



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

interviews

Dancing Queen

Big Dreams

She-Hero

Girls' Stories

Spotlight on Quebec



Journal

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Small scale on a large scale

In pursuit of a versatile and multi-coloured children's film landscape, it is not sufficient to place all hope in the hands of the big, powerful nations and players. Size matters, undoubtedly - *you currently have the thickest ECFA Journal in history in front of you* - but we also believe in the power of small scale.

That is why in this ECFA Journal we mainly give the floor to initiatives from smaller, less eye-catching countries, where passionate people are carrying the load with great spirit. Rarely have I seen such a level of motivation as in my encounter with the Polish youth documentary scene, which vigorously tries to escape the swamp of neglect, with the feature documentary *GIRLS' STORIES* as a first encouraging result. Meanwhile a Slovakian festival tries to wake up the nation after a hibernation of several decades. Blood is thicker than water, so in Slovakia too, projects such as *THE WEBSTERS MOVIE* (animation) and *SHE-HERO* (live action) testify to a minimal but fascinating production.

We are shining a special spotlight on Quebec, where production has recently boosted massively. This year, almost every festival is programming films from this Francophone province of the Canadian nation. Here, more than anywhere else, children's film culture is experiencing a revival thanks to the

efforts of inspired people, in this case the late Rock Demers, whose legacy forms the basis for a whole new generation. Our focus on Quebec is also a tribute to his work and to the decisiveness of committed individuals with a greater mission.

Things become even better when organisations join forces, as happened in the North within the NoJSe partnership. From now on NoJSe will have a small platform in every ECFA Journal dedicated to actions or initiatives in the Far North.

But the most beautiful proof of international cooperation, I witnessed recently in a far more poetic setting, when about 60 participants in the Workshop Warehouse gathered on a long row of tables in a park in Bologna to enjoy a simple meal (which in Bologna still guarantees pure culinary pleasure). ECFA looks back proudly on the first (and hopefully not last) edition of this "marketplace" for workshops and educational initiatives. These talking/eating participants were a perfect example of small scale on a large scale.

—
Gert Hermans

Aurora Gossé about DANCING QUEEN

“One of the best sensations you can feel”

The world of 12 year old Mina, a slightly pudgy, nerdy girl, is turned upside down when a young, cool hip-hop dancer named Edvin enters her school and organises an audition for a new dance crew. Blinded by adoration, Mina recklessly volunteers but forgets about one detail: she can't dance! Or can she? With the support of her grandmother and the power of her unrelenting enthusiasm, Mina plunges into practice and rehearsal. Will she finally dare to step into the unknown?

Every now and then there is a film you can't ignore. A film that charms everybody, that is wanted in every festival, and that sends audiences back home with a broad smile on their faces. This year, that film is called DANCING QUEEN, made by Norwegian director Aurora Gossé, and it brims with energy. Like in the scene where Mina, alone at home and delirious with excitement, exuberantly indulges in her first choreography. She glides and whirls around the house... until grandma enters the room.

This is Mina's moment of true awakening, when she realises: dancing is my thing! Bursting with energy, this moment marks the beginning of a new future.

Aurora Gossé: She is on top of the world, nobody can hold her back. I hope that people can relate to that feeling of being unstoppable - it's one of the best sensations you can feel. Knowing what she'll have to go through later, it is nice to allow her this joyful moment. Recording the scene with Liv Elvira Kippersund Larsson (playing Mina) was great fun. We improvised - inspired by what Liv picked up from popular media - until we found the right form and tone. Once on set, it was all about making that choreography look spontaneous, and giving Liv the energy she needed to make her feel great and inspired.

Did you ever have a similar revelation, when you realised: this is what I want to do in life?

Gossé: At the age of 18 I was interested in film, but didn't know anyone who made a living out of it. There was

this 'pupil guidance' centre coming to school, and the kids coming back from the consultation looked very determined, as if they knew exactly what to do with their lives. I was eager to hear from them that "you were born to become a film director". Two days later the results came: "We recommend you to become a children's nurse". - "Euh... thank you, I never thought about this before, but I guess you're right." Until my mum asked me on the phone "if this is what you really wanted?" I burst into tears. That was my true awakening: if I really want this, I need to find the motivation in myself, in my heart. In that period in life, kids can easily get lost; all you want is some answers and somebody who believes in you. I consider myself blessed for having a mum who knew me well enough to ask me that one, simple question.

The film opens with a scene from the end, revealing a little bit of what will happen later. Why?

Gossé: It is my way of showing what is at stake. The scene reveals that this is a serious matter - there is a lot to win



or lose. Seeing Mina on stage, you realise she has come a long way. The girl we meet at first is a completely different person in a completely different atmosphere; Mina is still a harmless kid.

Mina's initial innocence takes you into a danger zone. How innocent could you make her before she turned 'ridiculous'?

Gossé: The balance was fragile; I was aware of that risk. Things could easi-





ly turn out really bad. I knew exactly when the audience was supposed to laugh and when they shouldn't. The dancing scenes in the beginning were a challenge. The last thing I wished for was to see a 'silly girl dancing'. I wanted to show Mina's eagerness, not her eventual clumsiness. That was hard to measure. Liv didn't want to feel embarrassed, whereas the beauty and charm of her dancing is exactly in the fact that it isn't perfect.

Nevertheless we immediately feel that Mina has something... it's undefinable and under the surface, but it's there. Like in the first dancing

scene in the school yard.

Gossé: That was one of the hardest scenes, and extremely embarrassing for Liv. There were 60 kids standing around staring – some of them were experienced dancers – while it was her role to do things completely differently. We told everyone that "she is in her character", but still it was more challenging than expected. We took our time and talked things through; we acted as teammates, standing by her side, but yet I felt somehow helpless. Now Liv is extremely proud of what she has done.

It's also the first moment in the film

that you feel how the characters are loaded with hormones! Where do they suddenly come from? Is that also a kind of awakening?

Gossé: Mina never felt such a passion before, she didn't realise she had it in her, she has never been in love before. She has always been using her head a lot, but this is the first time she is so much aware of her physicality. She suddenly feels lifted up, flying, forgetting about time and space. You can hear the sound of her breathing in the score, how it is taken over... In a way it might feel sensualised, but it mainly marks the beginning of a new world, filled with feelings she isn't familiar with yet.

The object of her desire - Edvin - is not a total jerk; not as bad as he could have been.

Gossé: That is how we wanted it. It is easy to put characters in boxes - the good girl, the bad guy - but in children's films more nuance is needed. Real people are complex; they can do both good and bad things. Realising that characters are complex can encourage children to reflect or discuss them. Therefore it was crucial for them to understand Edvin's reasons and ambitions.

Also for the actor!

Gossé: In the auditions not a single 12 year old boy could deliver what we were looking for. Improvising the scene in which Edvin refuses to team up with Mina, none of them was able to surpass Liv's status - those young boys couldn't make their point and felt uncomfortable. Luckily there was one whom I found too mild, too humble for what we were looking for, but we asked Viljar Knutsen Bjaadal to come back and show us all he had - we dug deeper into his character; he is a great dancer so he knows about ambitions. We started from the hardest scene, and developed it from there on.

But the moment he said his fatal sentence - "You should lose some weight" - the audience reacted furiously. You could feel it through the entire cinema: You shouldn't have said that!

Gossé: Good to hear that! I felt the same reaction from the audience in our test screenings and at the Berlinale world premiere. I find it difficult to experience the film on an emotional level since I've seen it so many times throughout the process, but that particular scene always hits me. After Mina has been building up all these expectations - "we will finally dance together!" - Edvin kicks down that





whole world of dreams with one sentence. It is a horrible moment. Equally important is Bella's reaction. She has all the time been a bit sore towards Mina, but even she is standing there, flabbergasted and feeling sorry for Mina, with the same gaze in her eyes as the audience has.

What can DANCING QUEEN add to the 'perfect body image' debate?

Gossé: In the Berlinale I met a lady who works with children suffering from eating disorders; it made me happy to hear how much she appreciated the film. It might seem scary to address such subjects with young kids, but this debate is so important. Due

to social media, children are becoming increasingly acquainted with the theme at an earlier age; isn't it horrible to reflect on your 'perfect body' already at the age of 10? Anne Marit Jacobsen (playing Mina's grandma) often advocates for young actresses. When she started her career, she was refused for several roles because she didn't have this "standard slim body" that actresses were supposed to have. Being a 76-year-old actress, she still remembers things that were said, and how those words affected her. Now she acts as a spokesperson for the younger generation. Being held back, being told that you should change your looks, being blamed for looking differently, whether you're 10 or 90 years old, can hit you so hard and drastically influence the way you look at yourself.

Mina's parents consequently overrule their child, automatically, in every possible situation.

Gossé: They think they know what is good for her and consequently see her as someone who is not capable of taking her own decisions. They don't allow her the freedom to think for herself - which often happens to parents. Mina's mum is also affected by the relationship she had with her mother. She never experienced the



safety and care that she now wants to offer to her daughter. She has become overprotective to compensate for what she never had. At a certain moment in life, it is normal that some things you don't want to share with your parents. The same happened to me when I was Mina's age.

