod.: Ulysses Films, Cantilever Media

World Sales: Global Screen

Phone: ++49-89-24-41-29-55-00

info@globalscreen.de

www.globalscreen.de

And the King Said, What a Fantastic Machine

Documentary, Sweden, Denmark, 2023

Directed by Axel Danielson & Maximilien van Aertryck

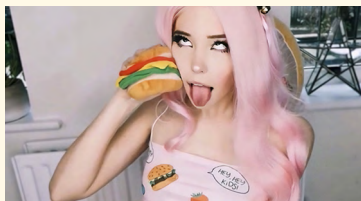
Prod.: Plattform Prod., SVT, Bullitt Film

World Sales: Heretic

Phone: ++30-21-06-00-52-60

info@heretic.gr

www.heretic.gr



Birk & Magna - The Dark Secret of the Mine

Feature Film, Norway, 2023

Directed by Christer Steffensen

Prod. & World Sales: Truewest AS

Phone: ++47-90 06-98-01

nl@truewest.no

www.truewest.no

Bullets

Feature Film, Sweden, 2023

Directed by Peter Pontikis

Prod. & World Sales: Thin Skin Films

hello@thinskinfilms.com

www.thinskinfilms.com

Dancing Queen

Feature Film, Norway, 2023

Directed by Aurora Gossé

Prod.: Amacord

World Sales: LevelK

Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72

tine.klint@levelk.dk

www.levelk.dk



Delegation

Feature Film, Poland, Israel, Germany, 2023

Directed by Asaf Saban

Prod.: Koi Studio, Gum Films, In Good Company

World Sales: New Europe Film Sales

Phone: ++48-69-49-67-610

office@neweuropemfilmsales.com

www.neweuropemfilmsales.com

Exodus

Feature Film, Sweden, 2023

Directed by Abbe Hassan

Prod.: B-Reel Films, SVT

World Sales: LevelK

Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72

tine.klint@levelk.dk

www.levelk.dk

Four Souls of Coyote

Animation, Hungary, 2023

Directed by Aron Gauder

Prod. & World Sales: Cinemon Entertainment

Phone: ++36-1-78-07-751

studio@cinemon.hu

www.cinemon.hu;

www.4soulofcoyote.com



A Greyhound of a Girl

Animation, Luxembourg, Italy, UK,... 2023

Directed by Enzo d'Alò

Prod.: Paul Thiltges Distr., Aliante, Jam Media,...

World Sales: GFM Animation

Phone: ++44-20-71-86-63-00

general@gfmanimation.com

www.gfmanimation.com

My Fairy Troublemaker

Animation, Luxembourg, Germany, China, 2023

Directed by Caroline Origer

Prod.: Fabrique D'Image, Ella Filmprod., SERU Animation

World Sales: Global Screen

Phone: ++49-89-24-41-29-55-00

info@globalscreen.de

www.globalscreen.de

A Mystery on the Cattle Hill Express

Animation, Norway, 2023

Directed by Will Ashurst

Prod.: Qvisten Animation

World Sales: New Europe Film Sales

Phone: ++48-69-49-67-610

office@neweuropemfilmsales.com

www.neweuropemfilmsales.com

Nayola

Animation, Portugal, France, Belgium,... 2022

Directed by José Miguel Ribeiro

Prod.: Praça Filmes, S.O.I.L., JPL Films & iLLuster BV



World Sales: UDI – Urban Distr. Int'l
 Phone: ++33-1-48-70-46-56
contact@urbandistrib.com
www.urbandistrib.com



Nelly Rapp – The Secret of the Black Forest

Feature Film, Sweden, 2023
 Directed by Johan Rosell
 Production: SF Studios Prod., Film i Väst, SVT
 World Sales: Reinvent
 Phone: ++34-91-54-88-877
info@reinvent.dk
www.reinvent.dk



New Tales of Franz

Feature Film, Germany, Austria, 2023
 Directed by Johannes Schmid

Prod.: IF Prod., Nikolaus Geyrhalter
 Filmprod.
 World Sales: Atlas Int'l Film
 Phone: ++49-89-20-07-19-09
mail@atlasfilm.com
www.atlasfilm.com



Okthanksbye

Feature Film, the Netherlands, 2023
 Directed by Nicole van Kilsdonk
 Prod.: Labyrintfilm, BNN-VARA
 World Sales: Labyrintfilm
 Phone: ++31-20-68-81-843
info@labyrintfilm.nl
www.labyrintfilm.nl

Rosa and The Stone Troll

Animation, Denmark, 2023
 Directed by Karla Nor Holmbäck
 Prod.: Dansk Tegnefilm, A. Film Prod., DR
 World Sales: LevelK
 Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72
tine.klint@levelk.dk
www.levelk.dk

She – Hero (Mimi)

Feature Film, Slovak Republic, 2023
 Directed by Mira Fornay
 Prod. & World Sales: Mirafox
 Phone: ++42-1-91-01-76- 857
mira.fornay@mirafox.sk
www.mirafox.sk



Sixteen

Feature Film, France, Belgium, 2023
 Directed by Philippe Lioret
 Prod.: Fin Août Prod., GapBusters
 World Sales: Orange Studio
 Phone: ++ 33-1-57-36-11-11
contact.orangestudio@orange.com
www.orange-studio.fr

Teach Me If You Can

Documentary, France, 2023
 Directed by Emilie Therond
 Prod.: Winds, Daisy G. Nichols Prod.,
 World Sales: Winds Films
 Phone: ++33-1-55-07-80-83
hello@windfilms.com
www.windfilms.com

Three Robbers and a Lion

Animation, Norway, 2022
 Directed by Rasmus A. Sivertsen
 Prod.: Qvisten Animation, Copenhagen Bombay
 World Sales: Sola Media
 Phone: ++49-711-96-89-44-40
post@sola-media.com
www.sola-media.com



We Will Not Fade Away

Documentary, Ukraine, 2023
 Directed by Alisa Kovalenko
 Prod.: Trueman Prod., Haka Films, East Roads Films
 World Sales: Trueman
truemanproduction@ua.fm
www.facebook.com/truemanproductioncompany

More information on all these films you will find on our website:
www.ecfaweb.org/european-childrens-film-network/feature-films

Rasmus A. Sivertsen

Personal impression by Xiaojuan Zhou

I have to admit that I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting Rasmus in person. We agreed to take a coffee during the Berlinale 2023, until a festival screening incident regarding his new film kept him away... Over the years, I have watched most of his films including a much earlier GURIN WITH A FOXTAIL that had his hands as a head animator. His stop motion trilogy featuring absolutely charming characters Louis and Luca, were gigantic domestic hits and sent French distributors into a frenzy bidding war. One of the three

films was brought to Quebec by our company. So far, he's credited for directing over a dozen animation films which were domestic hits, festival darlings and commercial best sellers. An animation specialist once told me that every independent animation film normally takes seven years to materialise. If that holds true, Rasmus might have started way before his birth? Or was he born with a magic wand in hand?



THE 'MEET THE MENTORS' Q&A

Rasmus A. Sivertsen, Animation director, Norway

You are a top Norwegian animation director whose films are popular both at home and abroad. How did it all start?

Rasmus A. Sivertsen: The house I grew up in was filled with animation. My father is an animator who made classical hand drawn 2D short films. Working from home, he sat in the living room with a light table, flipping and drawing like a wild maniac surrounded by huge stacks of paper. Both my brother

and I were greatly inspired by this and spent most of our time drawing, analysing classic Disney movies frame by frame, and talking (only) about animation. When it was time to choose a career, animation was really the only thing I knew how to do.

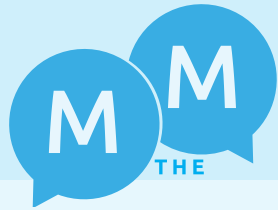
Who, fictional or real, inspired you the most?

Sivertsen: It was of course very inspiring to help out with my dad's films as a kid. Back then the animation had to be shot on a film camera and then you had to wait weeks for the developed



LOUIS & LUCA





film to see the result of your work. It was an out-of-body experience to see the drawings actually move, although always a little disappointing, because I had built up such a grand expectation of how good the animation would be during the wait.

Another thing that really got me fired up was the storytelling of Carl Barks and the absurd humour in Tex Avery's wacky shorts.

Now that I'm older I'm more inspired by human behaviour and our emotional lives in general.

Can you tell us how you managed to be so prolific while ensuring the level of quality?

Sivertsen: That would not have been possible without the incredible team at my company Qvisten Animation: 80 highly creative and innovative artists

that really know each other through and through and can play on each other's strengths. This, combined with an efficient and trimmed pipeline, makes us bring the most out of any budget. I'm really fond of teamwork, when the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. I'm a bit torn about the puzzle piece in a co-production model that many animated projects end up with, since it is hard to create that sense of ownership in a team when the project is split up into so many pieces.

Norway is indisputably a leader in Scandinavia when it comes to producing arthouse and commercial

films for not only adults but also children. May we know what exactly you are doing right in Norway that has brought you so much success?

Sivertsen: Norway has been blessed with a good funding system for films and there has been a political will to push for a high market share for Norwegian films in the domestic market. This has resulted in both critically acclaimed films like *THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD* and big crowd pleasers like *THREE WISHES FOR CINDERELLA*. The domestic market share for Norwegian films in the cinemas has been around 20% for the last decade, which is pretty good for such a

small country.

How much did your own childhood memory or film watching experience influence your filmmaking for children nowadays?

Sivertsen: Every time I approach a new project, I tap into how I felt as a child when I had a good cinematic experience. I was a sensitive kid and films really affected me and shook me up. Some films I could go around and think about for weeks. A film should be an emotional journey, but at the same time, I loved humour in films when I was a kid. I think that when a family goes to the cinema, they would like to be told a great story, have a good time and laugh together. How to make an audience laugh is a science that I never get tired of exploring. It is a miracle every time it happens!

How do you and your team decide on the type of animation style for each production?

Sivertsen: Each story and project demand a different look, style or technique. I found that traditional IP's and stories suit stop motion well. I'm very happy about Norwegian audiences embracing this technique. CGI works very well with bigger adventure stories that require big sets and lots of





JUST SUPER

VFX.

Lately we have started to combine techniques. Our latest feature THREE ROBBERS AND A LION combines real, miniature stop-motion sets with characters animated in CGI. The photographed sets add plenty of warmth and great, real lighting to the film, while the characters benefit from the flexibility that CGI gives, especially for the facial animation. I think this is the first feature film ever to use this combination. It was something that we were forced to do because of the pandemic, but we liked the experience and the result so much that now we might adapt it for future projects as well.

What are the do's and don'ts in animation?

Sivertsen: I love the current state of the art form. There are so many different stories told through so many different styles on all kinds of platforms. It seems like everything is possible and that the audience is getting more and more into animation. There is more animation for young adults and teens than before as well, which is great. There should not be any rules, but I always find it inspiring when projects use the medium for what it is worth, when the unlimited possibilities of the technique are exercised.

Animation is a very universal genre.

How important is it for you to make your films travel beyond Norway?

Sivertsen: In my latest films I have explored themes that are very important to me. The film JUST SUPER is a fun superhero movie, but at the same time it is about the pressure many kids and teens feel about being perfect all the time. I therefore always wish for a big audience for my films, to share my explorations with as many people as possible. But it is hard for specific Norwegian stories and typical Norwegian characters to travel abroad. In the future I will focus on stories with a more international approach. At the same time, I will try to keep and bring some Nordic touches and values to the table. And, if done well, they can be successful both locally and internationally.

What does competition against studios mean to you?

Sivertsen: It is impossible for a small Norwegian animation studio to compete with the major studios in terms of budget and size. That is why we must focus on being equally good at telling stories, even though our visuals will never get to their level. Scripts and storyboards are not that expensive and should have a high quality regardless of the budget. But what is interesting is that local

audiences choose to go and see our films before they see the major Hollywood studio's films, even though our films are made at a fraction of their budget. Our films are usually made on a budget between 3-5 million USD. More people actually went to the cinema to see our latest animated film than the latest Disney or DreamWorks movies here in Norway.

Do you plan to make live-action films for children?

Sivertsen: Interestingly I get this question quite often. My heart is closest to animation, so I have no immediate urge to do live-action films. I have done some live-action commercials, but I must admit that I always felt that when shooting a live-action film it was hard to get the exaggerated fun and magical feel that you get in animation. However, it could be fun to make a film that combines animation and live-action in a new way at some point.