DANCING QUEEN is pleasing its audience. Were you willing to do everything to make the crowds happy?

Gossé: Of course the ending is constructed in a way to make everybody happy. But most of all I wanted to offer hope to a young audience, which today is needed more than ever. That

is what I've been striving for in a film that wants to make you laugh and cry and let go of your emotions.

—
Gert Hermans

Dan Pánek about BIG DREAMS

“Everybody can still tell you where they were when it happened”

Sometimes kids make things so easy for you. If you thought the most challenging task for a children’s film professional is to look through the eyes of children and estimate their reactions, you just have to enter the cinema during the last 10 minutes of BIG DREAMS by director Dan Pánek. The wild enthusiasm during the screening at the Zlin Film Festival, with children hopping up and down with pure excitement and loudly supporting ‘their’ team, left little doubt about it. This film grabs them by the heart and won’t let them go.

The year is 1998, in Nagano, Japan. The Czechs win the gold in Olympic ice hockey and every child in the country dreams of becoming an ice hockey legend. Like 11 year old Dom, who would love to play hockey, but his parents don’t have the money and doubt his abilities. Nevertheless, Dom and his friend Honza bring together a team – the Sabres! A bunch of disparate, underestimated kids with one great challenge: to defeat the Red Wings team from the next village and

earn respect. After an initial defeat, the Sabres head for a rematch.

The original title translates as CHILDREN OF NAGANO. That’s something! ‘Nagano’ means a big deal for the Czech nation. It was not just another ice hockey game!

Dan Pánek: In 1989, 10 years after the Velvet Revolution, the entire Czech nation was depressed because democracy didn’t go as planned, the financial situation was disastrous, everybody was desperately trying to find a job. We lacked all national pride and confidence, and even our national hockey team seemed to have lost all its power. Then, in the Winter Olympics in Japan, we unexpectedly made it to the finals, defeated Russia and won Olympic gold. That victory boosted the confidence of the nation, it was a turning point, like a second velvet revolution. The impact on people of my generation was like 9/11 for the US; everyone can still tell you where they were when it happened.

Martin Beinbauer (producer): The final score was 1 - 0 and the only goal



was scored by a player named Peter Svoboda, which literally means ‘liberty’. We started as complete underdogs, even with Dominik Hašek as a goalkeeper. It is like a dream that we now commemorate - 25 years later - with a movie that is exactly “98” minutes long.

Czech kids still know those idols?

Pánek: In those days every kid dreamed of becoming the next Hacek, the next Jaromír Jágr. I’m not sure if kids these days still have similar dreams - they might dream of becoming

successful YouTubers. That was one of my reasons for making this film. Ever since Covid-19, kids have become afraid to play. I want them to go out and play again, instead of staring at their phones all day long.

Actually, the kids in the film do not really play ice hockey...

Beinbauer: They play field hockey on the street. Ice hockey is very expensive and time consuming for parents. You need to be completely up to the task, buy the equipment every year again while your child grows taller,



send him to training camps and dedicate all your time to it.

There's many lessons to learn from hockey in this film. One is: Hockey is no ballet.

Pánek: It's a tough game, very physical, you must be relentless and brave. If a puck hits your head - without a helmet - you are dead. If playing without the proper equipment - like the kids in the film do - you'll have bruises, you might break a leg or get seriously injured.

Another lesson is: Nobody is bigger than the team.

Pánek: Understanding what teamwork is all about, is a lesson for life. Today parents want their children to stand out as strong individuals; all films we get to see are about kids struggling with their individual identity. Our main character Dom is an individualist, but it's his dream to be part of a team, something bigger. That is actually the main goal of every member of his team of underdogs. Team spirit is what our community lacks nowadays. This movie is about the positive energy that you can get from a team.

Within the hockey context, there's one particularly odd character: the referee. Is a drunken referee some-



thing you might only see in the Czech Republic?

Pánek: In the villages you might still meet guys that you grew up with, who are still hanging around in pubs and are willing to serve as a referee in a hockey game for a few crowns... or a few beers. For them, it's a pretty good business model.

Beinhauer: We Czechs are actually all referees. We all have our opinion about how to play, which players were good or bad... We all know better than the coach and the referee.

What we get to see is how family life was organised 25 years ago?

Pánek: When you had a friend, you went over to his house, asked his par-

ents if he could come out and play, and that was the start of another adventurous day. Nowadays kids don't feel the urge anymore to go out and meet each other; they feel comfortable in their virtual world where you have so many applications that you no longer have to face real people. In the auditions I asked kids if they could ride a bicycle. Can you imagine there's kids who don't know how to ride a bike anymore, or how to swim? Kids love how our film offers them an appealing fantasy, while in our youth, this was reality.

In one scene that I found particularly significant for life in 1998, the family is sitting together while fa-

ther watches television in his chair having a beer, mother and son sit quietly behind him.

Pánek: That is how I remember my family, and it was very similar in other families. Father was the strong figure deciding about everything, while mother was running the family, silently pulling strings behind the scenes, justifying dad's decisions to the children. No one would even consider sitting in his chair. It's strange that I made this movie at the age of 35 - it feels more like a nostalgic story to tell when you're 70. But it is important to address these topics now that I see many children going through similar situations, with many families falling apart, single mothers managing on their own... That dilemma of a mother who dreams of a happy family and desperately hopes for her son to get along with his stepfather - *"he is not my father!"* - is exactly how I remember my childhood.

Another thing you had in common with Dom is the position of an outsider, moving in from the city.

Pánek: I was born in Prague and at the age of 8 moved to a small town, where everyone looked down upon city-dwellers. I was shocked; what was wrong with Prague? It was the first time that I felt a complete outsider;



I had no friends, my parents had split up, I hated my stepfather, I no longer trusted my mother. Very much like Dom.

One charming thing about BIG DREAMS though is to see a 1998 village coming to life: the gardens, garages, pubs and streets.

Pánek: We didn't have to recreate it, we just found it exactly like this in today's Czech villages where time has stood still. Near the city of Kutná Hora, we found villages where seemingly nothing had changed since the seventies, except maybe TV sets have grown bigger. Everything you see in the movie was right there.

Beinhauer: I immediately recognised the kitchen. We had the same one, and so did all my friends. It came in three colours: orange, green or blue. Under communism, factories only produced one type of kitchen. There was this old woman who apologised for not having cleaned up her garage - *"No, please don't touch anything. It is perfect as it is!"*

One thing that luckily has changed, is the pedagogic system in schools. What is this 'desk for dunces'?

Pánek: That is where I sat a lot, especially during maths and science classes. Our old teachers were raised in

the communist tradition. When they thought that you didn't pay attention they would tell you to go sit on the desk for dunces, while the whole class chanted: you are a donkey, you are a donkey! But the teacher's words felt worse: "You are good for nothing; nothing will become of your life, consider yourself lucky if you'll ever finish this school."

How many lives have been ruined by people like that?

Pánek: They could do two things to you: mess you up for the rest of your life, or make you stronger so that you wouldn't take no for an answer. Which is hopefully what happened to me. Around the age of 14, I started to write film scenes. From that moment on they found me even more bizarre - the way they addressed me made me feel weaker than everyone else. Now when I meet those teachers somewhere, they tell me: we always knew you were special. But what they told me back then was: you will be poor and miserable.

Beinhauer: Every day when school started, we had to stand up straight for the national anthem. Then afterwards the Russian hymn was played, for which I refused to stand up. That's how you grew a reputation of being a problem child. They didn't want you



to behave differently, to stand out. You should grow up to be a regular guy.

We know that something is going on at Katja's home, but you don't say much about it, even if you clearly suggest that she gets abused physically by her father.

Pánek: I wanted to make a family film for children, with a light tone. If I would have told Katja's backstory, it would have become an entirely different movie, with a different dynamic and impact. I expect the audience to read between the lines, as I don't

think everything should be served on a silver platter. Katja's case is only one of the many storylines in the movie that are not closed - life will continue and things will change, so we leave that narrative open; it must live on after the movie has ended.

—
Gert Hermans

Workshop Warehouse

Film Education in Action

In May 2023 ECFA members assembled in Bologna to participate in the first ever Workshop Warehouse, an event focused on sharing expertise in film education. As an ECFA board member with a background in film and media education, I was especially excited to meet with colleagues who shared my passions and to learn about their practice.

As I packed my case, my anticipation about visiting Bologna and the famous Il Cinema Ritrovato grew. Over the years I have been to quite a few conferences, mostly academic, and whilst I always look forward to reconnecting with friends and colleagues, the conference itself is often an act of endurance. I had high hopes that this event would be different. What really excited me was the key idea behind the event – the aspiration not to be a set of talks with slides, but instead to involve and immerse us all in innovative, creative activities.

The idea of sessions where ECFA members would run their creative ac-

tivities for others to try out and learn from was suggested to ECFA by its members. An acknowledgement must be given to Gert Hermans, who kept this idea alive throughout the long planning process which started well before the Covid-19 pandemic and at some points felt like an impossible aspiration. I must also acknowledge Elisa Giovannelli and her team at the Dipartimento educativo, Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, who undertook all the organisation of the event. This was no small task and involved finding a sprung floor suitable for dancing and many large workshop spaces. The production went well beyond the usual conference requirements of Powerpoint and working mics and some might say that would have been the easier option. Easier, certainly but the experience of fully participating in the activities offered to children by film educators from across Europe was powerful, enabling us to experiment with film, sound, music and editing but also poetry, drawing and dance and this was something the members really valued:



It was a super interesting, informal meeting where I had the rare opportunity to be involved as a participant in practical activities. And I think in the future it could be extended by a day or two.
(ECFA Member)

Every workshop I attended was memorable. I took part in two stop motion animation workshops, foley sound creation and a film editing activity and, although these are all activities I have run myself, it was fascinating to gain an insight into the different ways that other organisations approached

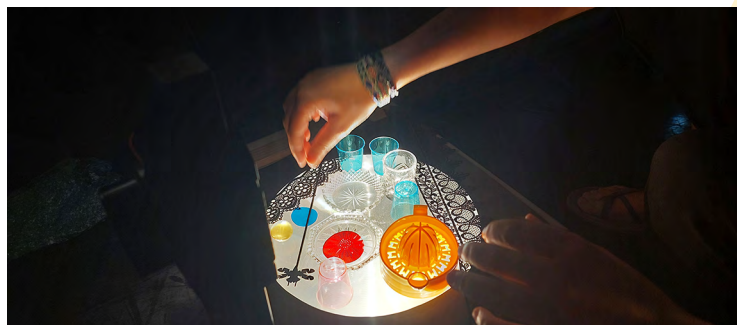


each stage. There were differences in how we worked in groups, how the activities were facilitated and what the final outcome was. These differences prompted a lot of discussion, which meant I gained insights into a range of international perspectives of children, creativity and learning. There is something also to be said about the value of being fully immersed in a creative activity. I looked around during one animation activity and observed faces fixed with concentration, fully committed to a creative process and this was a joy. It's a similar joy to the one you feel when children become totally immersed in a creative process and an important reminder that we, as practitioners, need to sometimes feed our own creative practice:

Workshop Warehouse is a great idea and it is also good for us adults to have an opportunity to play again and to be inspired to do that more often. (ECFA Member)

Working in this way, also helps to remind us that we may be asking children to do things they are not good at or are outside of their comfort zones and that we need to consistently offer support to enable them to do that.

One activity which was decidedly out-



side my comfort zone was focused on dance - Cinédance. Initially I felt quite tentative about the idea of doing movement activities in front of my colleagues, even though I enjoy dancing. I was also unsure about how these two art forms could be linked in a way that enhanced learning. If I had just heard about the process, I might have

remained cautious, but trying it out meant I could see straight away how this would help children pay attention to movement and gestures in film and find new ways to articulate their responses. The group game, highlighting movement in film, developed by Linfraviolet also demonstrated the potential for film and arts educators

to design their own new digital tools:

New technologies are helping film educators create new learning opportunities for children and make more films available to them. (ECFA Member)

The focus on dance and film fuelled my interest in combining a range of art forms together in approaches to film education in the future and I know others felt the same.

I had less caution about the Light Lab session. As soon as I entered the space I also wanted to take up the invitation to play. All around us were playful activities which enabled us to use light and dark to create shadows, silhouettes and movement in a way that reminded me of Italy's [Reggio Emilia](#) approach to early childhood education where the child is invited to learn through play and speak or express themselves in the 100 Languages of Children ([see poem](#)). Designed for very young children, the inspiring materials were designed by Taartrovers to support moments of coming together to co-create characters, patterns or stories and to investigate and explore.

In the debrief it was clear that col-



leagues were hungry to try out the approach themselves and understand how it had worked in schools and cinemas which members valued:

A wonderful chance to learn from practitioners around Europe and come home with lots of practical ideas to use in my own work. A chance to further my professional network and possibly forge collaborations. (ECFA Member)

These debriefs were an important part of the process, as were the lunches and social times, where we could hear how others had responded and also about the challenges to doing this work in many international contexts.

We were very fortunate to have this opportunity, the sharing and intensive learning was very important and strengthened the team spirit and the will to change. For a missionary like me who has little support in my own country this space of networking and empowerment was very precious. (ECFA Member)

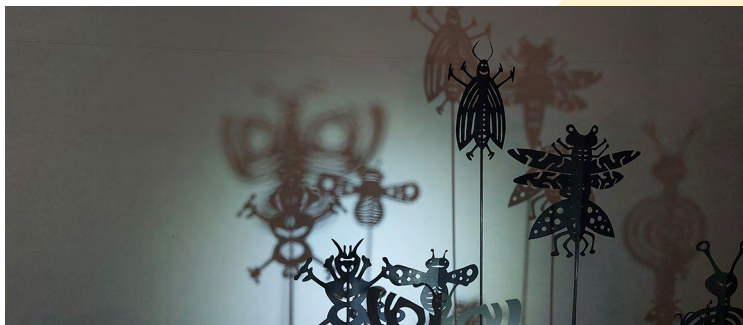
The value of arts education more broadly is not universally well understood and new barriers and challenges facing some countries emerged.

This is why this coming together with colleagues is especially important: Film education is a very important part of my organisation and the workshops gave me an extra boost of courage, motivation and new ideas to carry on and continue with this challenging but exciting agenda. Also, the reassurance that we (despite coming from different countries and backgrounds) share the same challenges and the positive sides as well. (ECFA Member)

Many of us had the chance to talk about children's rights, the barriers faced by some young people in accessing creativity and culture and how the political context in some countries makes film education something we have to fight for. This event was so important to developing connections with colleagues and possibilities for new work, but also to offer support and encouragement to keep going in difficult times.

The ECFA board and the steering group are coming together to review the feedback to the event and I am sure we will find things we can improve and develop, but I am also sure that we demonstrated the importance of focusing on film education - showing rather than just telling and





continuing to find ways to speak in the 100 Languages of Children.

Workshop Leaders:

- [Cinemini Europe](#): Sebastian Rose-now, Christine Kopf (Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum)
- Lightlab: Remke Oosterhuis, Tessa Van Grafhorst, Iris van der Eijken,

Floor Mulden ([Taartrovers](#))

- Learning Film Literacy: Marjo Kovanen (Koulukino)
- The Game of Editing: Marga Almirall, Raquel Marques ([Dràc Magic](#))
- Moving Words: Catarina Ramalho, Nuno Bernardo ([PLAY Festival](#))
- Graphinéma: David Simon, Cécile Durieux ([Ciclic](#))



- Cinédance: Céline Ravenel, Tatiana Tognolo ([Linfraiolet](#))
- Changemakers: Elfi De Vos, Marjolein Fransen ([JEF](#))
- Pixilation: Ditte Nielsen, Hanne Pedersen ([Animok](#))

– [Becky Parry](#)

Quotes taken from participants' evaluation forms

SKATE THE CITY

Imagine this: The wind is blowing in your hair, the sun is slowly setting, your friends are cheering and you finally just landed that skate trick you had tried over and over again. What a feeling! But before you start to realize, somebody shouts at you to stop because skating is too noisy. Pippa and her friends are annoyed and decide to take action.

Pippa's hometown Antwerp becomes less and less youth friendly, banning popular activities like skating quite literally with the use of so-called skate stoppers. The designated concrete skate parks outside the city centre are no good options. For Pippa skating is not only a lifestyle but an art form and creative vessel that needs room to roam and explore urban spaces. Where others see a simple sidewalk or stair, the 15 year old sees a quest to land a trick.

Used to not giving up, Pippa fights for her passion and has ideas. She organises a skate contest in order to gain attention. She posts on Social Media, contacts her local government and is invited to speak in the City Hall. In her



speech she takes up her courage and advocates for more skating spaces. In the meantime, she and her friends take matters into their own hands and clean up an old pool in order to use it for the contest. The message is clear, if you want to be heard, get together and get involved.

This is not just another skate movie, the 15 minute documentary (developed in the Ket & Doc trajectory) presents more beyond the cool stunts. It opens up questions about access to public spaces from the perspective of young people. Who decides about how cities look and how can

one participate in the process? With its immersive camera work, an upbeat soundtrack and playful animations the film really is suitable and interesting for a range of age groups offering different conversation starters. And after all, there is indeed some really skilled and fun skating.

SKATE THE CITY will be part of this year's *doxs!* programme with screenings on the 6th and 7th November in Duisburg and is nominated for the ECFA Documentary Award.



SKATE THE CITY
Belgium, 2023, 16'
Director: Lies van der Auwera
Production: Katleen Goossens
Contact: wim@bulletproofcupid.be

-
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

Mira Fornay about SHE-HERO

“Every loss is an incentive to move forward”

Seven year old Roma loses her beloved parakeet Mimi. She sets out to search for her in the nearby forest, and takes her new parakeet with her, because she and her friend Cypek believe that her singing could attract Mimi. Once entered into the forest, a seemingly ordinary adventure begins in which Romy makes new friends, handles tense moments, tries to do things on her own and learns that you can't control nature.