What are the other "mountains" you wish to climb?

Sivertsen: I dream of making a European FAMILY.GUY, an animated satire for grownups that pinpoints and plays around with the way lives are lived in Europe.

Mascha Halberstad about OINK

“Not all people are good”

When nine year old Babs gets a piglet as a gift from her mysterious Grandfather Tuitjes, her mother – a hardliner vegetarian – isn't exactly pleased. Babs does everything she can to teach 'Oink' some manners, so she can keep him. As occupied as she is with her mission, little does she notice how a villain has evil plans for her beloved pig.

OINK, the first Dutch feature stop-motion film, wins all hearts with its overwhelming charm and a surprising amount of excrement. A plainly hilarious and exciting animation film, on which Mascha Halberstad and her team have worked for eight years.

OINK looks rather 'Dutch', both in its sets (tight residential areas with small cars in the driveway) and in its somewhat 'cheeky' style.

Mascha Halberstad: That's where the story takes place: in a Dutch village. I wanted to show the country as most Dutch people know it. Not the touristic tulip-Netherlands, but the terraced-house-Netherlands, with

its fencing and identical houses and characteristic streets, which I liked to depict.

Yet the film will be released in France, Italy, Japan and many other countries, so it must have some universal appeal.

Halberstad: It's all in the theme. OINK is about trust, about the loss of trust and about 'not to be trusted'. This is mainly reflected in the relationships between Babs and Grandpa Tuitjes, and between her mother and father. So there is a whole narrative line for adults, while the poo is mainly addressing the children.

Yet the underlying story is pretty intense. Is that what attracted you to Tosca Menten's book?

Halberstad: Definitely! There are many differences between the original book and my movie, but that element has certainly remained. I like that there's a character who simply turns out to be a plain jerk. I deliberately wanted to make a film that does not pamper children, as in reality not



all people are good.

Especially for the film you created your own Holy Motion animation studio. Why did you need one?

Halberstad: I founded Holy Motion together with producer Marleen Slot. We thought it was a waste of money to rent a space, as finishing a stop-motion movie might take you years. So we bought a 650 square metres space literally around the corner from my home. A good investment, as we can rent it out to other filmmakers.

Where does the job of a stop-motion director begin and end?

Halberstad: Basically, I do everything except animating. From writing the

screenplay to designing the puppets, from creating the whole film universe to directing the actors, the animators and the editing. I also created all secondary characters. I first made the puppets myself, and immediately gave them a clear character. Those examples then went to the puppet makers, who really knew how to perfectly convert my designs. As a director, I am carrying the entire load. Fortunately, the stop-motion process is very fluid and easily allows you to improvise. Perfect for a self-taught artist like me; I didn't follow an animation film course, but I did follow my intuition!

– [Fien Meynendonckx](#)

OKTHANKSBYE

Screening for a hearing-impaired audience

It was a remarkable moment during the BUFF Festival: the enthusiasm for OKTHANKSBYE (Nicole van Kilsdonk, the Netherlands) concerned not only the film, but especially the Q&A. The audience, which mainly consisted of deaf and hearing-impaired youngsters, made clear to screenwriter Lilian Sijbesma how delighted they felt to recognise themselves in the main characters. According to festival programmer Daniel Lundquist, this special screening was no coincidence.

Daniel Lundquist: For several years we have been collaborating with an organisation for deaf people. When we first got in touch, they were organising a film festival, but met some challenges when it came to marketing and ticketing, and felt how their event happened completely isolated from the hearing community. For BUFF it has always been crucial to be inclusive, open and accessible to everyone. We started collaborating and as a part of our festival we have since then been able to offer both public weekend screenings and school screenings,

in which we invited both pupils from regular schools and from schools for deaf people. And with OKTHANKSBYE we found the perfect match.

Jamie is only just starting to get settled at her new Dutch boarding school for deaf children when she gets an alarming message about her beloved grandmother, who ended up in a hospital in Paris. When the family leaves for Paris in panic, Jamie stays behind, feeling completely powerless. Imane, the most rebellious girl in class, suggests they embark on the trip on their own. Whether you can hear or not, such a journey can never be anything else than adventurous and full of challenges. But after trekking for days through the rural Lowlands, will they finally make it to Paris?

OKTHANKSBYE premiered at the New York Int'l Children's Film Festival: *"This charming film gracefully explores the way two girls – one with a cochlear implant and one without – navigate friendship, the deaf community, and the hearing world. (...) OKTHANKS-*



BYE takes care to represent the deaf community with graciousness and accuracy." The film makes it easy to empathise with the main characters through an inventive use of sound; often we hear exactly the same as what the characters hear. Although initially with an alienating effect, this method ensures an even more correct and complete viewing experience.

Lilian Sijbesma: When one day we visited an institute for deaf children, we were surprised to see how happy and comfortable those kids felt, "signing" all day, without the pressure from

the outside world's expectations. It boosted their confidence. That is where OKTHANKSBYE took its start, a film about an unconfident girl's journey on her way to trust and acceptance. The roles of all students in the film are played by kids from that institute.

Lundquist: When I first saw the film by Nicole van Kilsdonk (remember TAKING CHANCES) I realised immediately this was a perfect fit for BUFF, and for our collaboration with the Deaf Film Festival. It is an exciting story and a well-made film full of thrilling adven-





tures that works for both younger or teenage audiences.

We saw the film in the festival in a cinema full of deaf children.

Lundqvist: It was an amazing experience. The Q&A with screenwriter Lilian Sijbesma was challenging since we had to do it in English, translating into both Swedish and sign language, and the other way around for the questions from the audience, but it worked very well. What the kids mainly wanted to know is why a hearing person would make a film about hearing-impaired children.

Sijbesma: Because everyone should be represented in cinema. We thought it would be really important to have

such a film, so we consulted many deaf people in the writing process and used their stories and anecdotes.

Lundqvist: What struck me most was how important it is to feel represented in a film. It was so obvious that for this audience it meant a lot to see themselves portrayed on the big screen – not in a film that would mainly be about a handicap, but in an exciting road movie adventure about two witty, clever and active young girls.

Sijbesma: Nicole wanted to make the film on two conditions; a) a deaf protagonist and b) a road movie. The genre is often used to depict an inner journey, which is a good start for a script writer. Our protagonists are

on a journey, not only geographically but also inside themselves. Adding a touch of humour was easy through the colourful characters they met along the way.