SHE-HERO is a positive film with a strong environmental message, made in Slovakia, a country with not much of a youth film tradition. Director Mira Fornay creates a unique atmosphere, which often makes you feel as if you're watching a fairy-tale.

Mira Fornay: The main idea for the story came from spending time with kids in a forest in the pandemic year 2020. Then I applied a few ideas from 'The Hero's Journey' (a method for structuring a story with plot points and character development). But the most important element was meeting

Romy and Cypko – who is my cousin. There's nothing wrong with watching fairy-tales; I believe they are important in our lives.

Nearly all people that Romy meets on her path have sad secrets to hide.

Fornay: I don't think the reality of those people is so sad. We all have to deal with losses in our lives, but - as Romy proves - they can lead towards adventures. Different from children, many adults get obsessed with life's little losses, which prevents them from living in the present. This film tells you to perceive every loss as an incentive to move forward and enjoy every moment to the fullest. Life is fun and beautiful, despite our losses.

Which war are you referring to in the story?

Fornay: There is no war in my story! Among many other characters, Romy meets a soldier in the forest; in this area you can still find many bunkers from WWII. Once it used to be a gathering place for fascists, both German and Slovak. I leave it up to the children



and parents to discuss if this soldier is real or just a ghost. This story is full of magic-realism; it's a kind of poem about 'Romy in the forest'. There is often more than one possible meaning to the story elements, and I encourage kids and parents to follow their own interpretation.

Both at the beginning and the end of Romy's journey a storm wind is blowing.

Fornay: I love this shot; as if the wind – in a magical way – pushes Romy into the forest and supports her on her journey. The forest and nature's ele-

ments have all become characters for Romy to meet.

There is this woman in a long dress who disappears in the forest with her dog. Later she will return in Romy's dream... representing Mimi?

Fornay: I'm not going to explain my film to anyone, as that would prevent them from creatively interpreting certain moments or even the overall narrative. Nothing in the film comes with one fixed meaning. Now it is up to the audience to come up with creative explanations. That is what is so fascinating about art.





What can you tell about the 'real Romy', the girl you worked with?

Fornay: She is a kind, big-hearted and sometimes very stubborn girl. She practises gymnastics and karate, and loves animals and nature. Skilled in many crafts, she is a big support to her two sisters. She loves her parents and grandparents and friends but she doesn't want to become famous. To me, she is a real personality, active and sensitive, and it was very nice to be with her and the other kids on the set.

Kids and their strength seem to truly fascinate you.

Fornay: I am fascinated by life; it is

a miracle and kids are proof of that. They know how to spontaneously enjoy life – the older some of my friends get, the more they become scared of life. Kids allow me to be myself, creative and light-hearted; maybe I'm still a child at heart. They join me in my games and they don't take things personal... for too long. I wish for all children to have a childhood as safe as Romy's, but unfortunately this is not the case. That is why we decided with this film to support two children's charities, one for kids whose parents are in prison (I am mentor of a group of teenage girls and hoping to make a film with them), and one for child refugees.

In the Berlinale – where SHE-HERO won the main prize in the Generation Kplus category – you were facing the crowd in Q&A's. How interesting was that experience?

Fornay: Very! SHE-HERO is my first young audience film and it was interesting for me to see how they enjoyed it and joined the discussions. The Berlinale was a totally positive experience, with kids acting spontaneous and happy. That was utterly cool!

What did the award mean for you?

Fornay: It could be a big support for having SHE-HERO screened in many festivals, thus disseminating the message of the film, the ecological discussion connected to it, and the charity projects that we support. I was asked to develop a cooperative board game and a kind of diary for adventurous kids, with a focus on ecology and feminism. And I'm writing a new script, telling the story of adults who decide not to have children. It would be a film about freedom of choice, while still being pro-life. Kids, forests and water all need protection, as without these entities, humanity would cease to exist.

How important is sustainability for you as a filmmaker?

Fornay: I am an ecologist by heart.

I am (a flexible) vegan, I don't travel by plane, I don't have a car, I buy only unwrapped food from a local farm, my family has a bio-vineyard... Green filming was a natural choice. It was my first time as a solo producer, so I could decide about working with like-minded people. We did location scouting on bicycle, we filmed in a local forest with only small equipment, and we tried to be as silent as possible, although we laughed a lot, but I think that is healthy, even for a forest. During the shooting we only used three cars, of which one was electric. We walked a lot and basically minimised our needs; no comfort, no luxury, nothing... That freedom was so relaxing, but also demanding, as we worked hard all the time. But it was worth it.

–
Uta Beth

Ludmila Cvikova about the CINEDU Festival

“Children’s films were simply another world”

The Slovak CINEDU Festival for children & youth (18–29 September) might be a relatively new event on the international calendar, but festival director Ludmila Cvikova is not a rookie. For 15 years, Cvikova has been programmer for the Int’l Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), she has served as advisor to some of Europe’s leading festivals like Karlovy Vary and Locarno, and has been Head of Programming for the Doha Film Institute. Seven years ago, she jumped off the merry-go-round of big festivals and engaged in a small-scale event in a different segment of the film industry: young audience cinema. It is a unique opportunity to question someone with such a track record about her impressions of the youth film industry, and the specific challenges she faces in her native Slovakia....

Ludmila Cvikova: Slovakia is a sleeping beauty. Almost nothing happens there in terms of children’s films, except in animation. Children grow up on Hollywood blockbusters and don’t have a notion about European qual-

ity cinema. We launched CINEDU in an attempt to bring something new to the country. Kids know about the festival and love it, but professionals and financiers still need to discover CINEDU’s values and its potential.

In less than a minute you shifted from ‘sleeping beauty’ to ‘total wasteland’.

Cvikova: The production for children, especially in live action, is very poor, with maybe one title every two years. However, this year in the Berlinale we had SHE-HERO by Mira Fornay, a well-respected director who had never made a children’s film before. We lack not only the films, but also the audience. Even among Slovak adults, there is no cinema culture beyond the multiplexes. This country urgently needs a wake-up call.

The good news is that nowadays there is a festival!

Cvikova: The first years of the festival, we were only working on getting kids to the cinema. The breaking point came in the fourth edition, in

2022, when we found not only an audience in our own town Nove Mesto nad Váhom, but even attracted kids from surrounding villages - for some it was their first time inside a cinema. We had around 2,300 visitors in total, and we are proud of it! What we do is really pioneering.

What kind of a place is Nove Mesto nad Váhom?

Cvikova: A smaller town, one hour north from Bratislava, on the river Váh. First we’ve been trying other cities, like Bratislava, Trenčín, Trnava, but in Nové Mesto we found this beautiful City Cultural Centre, with a director who has an understanding of what young people need and deserve. I noticed how every children’s film festival develops its own profile, adapting itself to the needs of the city where it takes place. That is fascinating! We are also searching for our ide-

al format. For instance, we work with a two-weeks-concept; one week for kids and one for a 12+ audience, as we want to include teenagers too, even if it’s a challenging audience.

The impact you can have in Nové Mesto nad Váhom is much bigger than in Bratislava.

Cvikova: With only one cinema our capacity is limited, but we’d love to further spread the festival throughout the country. Like the Young Horizons festival in Warsaw, who have their own distribution network and festival spin offs in almost every city - that’s my ultimate dream.

The first ones you reached out to were the schools.

Cvikova: That worked out well - all the time they’re asking us about the next edition. But we’re trying hard to close the gap with the family audiences dur-





ing the weekends. We still have to win Slovak families' trust and persuade them.

With all your experiences from the world of festivals, can you share some observations on the children's film landscape?

Cvikova: It's a fantastic new world for me and I love it. I especially admire the Dutch children's film production with its great quality and topical diversity. Strangely enough, all those years that I've been living in Holland, I

wasn't aware of it so much - children's films were simply another world. Just like our industry and government don't pay attention to the relevance of what we do at CINEDU. I hope we can more often join forces with colleagues in Central Europe. I feel there is a need for it.

Where do you see Cinedu in 10 years?

Cvikova: I would love to have a festival in 10 cities simultaneously with thousands of spectators in every city.

I find this a typical answer. All you seem to care for is your audience!

Cvikova: That is indeed where my concern is. It is written everywhere that the youth of today are the audience of the future, but no... they are here now, and they have the right to see good films and enjoy their own film culture.

Looking back upon your impressive track record, what were the heydays of your career?

Cvikova: The best moments were at the Rotterdam Film Festival, right after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. The world was optimistic and the future looked bright. Suddenly I could welcome directors from Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan, discover all these upcoming artists who are nowadays big directors, and travel the world with a suitcase full of VHS tapes. We felt really lucky.

Did you keep some of that optimism alive?

Cvikova: At my age I'm organising a festival and I strongly believe that it will work someday. Wouldn't you call that optimistic? But it's a challenge to remain optimistic when people are being killed in your neighbouring country; in Slovakia we can feel the

impact of Putin's propaganda and that makes me sad. That's why more than ever I feel a responsibility to work for and with young people. In last year's opening speech, I stated that I believe that every film is a window to another culture, and kids discovering all these cultures will make new friends, and not feel the need to fight a war. Nations might have weapons, but we have cameras, so let's use them.

What kind of titles would summarise for you what a good children's film is all about?

Cvikova: There is a preference for the Scandinavian and the Dutch tradition, with both strong artistic titles like KAUWBOY or comedies like JACKIE AND OOPJEN. There was the film THE SENTRIES by Rumanian cinematographer Liviu Marghidan about kids in a summer camp that didn't make it to many festivals, but our audience loved it. The director gave a lot of decisive power to the children in making the film their own. But I grew up with the Czecho-Slovak classics with Jan Werich, or films like THE GIRL ON THE BROOMSTICK by Václav Vorlíček, about little witch Saxana. That was such a fantastic and empowering film.

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Gert Hermans

Katarina Kerekesova about THE WEBSTERS MOVIE

“Yesterday I killed a fly”

Some people start screaming as soon as they see a spider. Anyone watching THE WEBSTERS MOVIE can hardly sit and scream for 70 minutes. Maybe ‘laugh and enjoy’ is a better option? Because the encounter with this lovable spider family is pleasant and care-free.

You may know THE WEBSTERS from a TV series, in this film several episodes are linked by one larger story. Director and author Katarina Kerekesova stays true to her usual tone: loving observations with a big heart for everything living, and firmly rooted in everyday life as even very young viewers know and recognise it.

Was there a story this time that was too big to be told in a short episode?

Katarina Kerekesova: I wanted to tell a story about themes like tolerance, and judgement towards the unknown, which I consider very strong and important for children nowadays. Therefore we needed more space for the story to unravel itself. The TV episode format that we are used to is limit-

ed in time (12’) and structure. The story we had in mind this time didn’t fit into those outlined structures. By connecting different short episodes – with several small adventures merging into one - we aimed to create a kind of collage that could expand the usual values.

In general the problems and challenges the Websters are facing, are a reflection of our everyday human lives. What are their crucial challenges to face in this film?

Kerekesova: Just like our TV series MIMI & LISA, THE WEBSTERS are about cooperation, about the ability to understand different beings with empathy and without prejudices. In my opinion, this is the most important thing we need to show to children. For this movie I wanted to concentrate specifically on our fears for the unknown and how quickly humans AND spiders can jump into conclusions, without any real proof. Nowadays we are too easily swayed by prejudices, assumptions and discriminations.



The idea of a fly farm is totally disgusting, and moth larvae probably in reality looks like horrible creatures. Yet you make it all look funny, cute and sweet.

Kerekesova: It’s just how you look at the world. By our norms and standards you could say that, yes, a swarm of moth babies doesn’t look particularly appealing. However we have to remind ourselves that we aren’t the only creatures living on this planet and therefore our opinions aren’t universal by any means. Imagine how ridiculous we must look to them!

How long ago since you killed a fly?

Kerekesova: Yesterday. I have one small spider in the window, who ate one a few days ago, so we make quite a good team together. Of course I still watch some insects with a certain prejudice, especially mosquitos.

An interesting episode is the one about Momo, a newcomer among the insects in the building. You use this episode to tell a story about inclusion.

Kerekesova: Inclusion doesn’t always come easily, so I really wanted to highlight the importance of listening



to the stories of others, before dismissing people as weird or different. Often, our misconceptions arise from a lack of knowledge about 'the others'. Once we know their stories and see glimpses of ourselves reflected in them, we can include them more easily in our world.

The star of the film is the young spider Lili. But she is surrounded by interesting other characters, like her brother Hugo. As a rebellious teenager, he is not among your target audience, but the character might be recognisable for them.

Kerekesova: As I grew up with two older brothers, I wanted to grant the same to Lili. Hugo is a teenager, often indifferent or grumpy, but in times when Lili really needs his help, he always comes to the rescue. For Lili he is an important role model, who challenges her to new things. Together they are a perfect example of love among siblings.

And there is the remarkable grandmother figure, who is 'a star' in her own particular way. Could it be that there's a glimpse of dementia looking around the corner?

Kerekesova: She simply is a grand figure, full of experiences from the past and knowledge of the world. She can

lift your spirits with silly remarks, but can always pinpoint the importance of things, if needed. Because of her age she has no problem speaking up bluntly. As for her short-term memory, I wouldn't say it's dementia, rather I would interpret it as focusing on the things that truly matter the most.

When animating insects I guess the eyes and legs can be rather challenging, as there are so many of them.

Kerekesova: Of course the animation is extra challenging; all legs and arms have to move in harmony with one another, and you can't copy-pasting those movements usually makes an unnatural impression. The eyes do move simultaneously, but with four of them it's no easy task. Sometimes our animators are sick and tired of all those hands, legs and eyes. But in the end, they're also attached to them. When the production of the last WEBSTERS episodes came closer, it was often mentioned how much they would miss them.

Did you have to watch hours and hours of YouTube clips to collect the right insect documentation?

Kerekesova: In the beginning, yes, but now I just try to observe my surroundings and find inspiration there. I



certainly have more books on insects than other households, but we used plenty of our own imagination to create these spiders and their friends.

It's a recurring theme in children's films but can you explain to a non-expert what is so special about flying a kite?

Kerekesova: It is all about the joy of imagination. A piece of cut out fabric can become a butterfly within seconds when the wind catches its wings. Its power exists only for as long as children believe in it. I found it beautiful that two creatures – one human and one spider – so different from one another, can imagine the same thing, and together created a game, tied to-

gether by one spider silk thread.

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Gert Hermans

THE WEBSTERS MOVIE is co-produced by Fool Moon, 13ka, Radio & TV Slovakia, Czech Television and PFX and supported by the Slovak Audiovisual Fund and the Czech Film Fund. THE WEBSTERS – TV series was also supported by Media Creative Europe and the Polish Film Institute, with Invidia and Radio & TV Slovenia as co-production partners.

Karolina Smigiel about young audience documentaries in Poland

“I dream about a funny documentary musical”

During the Millennium Docs against Gravity festival in Warsaw, a group of young filmmakers pitched eight new documentary ideas for young audiences. Their enthusiasm was contagious; only the delegation of Polish broadcasters reacted coolly... Since documentaries are by definition long and boring and not intended for children, right? Karolina Smigiel of the Andrzej Wajda Centre for Film Culture has a lot of resources to combat this kind of ignorance.

Her most important tools are enthusiasm and commitment. Not only with the young artists, but mainly with herself. For ECFA she tries to unravel the labyrinth of the Polish children's documentary scene. It seems complex, but it isn't. In fact, it is all about the ambition to have an impact on every step of the process, and to make progress in all areas.

I picked up one sentence from a lady I met in a taxi in Warsaw, who said: “The Polish are as proud about their documentaries as the French are

about their features.”

Karolina Smigiel: Our biggest recent successes were indeed all connected to documentaries with an artistic style that is often based on observation, in the tradition of great Polish documentary masters like Krzysztof Kieślowski, Paweł Łoziński or Kazimierz Karabasz.

Young audience documentaries are not a part of that heritage yet?

Smigiel: Not at all, they remain unknown to funders and industry people. Ever since I got to know about this genre - when I first participated in IDFA (Amsterdam) - I've been trying to convince people about it. The funders and broadcasters that I invite to our Forum are totally not aware of the phenomenon.

This Forum is organised within the framework of a festival with the coolest name ever.

Smigiel: Millennium Docs against Gravity is the coolest Polish documentary festival. Warsaw citizens actively participate in it, there are spin-offs in



seven other cities, they have 180 titles in the programme and a platform for online viewing. The festival also has a distribution company dedicated to documentaries, which is pretty unique for Poland.

You organise the Let's Doc Forum for the Andrzej Wajda Centre for Film Culture. How do the festival and the Centre fit together?

Smigiel: The Andrzej Wajda Centre is an institution financed by the city government. We had a budget to invest in documentary projects but needed a strong partner. Millennium Docs was our obvious choice.

What does “Let's Doc” stand for?

Smigiel: Let's Doc is the brand for our activities that all together create a kind of “ecosystem” for the promotion of youth documentaries in Poland. There is the Forum, the Documentary Ideas Lab in which we conduct filmmakers on a trajectory towards their own short documentary, and in October we will have the first edition of our Let's Doc Festival, with one competition for kids and one for teenagers. We will have workshops, meetings, panel discussions... Room for discussion is needed in every documentary festival.



This Ideas Lab should launch a tradition among a new generation of directors?

Smigiel: It's a development programme. Participants come to us with an idea that we'll develop over the course of one year with the help of tutors and a panel of young experts.

What role do you give to these youngsters?