When screening this film, what are the differences between a hearing and a non-hearing audience?

Sijbesma: Deaf students recognise all the details from everyday life in school, how classes are organised, the light switches at the door, all those common things... Hearing children are amazed to discover how it all works. But Jamie, feeling kind of shy and secluded, was equally recognisable for all audiences. The humour is the same for both – everyone

laughs at the same moments, except for some small jokes that were only in sign language. But we didn't know much about our audience; the film was initially made for Dutch TV so it hasn't been screened in many cinemas.

What about the crew?

Sijbesma: All actors play exactly who they really are: deaf, or hearing impaired, or hearing. The main actress is deaf, the other one is hearing impaired but used to using sign language, and we had a couple of deaf crew members, for example the editor, which was really useful for the sign language scenes. The whole crew had a 2 day course in sign language... with little result, obviously.

Lundqvist: Presenting OKTHANKS-BYE at the festival and meeting this particular audience was one of the highlights at BUFF 2023 and a proof that representation is so important and can be absolutely decisive for how young people see themselves and their place in the world.

–
Gert Hermans

Joya Thome & Yara Storp about ONE IN A MILLION

“My aim is to be a small, friendly fly”

More than a talented gymnast, Whitney is a popular YouTube star with a million followers. Among them is Yara from Germany, one of her biggest fans. The two girls - one seemingly unreachable, the other one in devoted idolatry - live in different continents but are connected by their screens. Joya Thome brings them together in a documentary about teenagers finding out who they are and what they want from life. By the end of the film, both Whitney and Yara aren't the same girls as when we first met them, while also their relationship has changed.

ONE IN A MILLION clearly has its finger on the pulse of today. How do you think people will look at this film in 20 years?

Joya Thome: In a way ONE IN A MILLION is about social media, but then again it is not. I wanted to make a film about growing up, and about all the hardships that brings about. I guess those hardships might remain the same in 20 years. All the bigger questions about the why and how that will continue to arise during the rest of

your life, you are confronted with for the first time as a teenager. The film doesn't contain too many elements that might soon feel outdated - we didn't adapt our cinematographic language to the visual style of social media; we developed our own perspective and looked behind the scenes. We could have made a film only using social media footage, but that would have been a totally different movie.

Still people might easily describe ONE IN A MILLION as “that film about an American YouTube star”.

Thome: That is the punchline, the uniqueness of this movie from a marketing point of view. While the uniqueness of Yara will only be revealed later - Yara is not a punchline. And later on you will also realise there is more to Whitney than just being a YouTube star.

Films about similar topics are suddenly being made everywhere.

Thome: In Germany another film about the same topic was produced simultaneously, which proves the



urgency of the subject. But the pandemic didn't make it easy for us, we couldn't fly to the US anymore and missed a lot of Whitney's growing up - suddenly she was no longer a child. We were there in 2018 and 2019 but when finally being prepared for the big shoot in 2020, they wouldn't let us fly. We were getting nervous - even if we already collected a lot of footage, our story wasn't told yet. We applied for a special visa and then one lucky day in 2021 the embassy said “yes”.

It is obvious why you choose Whitney... but why Yara?

Yara Storp: There have been test shootings, but I never knew why they finally picked me.

Thome: Yara's fan account was somehow different and intuitively spoke to us. Whitney has this open, friendly side to her, and then there is a more sad, shy and self-conscious side. Seeing both sides reflected in Yara's fan account was intriguing. At first Whitney comes across as more energetic and Yara as introverted, which changes throughout the movie; I like this shift in energy.

We all appreciate Yara, but at first





I had a problem appreciating Whitney. There was an aversion towards this girl that initially came across as a spoiled kid.

Thome: I don't see Whitney that way. The cultural differences between the US and Europe are huge. The way kids are brought up in the US is very much focused on a career. Parents feel the urge to offer their children all the best possible opportunities, no matter what it takes. And many of them – not just Whitney! – get a car for their 16th birthday.

Storp: I only got my drivers' licence last week and having my own car wouldn't make sense – I'm not allowed

to drive without my parents until I'll be 18. But over the last 6 months I have travelled by train to so many film festivals.

As the American society surprises us, maybe there were moments that you were surprised by small town life in Germany too?

Storp: Neumunster never looked like a small town to me; in our region it is one of the bigger cities.

Thome: I grew up in South Berlin, a stone's throw away from the heart of the city.

The American scenes have a different colour palette than the German ones, like 'pink fluffy' versus 'earthly'.

Thome: That's how I experience the difference between the two countries. The Atlanta suburbs feel more like pop culture. Probably growing up on pop culture has influenced our perception, and then the camera captures what we want it to capture. It was our choice to show Whitney's room with all this display of soft and flashy colourful elements.

Storp: There is not a lot of pop culture to find in Neumunster - it's not the new Hollywood.

The scene in which Whitney's dad



has a say about the editing of her clip is profoundly meaningful in terms of understanding about her life.

Thome: Nowadays she doesn't post as much anymore, but what she posts is completely her own work. Finally she has full control over her videos and that is how she wanted it.

You had to negotiate with all the parents about filming their daughters.

Thome: I simply asked. Whitney's parents were really open to it - they are not media professionals, they are basically a normal family.

Storp: I don't think my parents understood why Joya wanted me - nobody did - and they were mainly surprised that I said yes. They didn't expect that! But I felt safe; Joya and I always spoke about what I wanted to share and what not. Finally they were happy that I did it; it had a big impact on me and I grew so much throughout the process.

What's the profile of your parents in the film?

Storp: It's mainly my dad discussing my plans for the future. He wanted me to already know how to plan my life, and I wasn't ready for it yet. I am



still convinced that I don't need to plan it yet.

Whitney is used to being a role model for many young people. But in a way, Yara is a role model too.

Storp: It is totally weird how on some occasions people make me feel like I'm a celebrity. While it is just me, a girl living a normal, everyday life. Often parents come to tell me how I helped them get a better understanding of their daughter's behaviour.

Thome: As a teenager I was an obsessed Avril Lavigne fan; for a while I couldn't think or talk about anything else. And then some day it was over. One of the film's goals was to show what it actually means to be a fan, or to find comfort in someone's online presence - there's so much more to it than just screen time.

Joya had to become a fly on the wall, all the time present without being noticed.