Smigiel: They are experts about their own world, and they are consulted in different stages of the process, collaborating in an atmosphere of true partnership. Even if we still remember the feelings and experiences from our youth, we have grown so much older now and the world has changed a lot. The group of youngsters that we work with is very sensitive and in every meeting they sharpen our view towards new elements.

I don't know if it's sad or funny but for the eight projects that were pitched, all of them had "zero" as the established budget.

Smigiel: In this phase filmmakers are focused on the creation process. In a few months, some of them will have convinced a production company and gathered a budget. I have the feeling that we will find partners not so much with the established documentary



producers, but with a generation of young starters, who are more open and flexible.

The topics of the projects were pretty strong; we had orphans, patchwork families, gender diffusion...

Smigiel: I dream about a funny documentary musical being produced one day, but since the pandemic years and the war in our neighbouring country Ukraine, children are going through a tough time. It's also a part of the Polish documentary tradition; maybe we are a sad nation by nature. What frightens me more is that Pol-

ish broadcasters find it impossible to screen these films in combination with the usual cheerful animation. Why not? Our young experts generally appreciate some complexity to their stories and are happy to discuss serious topics that they struggle with. It won't happen at home or in school; only documentaries can create such an occasion.

Are such decisions motivated by today's political climate?

Smigiel: The political situation has an impact on the public institutions. Moreover, the bureaucratic system makes it really hard to have your

movie financed. I guess filmmakers in every country are facing similar situations.

Is there a budget in the Polish Film Institute for young audience documentaries?

Smigiel: The Institute has a programme supporting young audience films, but that's for fiction and animation. Youth documentaries have to compete with the other, more established projects. What would really help us is one international success story. I hope for our feature documentary GIRLS' STORIES to have an interesting festival career. The movie might not look exactly ground-breaking to European audiences, but for us it was a big achievement, especially since the film deals with taboo topics, like physical changes during the adolescent years and the first menstruation.

GIRLS' STORIES will be distributed in Poland by Young Horizons.

Smigiel: I am very happy about it, but they know it will be tough and they will have to invest much more energy in the promotion than with the usual fiction adventures.

- **Gert Hermans**

Aga Borzym about GIRLS' STORIES

"They will never be as fragile again"

Two friends meet at the playground. Now, on the eve of adolescence, Jagoda and Zuzia have a lot to discuss. The answers to life's bigger questions that adults can't give them, maybe they can find with each other, now that they are confronted with so many changes - hormone-driven or not. There's pimples, rebellion, first love, stupid rules at school, difficult dilemmas at home, and - above all - their first periods. When will it happen and how will it be? Jagoda and Zuzia introduce us to a world that every woman remembers and any boy watching this film can try to unravel.

Making young audience documentaries is not an obvious thing to do in Poland, where nowadays social and societal trends are highly polarised. Aga Borzym was brave enough to make a documentary in which young girls fully grasp the forum offered to them. More than a charming period piece, GIRLS' STORIES is also an encouraging pat on the back of an entire generation of young Polish viewers. The film premiered in May at the Mil-

lennium Docs against Gravity festival in Warsaw.

What sticks with you most from the premiere?

Aga Borzym: The children's positive reactions. One boy, about 9 years old, said: *"Thank you for making this movie that gave me a better understanding of girls. If you ever make a movie about boys, I want to be in it."* Some girls thanked us because we helped them to overcome the fear of their first menstruation. One teacher said she is among young girls all the time, but never has the opportunity to really enter their world like we did.

I noticed how easily the audience reduces the film to "a story about first menstruation".

Borzym: Which initially was the case. My idea was to make a short film with girls between 10 and 16 years old, talking about menstruation. But when coming across these two wonderful creatures, suddenly that subject felt too narrow. So we shifted towards a feature documentary about the end

of childhood, the beginning of adolescence and all the changes that brings about.

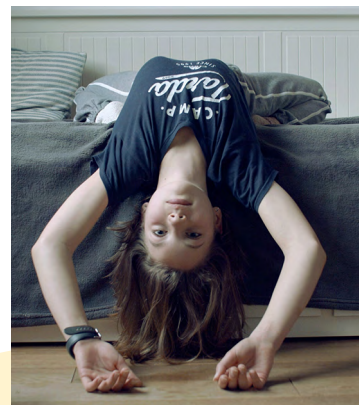
Is GIRLS' STORIES to be considered as a grow-up-manual for girls?

Borzym: Our main goal is the normalisation of fragile subjects, as an empowerment for young people. It's also a film about friendship, about sharing things with a friend.

Agnieszka Rostropowicz (producer): This normalisation is crucial. Presenting these topics as normal aspects of everyday life should make young girls feel supported and comfortable.

Are girls of their age still supposed to believe that babies are being born from cabbages or storks?

Borzym: No, not any more. But the expression might still be used in some schools - Zuzia went to a nunnery school - or with parents who think that children are not ready to know the truth. I guess often it's about adults not being prepared to bring up such subjects.



Besides the story of two girls, this film also tells about a country and a timeframe?

Borzym: People might claim that Jagoda and Zuzia don't represent the average Polish teenage girl, yet they give an insight into our society, for instance in the rhetoric in Polish catholic schools. Zuzia even makes a statement about women's rights, which are not exactly considered a priority in Poland nowadays. However I didn't want to put too much responsibility on the shoulders of a 12 year old.

Did you set an ethical code for yourself?

Borzym: People warned me that Jagoda and Zuzia would probably hate this



film if they will watch it again in five years, and that therefore the project was harmful. It made me extra careful. Getting the parents' full approval made me feel confident about both the process and the result.

Why Jagoda and Zuzia? Could it have been every possible girl in the world?

Borzym: Together they have this unique energy. I shot some scenes with Jagoda meeting other girls, and they felt totally different. When Zuzia is around, Jagoda acts more mature, and together they discuss crucial issues. I was surprised to find out what issues they had on their mind. When I was their age, I simply didn't have a clue.

Rostropowicz: And they are complementary.

In what sense?

Rostropowicz: Jagoda loves the camera; she is considering becoming an actress. She is the younger one but has a broad network and loves fooling around with people. Zuzia gives everything in a shoot, after two hours she is completely exhausted, but she has a great sense of humour.

Borzym: Jagoda's mother is a friend of mine, which helped us to connect at first but later became more tricky.



There was always the risk that she wouldn't see me as a filmmaker in the first place, but as an accomplice of her mother, an ambassador of the grown-up world. For instance when she decided to dye her hair without letting me know - although I would have loved to capture this process of change and her mum's resistance to it.

In the film Jagoda suddenly starts interviewing her parents.

Borzym: It just happened and it looked great; I wanted more of that. But then she thought it was too childish so we gave up the idea. Her parents were reluctant anyway to answer her questions, which in a way is also meaningful.

So are the short animations that you included.

Borzym: They add a new perspective to certain topics, for instance the physical transformation of the body. We had to be careful what to show in this documentary, for which animation offered a comfortable safety. Moreover the clay figures take you back to the world of childhood that we're about to leave, and moulding clay kind of symbolises the act of creating change.

The opening and closing scenes are shot in the same location. What happens there?

Borzym: The setting is the same, but the protagonists have changed com-

pletely. In the opening scene they are little kids with flowers and ice cream, nothing but joy and 100% pure innocence. In the closing scene they still have that power, but the topics and the discourse have changed. They're no longer kids, they're teenage girls talking, making tiktoks... Something has changed, and some things have gone lost permanently.

Rostropowicz: The 1.5 years of age difference between them is more visible now. We filmed these girls in the most vulnerable moments of their lives. They will never be as fragile again as in the moments that we captured on camera.

What about that song in the closing scene? What does "essa" mean?

Borzym: It was the "youth word of the year" in Poland and teenagers use it all the time. It means something like "easy going, chill, don't worry". I wanted this song to wrap up the entire film and sum up all the issues. And it should feel empowering in the first place."

—
Gert Hermans

Volodymyr Ksenzytskii about the Ukrainian Agugugu Children's Channel

"Children understand that a war is going on, but they have plenty of children's issues on their minds"

Is there a demand for children's programmes on television and theatre shows while a war is going on out there? Under such circumstances, how do you keep a focus on your work and your social mission? We asked director and producer Volodymyr Ksenzytskii, head of the Ukrainian Agugugu Children's Educational and Entertainment Channel.

Volodymyr Ksenzytskii: 15 years ago, me and two girls - Tutta and Niusia - embarked on our journey when releasing a children's programme called TELEMILITRIAMDIIA. Our start was challenging, none of us had any prior experience. Each of us acted as a director, which sometimes drove us in opposite directions. However, with time, things improved and we all found our best position in the team.

What is yours?

Ksenzytskii: I took on the role of team leader. My strength lies in generating ideas, so my task is to come



up with creative concepts. Tutta focuses on finding the right people to bring those ideas to life, while Niusia handles scripts and props. We invested a lot into self-improvement. For instance, I learned the importance of active listening and understanding the needs and desires of my colleagues. Their aspirations included creative expression, touring with our work, and a strong desire to secure a place on TV screens. Meanwhile all this has been achieved.