Thome: My aim is to be a small, friendly fly and not an annoying mosquito. Actually that 'fly on the wall' is a myth; I don't think it's helpful for filmmakers to presume that we are completely invisible. Our presence has an impact on every scene. Sometimes I even have conversations with the protagonists, which is something a fly wouldn't do.



Storp: We talked like friends, even after the camera stopped rolling. Overtime I got used to the filming and I looked forward to the crew coming over. I felt more pressure when friends were around and I needed to socially interact with people; I'm just not that kind of girl.

Recently a new wind started blowing through the world of sports. Several professional athletes in gym, tennis, athletics, like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka - rang the alarm bell that the pressure to reach excellence in sports is no longer justifiable.

Storp: That pressure was entirely with Whitney; I never experienced it. For

Whitney it was an important part of her life; for me it is just a hobby. If I fail, it wouldn't have an impact on my life.

Thome: Through Whitney's journey you can sense how much sacrifice is needed to reach that level. In Germany we send our children for a small charge to a local club, where they do sports for fun most of the time. But in the US sports clubs might be a career opening in the race for scholarships. Being in a college team on a scholarship doesn't only save you a lot of money, it also offers you public exposure - these competitions are sometimes even on national television! Nevertheless Whitney recently quit gymnastics. She didn't feel like it anymore and released a very interesting video about her decision on her YouTube channel.

All we know from the film is that afterwards Whitney and Yara met in person, and now I don't know whether I should even ask about it or not.

Storp: It felt unreal to actually meet the star that you've been adoring for so long. I sometimes forgot she was a real person, and then suddenly she was sitting next to me. But when we met again, we spoke like normal girls; it feels more like a genuine friendship now, even if we don't see each other

often. All the time Whitney has been so kind; it was an overall very positive experience.

Thome: I think Whitney appreciated that not all eyes were on her; she liked sharing the attention with Yara. We had planned a whole festival trip for the girls together, but after two days Yara got Covid. That was a bummer.

The three feature films you made were each so very different. QUEEN OF NIENDORF was a low budget indie drama, LAURA'S STAR felt like a blockbuster, ONE IN A MILLION is a documentary. What makes all three of them truly Joya Thome movies?

Thome: My interest in the lives of young people and my curiosity to see the world from their perspective. My next movie, again, will be about youngsters but it is going to be a dark drama, taking you to a slightly unrealistic world. The idea has been a topic of interest for me for a long time and finally I feel ready to pursue it. It's more like a genre film, which is something I haven't done before.

-
Gert Hermans

MAKE SOME NOJSE

Connecting Nordic children's film festivals



NOJSE is a story of cooperation, a story of sharing and exchange, and therefore a story we love to spread. In NOJSE five Nordic festivals have found each other, and with extra funding from Creative Europe came new opportunities, and an extended structure for cooperation. We spoke with representatives of three out of the five participating festivals: Daniel Lundquist (BUFF, Sweden), Mika Anttolainen (Oulu Festival, Finland) and Mariella Harpelunde Jensen (Buster, Denmark), the latter currently coordinating most of the NOJSE activities. What is NOJSE, how will it influence the Nordic festival landscape and how will results be visible on a European scale? But first of all...

Cool name!

Daniel Lundquist: It stands for Nordic Junior Sessions.

All NOJSE partners are festivals?

Mika Anttolainen: We are five. We started with Buster in Copenhagen, BUFF in Malmo, and the Int'l Children's Film Festivals in Kristiansand

and Oulu. Last year the Reykjavík Int'l Film Festival joined.

But NOJSE didn't come out of the blue. Something was going on already...

Mariella Harpelunde Jensen: In 2018 we started co-curating a short film programme together, supported by local Nordic funding. We selected one film from each participating country and had the package travelling to each festival.

Lundquist: Through our collaboration with a pan-Nordic online educational platform, we made the films available for streaming in schools. We facilitated a translation into all Nordic languages, including minority languages like Sami and Faroese. This platform doesn't compete with regular distributors, we mainly provide shorts, slightly older films or documentaries, like the brand new THE FALL (by Andreas Koefoed, Denmark).

Curating films together requires a profound amount of openness.

Lundquist: Hopefully we can comple-



LASSE MAJA for domestic Swedish audiences

ment each other. For instance documentaries were never a priority at BUFF, but maybe our partners can help us to pave that path with good titles.

Jensen: Up to a certain degree there is a sense of competition among these festivals, but doing this curation and discussing films together is fun. That is why we wanted to take the next step...

You mean this 'collaboration between festivals'? It is what sounds

the most obvious and at the same time the most mysterious.

Jensen: We want to cooperate on many more levels: in feature films, in our industry programme - maybe we can make speakers travel, or further build upon each other's discussions about current trends or topics, for instance the fact that screening fees are rising, which might be the death of several wonderful, small festivals. With budgets that are decreasing, we have to be smart, join forces or maybe discuss fixed prices.



Lundquist: Now that we meet every month, we can bring practical issues to the table about prices, transportation, logistics...

You even have people working on NOJSE exclusively.

Jensen: Besides the local funding, the next two years money will come from the Creative Europe programme. Now we have Olivia Anna Christensen coordinating all administrative matters, and there is a print coordinator. Coordinated by Buster, we are trying to make the network more efficient in terms of administration and finances.

What else is new?

Olivia Anna Christensen: At the Berlinale we had a workshop in which a third party organisation helped us to set our priorities straight.

Anttolainen: We were listing our priorities and added a few ones for the future, trying to find out where we are on the map. All five festivals have many similarities, but we also have some individual issues. Together we've set out a framework for our co-operation.

What are the things that you all have in common?

Jensen: Our festivals are not oriented on education; we want children to



RICKY RAPPER for domestic Finnish audiences

experience film as an art form in the cinema, more than teaching them. Even if we do produce educational materials, for none of us this is the main focus.

Christensen: There is a general approach towards children's films shared by all Nordic countries. Those ideas are embedded in every aspect of schooling, education and upbringing of children in our society.

Are you referring to the liberal, open-minded approach towards film content?

Anttolainen: This is something we take for granted. We can screen all types of films that say and show whatever they want on screen. That goes without saying – this issue is not even on the table.

Jensen: In Oulu and Kristiansand the Christian communities might eventually cause small cracks in our united thinking, but both festivals are experts in dealing with that. We hear about festivals in other countries that sometimes have to sneak certain topics into their programme, but in Scandinavia everything can be openly

discussed.

And what are the differences between the partners?

Lundquist: Some of us mainly work with school audiences – BUFF has been developing this relation of trust with teachers ever since the festival started – while a festival like Buster excels in attracting family audiences in their free time. And we give a different importance to our ambitions in having the entire industry – national and international – involved with the festival.

Jensen: Networking helped me to understand the different financial situations for different festivals; conditions greatly differ from one country to another. I was surprised to find out about the limited budget that some festivals have to work on.

Which direction could NOJSE possibly lead you into in the near future?

Anttolainen: We are hoping for more studies and surveys on the situation in the Nordic countries.

Jensen: Our part of the industry should collect more data on the good work that we do. We constantly make reports and collect numbers... that then somehow vanish again. It is important to get our data out; those numbers will show to politicians how



much we contribute to children's culture. We can tell all the time how important we are, but data will prove it. Christensen: We are launching a think tank, in which we'll bring experts from the Nordic countries together to reflect on our work and mission and to delve into topics that we've encountered during our festivals. We are the ones observing the children while watching films together with their peers but it is up to the industry to process these topics and connect the data.

What possible topics could be discussed?

Jensen: Children don't read subtitles anymore. Nowadays teachers are asking for dubbing for 12 year old kids. Such tendencies will have an impact on our industry.

Lundquist: After this year's festival we have a discussion with Janne Vi-erth, children's film consultant at the Swedish Film Institute, and we will speak with children to find out what is missing – according to them – and what kind of content they'd like to see more. These results we will bring into the think tank.

So far the word 'production' was never mentioned. Do you consider stimulating Nordic production part-

ly a task for NOJSE?

Anttolainen: The idea was from the very beginning to give more attention to the production of films, so we could screen the results in our festivals. We are always in contact with the production companies, and good films are made in all partner countries, but often they don't even get distributed abroad.

Christensen: We want to be a gate opener to the industry and help people find their way.

How are the Nordic films doing this year in the festivals?

Anttolainen: It's a colourful collection with very different types of films.

Lundquist: Films like BUBBLE (by Aleks Salmenperä, Finland) and THE FALL address young people, but there is little content for young children. It seems like Norway – a country that for a long time has been going really strong – this year mainly seemed to produce Christmas animation, until they luckily came up with DANCING QUEEN (by Aurora Gossé). When I started at BUFF, 15 years ago, we had at least five strong, new live action features from Denmark every year, but nowadays they seem to be producing mainly animation. From Sweden we had NELLY RAPP - THE SECRET OF THE BLACK FOREST (by Johan



Rosell).

How crucial are Nordic titles to the programme of the NOJSE festivals?

Anttolainen: In the Oulu programme, Nordic films – both features and shorts – always had an important share. Some Finnish films travel easily to other Nordic festivals but we also have titles – like RICKY RAPPER – that mainly target the domestic audience with a typical Finnish type of humour. They will not be screened in festivals abroad.

Lundquist: Ever since TERKEL IN TROUBLE, Denmark also produces films with a typical Danish touch, ex-

PLICITLY addressing older audiences with politically incorrect humour that wouldn't work anywhere else in Scandinavia. I don't think Sweden has this type of children's films targeting the domestic audience.

Anttolainen: Perhaps the LASSE-MAJA franchise? Selecting LASSE-MAJA #8 for our festival would feel like screening FAST AND FURIOUS 6.

–
Gert Hermans



Inês T. Alves about WATERS OF PASTAZA

“Not showing any adults insinuates some kind of utopia”

A group of Achuar children roam the rainforest along the boards of the Pastaza river, on the Ecuador–Peru border. Nature is their habitat, playground and workshop. They harvest vegetables and fruit, go out fishing in a small boat, they hunt forest animals, play at a waterfall, and watch videos on their smartphones. These kids run their daily lives almost autonomously and with a strong sense of collaboration. Portuguese filmmaker Inês T. Alves, stranded in this isolated community, observed them with a camera, catching glimpses of their daily lives that unfold on the rhythm of the jungle and the floating of the river.

You didn't look for these kids; you simply found them. Or they found you...

Inês T. Alves: It was an encounter. My desire was in the first place to discover the Amazon, and learn from the people. I got involved in a small scale project, collaborating with a local school teacher in an Achuar community. Within the project we could freely develop artistic and pedagogic

projects, so I took a small camera with me - maybe I could experiment with some film exercises, like I did in documentary workshops with children in Portugal. I didn't know if I would be able to charge my batteries there on the few solar panels that they had. In this amazing place I hung out with the kids; they were curious about me, and I was curious about them. They often made fun of my lack of basic knowledge about forest life, so they started teaching me. Seeing them so resourceful and independent, I got fascinated.

Did they know about cinema?

Alves: They all watch films on their smartphones. In a bigger village, one hour away, they sometimes project films on a big screen, and I also organised screening nights for the entire community.

Being somehow an intruder in their world, yet you felt accepted?

Alves: The community was very welcoming and the children all the time took care of me. The presence of my



camera at some point became natural for them. For me, documentaries are about the encounter. Even when watching through my eyes, we made it a collaborative work, thinking together about what would make sense to film. Things came together naturally while I filmed my encounter with their world and with myself.

How did you include that element in the film?

Alves: The things catching my attention are partly defined by who I am. I decided to focus on one particular aspect of the community: the auton-

omous lives of the children and their relationship with the forest. I intuitively filmed parts of my experience, deciding what to show and what not. For instance, not showing any adults in my film was a deliberate decision, insinuating some kind of utopia. You might easily imagine that these kids are living completely alone, in the sense that they do everything by themselves. My images are real but by the choices I made, I created this fictional dimension. Consider this a motto for my work: just because things are real, you shouldn't stop imagining!



Even if I knew the adults were around somehow, there is not a single scene in which you can sense their presence.

Alves: I had loads of footage and in the editing I began to understand that if the focus was to be on the world of the children and their strength and resourcefulness, it would come across much stronger if I radically took out all the adults, even if they were only somewhere far away in the background. That made the editing process much easier. It was super painful to throw away some of my favourite images, but it made the film more powerful and raises interesting questions about the documentary genre as such. Like, if documentaries should depict reality, then what is the reality? How would an audience that is preoccupied by documentary as a representation of reality fit WATERS OF PASTAZA into that vision?