It started with producing TV programmes for children. Nowadays they are broadcasted on the national children's TV channel, you run a popular YouTube channel and your large-scale live shows for children travel around the country. What is the secret behind your success?

Ksenzytskii: Always articulate the goals you have set and compare them with what you have achieved. You might be pleasantly surprised. In just the last 1.5 years, we have produced



two major shows, conducted tours in Ukraine and Germany, and produced over 500 episodes of various TV programmes. Last May our #Agugugu YouTube channel reached the mark of 15 million views.

When the war started, you answered the call for voluntary work, to which you dedicated a vast amount of energy and time.

Ksenzytskii: It started for a simple reason: my brother was at the front-line, where he was confronted with several pressing issues. We got together and pondered how to make ourselves useful. We connected with a volunteer centre for the distribution of humanitarian aid, and we found a playful way to deliver the goods to children. Subsequently, we started receiving calls for help from other locations. Then, a call came from Germany, suggesting to organise events for





children who fled their homes. Moreover, in order to occupy our heads with work, we started to record a new programme called DOCTOR LIKARCHUK. We had nurtured the idea for quite some time, and now the moment felt right to bring it to life. Work became a shield against depression.

While touring through Ukraine and Germany last year, what is it that Ukrainian children came to tell you?

Ksenzytskii: Children are still the same, both those who live in Ukraine and those who left. They don't talk extensively about the war. It's more the parents living abroad that are pushy about it. Of course the topic

is on their mind, but kids will always be kids – they talk about bright moments, about computer games... I believe, regardless of the circumstances, children should draw pictures of rainbows and the sun, they should embrace childhood things. Kids understand that a war is going on, but they do not dwell on it. They still have plenty of purely children's issues on their minds.

How challenging was it emotionally to make this Ukrainian tour?

Ksenzytskii: We always strive for delivering a high-quality product; it is our belief that children should be exposed to good aesthetics under

any circumstance. We firmly believe that working for children requires we must give it our all, and create a complete theatrical experience. During the tour, we had to travel a lot, and there were cases when the military wanted to serve summonses, right at the checkpoint. Not everyone understands the significance of our work. Another challenge is how to deal with air alarms. How to react and where to seek shelter? Surprisingly enough, during the two tours we did in Ukraine, only once in Chernivtsi were we confronted with an air alarm. Despite a two hour delay, the concert still took place.

Nowadays, what do you like more: a live show with an audience or recording a TV programme?

Ksenzytskii: For us, one cannot go without the other. Live encounters make it possible to come up with something new. From our contacts with children and parents, we understand what is relevant and needed at the moment. The joy of producing a television product is to watch how an idea grows into a final product, which gives a sense of creative satisfaction.

You have been nurturing the idea of creating a children's TV channel for quite some time. How far along is



the plan, and how will it differ from existing Ukrainian children's TV channels like "Pixel" or "Plus plus"?

Ksenzytskii: Unfortunately, we're only at the 'idea' level. The plan is very expensive and we still lack the resources. Nevertheless, I have several key principles in mind. Firstly, the content should be produced in Ukraine and in the Ukrainian language. Secondly, I want to give the existing children's studios, that already know how to create quality content, the opportunity to gain constant airtime. This will help them to grow. Ukraine boasts a vast number of children's studios, and it is vital to me that they can showcase their creations. This will act as a catalyst for the development of children's audiovisual creativity across Ukraine. Naturally, there will be a rigorous selection process, but it is crucial for children to see the top and understand the mechanism of how to reach it. This is the goal I have set and which I will now pursue step by step.

– Volodymyr Diagilev

Big Dreams

Feature Film, Czech Republic, 2023
 Directed by Dan Pánek
 Prod. & World Sales: Visual Riders
 Phone: +++420-72-54-35-111
beinhauer@visualriders.com
www.visualriders.com

A Cat's Life

Feature Film, France, 2023
 Directed by Guillaume Maidatchevsky
 Prod.: MC4, Orange Studio, JMH, FILO
 Films
 World Sales: Orange Studio
 Phone: ++33-1-46-47-31-92
contact.orangestudio@orange.com
www.orange-studio.fr



Chicken for Linda!

Animation, France, Italy, 2023
 Directed by Chiara Malta & Sébastien
 Laudenbach
 Prod.: Dolce Vita Films, Miyu Prod.,
 Palosanto Films
 World Sales: Charades
 Phone: ++33-62-98-74-504
sales@charades.eu

www.charades.eu



The Diary of Paulina P.

Feature Film, Croatia, 2023
 Directed by Neven Hitrec
 Prod. & World Sales: Jaka prod.
 Phone: ++385-95-900-10-17
info@jakaprodukcija.hr
www.jakaprodukcija.hr/en
www.dnevnikipaulinep.com



The Fantastic Three

Feature Film, France, 2023
 Directed by Michaël Dichter
 Prod.: Rectangle Prod., Les Films Nor-
 folk
 World Sales: BFF
sales@bffsales.eu
www.bestfriendforever.be

Fireworks

Feature Film, Italy, 2023
 Directed by Giuseppe Fiorello
 Prod.: IblaFilm, RAI Cinema, Fenix En-
 tertainment
 World Sales: Pulsar Content
sales@pulsarcontent.com
www.pulsarcontent.com



Girl

Feature Film, UK, 2023
 Directed by Adura Onashile
 Prod.: Barry Crerar
 World Sales: New Europe Film Sales
 Phone: ++48-69-96-76-10
office@neweuropemfilmsales.com
www.neweuropemfilmsales.com



It's Always Been Me

Documentary, Denmark, 2023
 Directed by Julie Madsen
 Prod: Got Fat Prod.
 World Sales: DR Sales
 Phone: ++45-35-20-30-40
drsales@dr.dk
www.drsales.dk

Jonja

Feature Film, Germany, 2023
 Directed by Anika Mätzke
 Prod. & World Sales: Kurhaus Prod.
 Phone: ++49-72-21-30-21-906
office@kurhausproduction.de
[www.kurhausproduction.de/en/mov-
ie/jonja/](http://www.kurhausproduction.de/en/mov-
ie/jonja/)

Lioness

Feature Film, the Netherlands, 2023
 Directed by Raymond Grimbergen
 Prod. & World Sales: Levitate Film
 Phone: +31-20-303-10-39
info@levitatefilm.com
www.levitatefilm.com



Mascot

Feature Film, the Netherlands, 2023
 Directed by Remy van Heugten
 Prod.: Bind Film, Savage Film, BNN-
 VARA
 World Sales: Bind Film
info@bindfilm.nl
www.bindfilm.com

Mavka: The Forest Song

Feature Film, Ukraine, 2023
 Directed by Oleksandra Ruban & Oleh
 Malamuzh
 Prod.: Animagrad Animation Studio,
 Film.U.A Group
 World Sales: Film.U.A Group
 Phone: ++380-44-501-39-71
info@film.ua
www.mavka.ua/en



The Mountains

Documentary, Denmark, 2023
 Directed by Christian Einshøj
 Prod.: Made in Copenhagen
 World Sales: Cat&Docs
 Phone: ++33-1-44-61-77-48
info@catndocs.com

www.catndocs.com

Romaissa

Feature Film, the Netherlands, 2022
 Directed by Fadua El Akchaoui
 Prod.: Juliet at Pupkin, NTR
 World Sales: Skoop Media
 Phone: ++31-23-888-01-68
sales@skoopmedia.com
www.skoopmedia.com

Scrapper

Feature Film, UK, 2023
 Directed by Charlotte Regan
 Prod.: DMC Film
 World Sales: Charades
 Phone: ++33-6-29-87-45-04
sales@charades.eu
www.charades.eu

The Siren



Animation, Germany, Belgium,
 France... 2023
 Directed by Sepideh Farsi
 Prod.: Les Film d'Ici, Katuh Studio,
 TrickStudio Lutterbeck,...
 World Sales: Bac Films

Phone: ++33-11-80-49-10-00
sales@bacfilms.fr
www.bacfilms.com/international

Sun and Concrete

Feature Film, Germany, 2023
 Directed by David Wnendt
 Prod.: Seven Elephants, Constantin
 Film
 World Sales: Moonrise Pictures
 Phone: ++34-917-60-76-05
www.moonrisepictures.eu

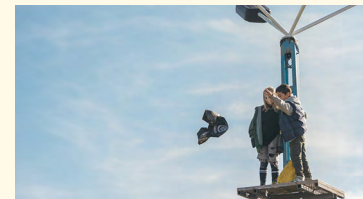
Tony, Shelly and the Magic Light

Animation, Czech & Slovak Republic,
 Hungary, 2023
 Directed by Filip Posivac
 Production: Nut Prod., Česká TV, Film-
 fabriq...
 World Sales: LevelK
 Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72
tine.klint@levelk.dk
www.levelk.dk



What the Finn?! - A Summer of Surprises

Feature Film, Germany, 2023
 Directed by Stefan Westerwelle
 Prod.: Lieblingsfilm
 World Sales: The Playmaker (Ex ARRI)
 Phone: ++49-89-38-09-12-88
worldsales@playmaker.de
www.playmaker.de



Who Am I Smiling For?