“Children’s qualities should be preserved until death, as qualities distinctively human – those of imagination, instead of knowledge; play, instead of work; totality, instead of separation.” The moment I saw your opening statement, I knew I was going to watch a beautiful film.

Alves: I adore the work of Portuguese philosopher Agostinho da Silva. I to-



tally connect with this sentence; this is exactly the core of the message that I wanted to convey. WATERS OF PASTAZA is no ethnographic cinema about Achuar children, it is about being a child.

Actually we never get to know how isolated their lives are; the exact information is lacking.

Alves: The village lies deep in the Amazon rainforest, there are no roads, there is just the river that flows from the nearest city Puyo in Ecuador. At the time, you couldn't reach the city by boat - the waters are too dangerous so you need to take a small plane - but the river connects all the small Achuar communities along the shore, allowing friends and family to visit each other regularly.

All the games that these kids seem to play are actually about gathering food.

Alves: By playing, these kids learn everything they need to know. These communities mainly live on what the forest provides: a lot of fruits, plantain, plenty of yuca, but no cereals. They hunt for meat, birds and fish, and share the catch, as there is no way to conserve it. They cultivate vegetables, keep some chickens, sometimes they might buy rice, but that is a luxury. Even if they lack a variety in their menu, there is no food shortage.

How risky is it to completely rely on what your habitat provides?

Alves: The situation is fragile. The desire for progress is inevitable, for which money is needed. Now indus-

tries are entering the scene. European and Asian companies come to harvest the specific 'balsa tree' on a massive scale; it is used in the construction of windmills. There is a plan to extend the one road that leads into the forest, officially to establish a better connection with the outside world, but in fact it is all about serving the needs of the industry. The ecological consequences are devastating, but often local communities will accept them because of the financial profit.

Did you return with common horror stories about insects and snakes?

Alves: Snakes are a real threat, but on the spot you tend to forget about it, as you don't see them often. Yet you're never - never! - supposed to go into the jungle at night without a light. There were many bizarre insects, and huge cockroaches. When I first saw them, instinctively there was this strong feeling of repulsion. The kids found it hilarious - cockroaches are no threat whatsoever, so they didn't understand my reaction and all the time they were catching cockroaches to haunt me. They will only feel repulsed if an insect can hurt them. But the most annoying I found the insects that you can barely see, but that slowly "eat" your legs, biting you constantly.





In the film it is not clear which of the children are boys or girls. At some point you see girls climbing the highest trees. But how do girls and boys relate to each other? Is there a clear distinction in their roles?

Alves: Not when they are children; the distinction only comes when growing up, at the age of 13 or 14. It's a patriarchal society with plenty of machismo and men have a lot of power over women - some are polygamic. Often women are shy and they don't have a voice in the community. But I got the impression that things are starting to change. I saw young girls taking up roles that are usually taken up by men, and somehow that was accepted. But there is still a long way to go.

What if you would have arrived 10

years later? Do you think you would still be able to make the same film?

Alves: Changes will be inevitable. They never had a radio or TV and now suddenly smartphones offer them a possibility to connect with the internet and thus with the rest of the world. Curious as they are, this connection is as important for them as it is for us. This is the moment for us to think about how humanity should relate to technology. Digitalisation is a powerful tool, but it alienates people, and it will surely alienate them. These tools entered our world step by step, but are entering their lives very suddenly and radically. Disconnected from our essence as we are, we need the internet to connect again, while they still have this connection to a more earthly and diverse natural world. It is im-



portant to launch a dialogue between indigenous people and city people, to share reflections about the power, constraints, possibilities and dangers of digital technology.

Is there room for such a dialogue?

Alves: Surely! Once I sat in a canoe with one of the children when he asked me: *"What is this thing that we are? What does indigenous mean?"* I told him about those who have been living here for a long time, many generations before people from other continents came to impose their ways of living.

Do they know how this film is seen by many people?

Alves: I recently went back there to show them the film and tell them

about the experience of having their work shared in screenings around the world. In different festivals, I've recorded short clips with local kids, sending them their greetings. During the screening some were a bit shy to see themselves on the big screen, but they laughed a lot and had so much fun catching up with their five-year-younger selves. They are happy to know that the film is circulating.

—
Gert Hermans

From inside to outside

Juvenile Prison project GenerAction

Educating cinema in a juvenile detention centre means creating a bridge with the reality outside, opening a door to the world, and supporting the development of kids who are living their young lives in a state of imprisonment. It means offering a horizon of new visions for a future that might appear to be dark or somehow unreal. This is why GenerAction (documentary festival for young audiences, organised by Il Nuovo Fantarca in Bari, Italy) addressed teenagers in schools and in a juvenile prison.

The goal of the project is not only to promote culture in prison but to let teens with very different profiles, living in and outside prison, share moments of culture and dialogue. In a tradition of audience development, GenerAction was rolled out in the cities of Bari and Matera, in different phases.

1. training (January - February 2023): gaining knowledge about the documentary language, style and genre.
2. screening (March 2023) of various documentaries - long and short.

Among the best European productions, teenagers from the institute selected six documentaries for the festival, held from 12-14 April.

3. festival preparation: young working groups from Bari and Matera worked on different tasks, like festival communication, welcoming the audience, school invitations, the presentation of films and guests...

At present in the cinema with their tutors, the boys from the detention institute presented their selection and interviewed the authors. The selected documentaries were LUCA + SILVANA (by Stefano Lisci), NELLY & NADINE (by Magnus Gertten), THE MATCHMAKER (by Benedetta Argentario), THE FAMILY GOLD (by Emanuele Pisano), PIZZA BOY (by Gianluca Zonta), NÈSCIRI (by Ivan D'Ignoti - winner of the Short Doc Award) and THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MY MOTHER (by Beniamino Barrese - winner of the Long Documentary Award).

About 600 high school students took part in the screenings. In the after-

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MY MOTHER

noon there was a workshop with renowned documentary makers Federica Di Giacomo and Leonardo Di Costanzo.

The strength of GenerAction is in giving young people the lead in all phases of preparing a documentary festival, and above all in creating opportunities for contact, exchange and dialogue between young people with very different lifestyles and social backgrounds. *"Because culture and beauty are rights for everyone and because it is one of the tasks of a media educator to help break down the physical and social barriers that don't allow*

everyone to access culture in the same way."

Il Nuovo Fantarca's attention for people in detention is all year round, since in 2002 the digital cinema platform aimed at prisoners in Italy was launched. The platform currently includes 21 films (more info [here](#)) and is co-financed by the Guarantor for Prisoners of the Puglia Region. GenerAction is funded by the Ministries of Education and Culture through the media education project Alfabeti Visivi.

- Rosa Ferro (Il Nuovo Fantarca)



Milou Gevers about SUMMER WITHOUT YOU

“I still know all the steps by heart”

Milou Gevers, who just received the ECFA Doc Award for *WHY DIDN'T YOU STAY FOR ME?* is already presenting her next film. *SUMMER WITHOUT YOU* is part of a series of short documentaries for Dutch television on the theme of 'divorce' and tells about children who meet each other at a camping site for single-parent families. Between Quinn and Julie, two visitors to the campsite, conversations about their parents' divorce get going smoothly.

Milou Gevers: I honestly enjoyed making *SUMMER WITHOUT YOU*. *WHY DIDN'T YOU STAY FOR ME?* felt very personal, but I was also familiar with the theme of the new film. My parents were divorced. In my circle of friends it is almost exceptional when the parents of a child are still together. In *SUMMER WITHOUT YOU* I was able to explore this subject on my own terms.

That is why you went to a single-parent campsite in France.

Gevers: Apparently there is a great need for single-parent holidays. You

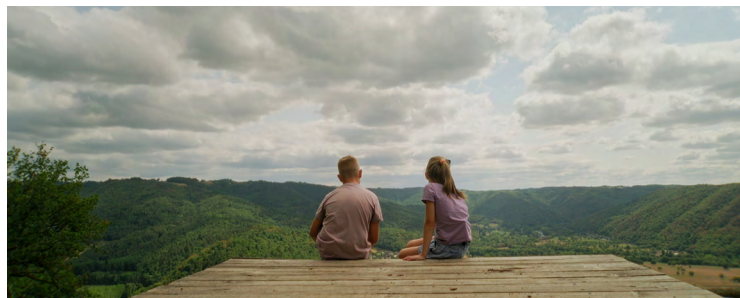
will find such campsites at numerous locations. For single parents it is nice to meet fellow companions and share experiences. But the first goal is celebrating a fun holiday full of activities for children.

Quinn is attending today's festival screening with both his parents, who are very proud of the film.

Gevers: Quinn and his family have already come a long way in the processing. With Julie's family things are still more fragile, that's why I brought them together in the film so that they could learn from each other. They spent a lot of time together during that holiday.

Did you select the children beforehand?

Gevers: Not all the kids on the campsite of course, but I selected Julie and Quinn - I found it interesting to work with two characters this time; you don't often see that in children's documentaries. The situation was very different for the two of them, but I hoped they would match, and that is



what happened, they became close friends from day one.

How they find each other and then have to let go of each other again adds an extra storyline to the film.

Gevers: I had hoped for that, but you never know if it will work. I had asked to put their tents next to each other and divide them into the same groups for activities, but I could never predict that girls and boys at the campsite would enjoy each other's company so much and that maybe - which we touch only very subtly - careful crushes would grow. But the film is primarily about love and loyalty towards your parents.

Which becomes apparent when Quinn draws a heart and unexpectedly writes... dad next to it.

edly writes... dad next to it.

Gevers: Just like *WHY DIDN'T YOU STAY FOR ME?* this story is about things your parents did for which you might be angry with them, but love is always part of it. These children are honestly concerned about their parents. For example, Quinn says emphatically that he wishes for a new love for his mum and he even has a plan for that: "It must be someone who can show some resistance, but mum should wear a dress more often..." I find it so touching when kids carry these adult elements within during their childhood.

At no point do they blame their parents.

Gevers: The approach of the film was: how can you have a nice life again af-





ter your parents have divorced? Once you get used to it, it can turn out pretty nice in the end.

It rains all the time at the campsite, which adds something gloomy to the film.

Gevers: The rain fits nicely with the first scenes when the kids haven't found any friends yet and still have to get used to the place. We were afraid that it would rain all week and that there would be no outdoor activities, but luckily the sun started to shine after a few days, claiming her place in the film.

As a run up to the conversations, you use letters that Julie and Quinn write to their fathers.

Gevers: I knew from the preparatory

talks that they would miss their father very much; Julie was thrilled to be so far away from him for the first time. We only had four shooting days – too few to work from pure observation, so we needed a common thread throughout the story. Those letters were a handy way to find out what was going on in their heads. Throughout the film, the letters get less and less attention, because the children think less about their absent fathers. All attention goes to their new friends, that's how I've always experienced my childhood holidays: you almost forget that your parents exist and the only thing you have on your mind are your friends. That's why I keep the parents out of the picture as much as possible; the story takes place exclusively among the children.



You went camping with them?

Gevers: Our tent stood next to theirs; they used it as their chill-out spot. We did that shot in the "disco tent" when a party spontaneously started at our place. I joined them in all the country line dances. We practised daily; I still know the steps by heart. Every morning I woke up to the sound of the kids passing our tent to brush their teeth, yelling "What are we going to film today? We're already dressed!" And the last thing I heard at the end of the day was a "good night" from the tent next door.

Without passing judgement, SUMMER WITHOUT YOU makes clear the unpleasant consequences of living with divorced parents.

Gevers: The children talk to me about

things other than what they discuss with their parents. Sometimes that is funny, but sometimes it is quite confrontational for the parents. Without shying away from the real consequences of a divorce, I still wanted to make a feel-good film with a happy ending. Other episodes in this TV series mainly focused on anger and sadness; while I wanted to show what it is like when you get further along in the processing, when a certain acceptance has already grown. There are so many stories of children with divorced parents, and not every story is deeply tragic.

–
Gert Hermans



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ECFA's goal is to support cinema for children and youth in its cultural, economic, aesthetic, social, political and educational aspects. Since 1988 ECFA brings together a wide range of European film professionals and associations, producers, directors, distributors. ECFA aims to set up a working structure in every European country for films for children and young people, a structure adapted to Europe's multicultural interests.

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Databases on children's film festivals, sales agents, distributors and TV-programmers interested in European films for children.

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