Documentary, Estonia, 2023
 Directed by Eeva Mägi
 Prod. & World Sales: Allfilm
 Phone: ++372-6-72-90-70
allfilm@allfilm.ee
www.allfilm.ee

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

A new wave of young audience cinema from Quebec

Jo-Anne Blouin: "And then... boom!"

World premieres in Zlin (BILLIE BLUE), a special focus in Schlingel, festival screenings around Europe (HOW TO GET YOUR PARENTS TO DIVORCE, DOUNIA AND THE PRINCESS OF ALEPPO, ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF ASHA)... Quebec young audience cinema is boosting in 2023, both in terms of quantity and quality. We asked Jo-Anne Blouin; as director of the FIFEM festival in Montreal she is the Number 1 Ambassador of Quebec children's cinema in Europe. How to explain this sudden success? *"Beware! A bunch of francophone vikings are here to take over the market!"*

In Quebec legendary producer Rock Demers and his company Productions La Fête for 26 years made one children's film per year. Rock Demers was very determined in his philosophy on why we should have our own film culture and our own heroes to grow up with. If there is one thing that all the filmmakers of these emerging new titles have in common, it is this: they all grew up with the oeuvre of Rock Demers.

We're all very proud about the current generation of successful adult filmmakers in Quebec, like Xavier Dolan, Denis Villeneuve, Philippe Falardeau... But teenagers will not go to watch their films. There is one thought that Rock and I often shared with each other: if you've only seen Hollywood films in your childhood, how will you develop a curiosity to see something else once you grow older? FIFEM has always been knocking on the doors of producers, filmmakers, and funding bodies with the argument that if we want to develop an industry, we also have to develop an audience. We keep giving money to filmmakers but if the numbers at the box office are disastrous, how long can we keep on throwing money through the window?

In Quebec we fight for francophone culture in a continent full of Americans. Cinema - like literature or music - is a good way to raise an interest in that culture. This awareness must have grown among funding bodies like Sodec and Telefilm, and budgets



Rock Demers

have profoundly increased. That is when all pieces of the puzzle came together and then... boom! A new catalogue of Quebec young audience cinema emerged.

Before Rock Demers passed away in 2021, he sold Productions La Fête to Dominic James, a dynamic producer. In COCO FARM - the first title produced under the old 'Tales for All' label - James successfully keeps the tone and spirit of that old film series alive. And there are other compa-

nies like Marie-Claude Beauchamp's CarpeDiem Film (SNOWTIME, the animated remake of THE DOG WHO STOPPED THE WAR), or 10 Ave Productions (KATAK, THE BRAVE BELUGA). Nowadays - for the first time in many years - we have both animation and live action, we have films for kids (COCO FARM), while BILLIE BLUE addresses young teenagers. We're covering the whole spectrum and that is quite exciting!

It's not during those nine festival days per year that FIFEM will raise that audience, but over 27 years we must have made an impact. The generation of kids that grew up with Rock Demers, also grew up with FIFEM. All the time I've kept the audience on a hot plate while shouting out: *"Can somebody please make them some films?!"* And that call is being answered now.

Based on a Zlin Film Festival podcast



Sébastien Gagné about COCO FARM

“An essential part of our collective DNA”

Entrepreneurship runs through Max's veins. When financial struggles force him and his father to move to the countryside, Max is welcomed with open arms by his somewhat unworldly cousin Charles - something he doesn't exactly find a reason to be cheerful about. Until he discovers the opportunities of small-scale farming and starts an egg farming business in the old barn, with the help of some local friends. *Coco Farm* becomes an immediate bestseller on the local market. But even kids cannot escape the laws of economics and industry, controlled by big enterprises.

After the death of founder Rock Demers, *COCO FARM* is the first new film in the *Tales for All* series, the legendary production line of La Fête Productions. How did it feel for director Sébastien Gagné to suddenly become part of Quebec's cinematic heritage?

Sébastien Gagné: To me, *La Fête* always stood for entertaining, local cinema. It's a quality label, like Pixar, and it comes with a lot of pressure, be-

cause their films have been so important to so many people, myself included! Some of those films I still watch every year with my kids; they are very dear to my heart. In a way, I was the one putting the most pressure upon myself because I didn't want to disappoint the first hour fan that I am.

You dedicated your film to Rock Demers.

Gagné: It's all about respect. When we rolled out the first film in the new era of the 'Tales for all' series, my producers and I felt that we had to acknowledge the legacy of what came before. We were standing on the shoulders of this giant and we wouldn't be where we are if it were not for him.

COCO FARM tells about entrepreneurship. 'Obsessive entrepreneurship', I would even say. Still the film is not a promotion clip for neoliberal corporate business.

Gagné: Eventually, one could see the movie through that particular lens. But to me, it's about pursuing a dream, having a goal and working



hard to make it happen. Many kids nowadays lack a purpose and spend — dare I say waste? — countless hours on devices doing nothing. *COCO FARM* shows kids the importance of having a project and working hard for it. Max's deeper motivation probably comes from this very primal principle that makes us want to outgrow our parents as individual personae and we don't want to repeat their mistakes.

The film paints an idyllic picture of rural Canada.

Gagné: Well... that IS Canada! It's where the food that we eat comes from. It's an essential part of our collective DNA. It's also a haven where you can escape the city and return to a more humane lifestyle. My Canadian fellow-countrymen would probably say their everyday life is much harder than the picture I've painted. I know that they face numerous issues such as labour shortage, but we can't address all that in the context of a short family film.





COCO FARM has a nice balance between young and mature characters. It's not the young versus the old, or the old ones leading the youngsters. No, the initiative is always with the kids, and in crucial moments they can count on the help of adults.

Gagné: That is all part of the "Tales for All" DNA. We simply made a 'normal' film, and it just happens to be that our protagonists are 12 year old kids... who sometimes get help from adults. But it's their story, told from their point of view.

One mature character is struggling with a profound problem. How did you make sure not to portray alco-

holism as a kind of folkloristic public entertainment?

Gagné: We talked quite a bit about this. I think the answer is in walking the thin line between showing the real consequences of that problem and showing the redemption of the character. Yes, we do make some fun of it, but through a process of change and growth, the character becomes redeemable and relatable, in a way.

If one thing can be said about this film, it is that there's a lot of chickens out there!

Gagné: At first the idea actually made me quite scared! We broke it down, so we actually needed no more than 300

chickens for only three days. In general, everything went pretty smoothly, and the kids loved to hold and pet the chickens. But this one night, while shooting Benoit's emotional scene in which he explains what happened to his business – which led to him losing his kids – one particular chicken just wouldn't shut up... like, the whole time! The actors, being very professional, carried through... I was afraid we would have to ADR the whole scene, but our sound people did a fantastic job in post-production and only one line needed dubbing.

There is hardly a scene in which cousin Charles is not carrying a chicken in his arms.

Gagné: He loves them! He would have had a chicken in his arms in EVERY scene if he had gotten his way!

There are a few remarkable scenes in which Max is advised by a man who died centuries ago. "I shouldn't listen to you because you don't exist," he says.

Gagné: That is Joseph Armand Bombardier, famous Quebec inventor of the snowmobile! Those scenes take place when Max feels completely lost and desperately needs advice. It is the voice of reason speaking, and it is also what gives him the strength not



to abandon his mission. Both the tone of these scenes and their place in the structure of the movie were carefully overthought; we wanted them to feel real. We played around with the idea of giving the character a soft glow – like Obi-Wan Kenobi – but then decided not to, in order to lend bigger gravitas to his words, especially to the story about the death of his son, an event that motivated him to invent the snowmobile.

The film has an interesting ending quote that somehow seems to question the entire agricultural industry.

Gagné: The Government of Quebec recently changed the law, so that smaller farms would be allowed to have more chickens. So, there's that! The change in regulation happened slightly before we released the film, so those issues were part of the zeitgeist, I guess.

–
Gert Hermans

Colin Ludvic Racicot about WHERE RABBITS COME FROM

“What does a rabbit see when it goes into the magician’s hat?”

How to find tenderness in a cold and grey world? The atmosphere on the streets in the opening scene of *WHERE RABBITS COME FROM*, directed by Colin Ludvic Racicot in his studio in Montreal, is both cosy and hostile. Like Montmartre on a dark evening... a very dark evening! In this depressing, dystopian world, a widowed rabbit father defies the authorities to bring a sense of wonder into his daughter’s life.

Colin Ludvic Racicot: The scenery was inspired mostly by travels in Europe, and by films like Tim Burton’s *NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS* or the gritty architecture in *101 DALMATIANS*. This hybrid universe combines human architecture with elements from the rabbit lexicon, like neon signs with flickering carrots.

Flickering lights are everywhere! You see them all the time while looking over the city, or when the rabbits enter their home.

Racicot: Cinema is light! We created a universe that is realistic and fantastic

at the same time, and small details like lights reflected in windows add credibility to the image. I’ve put in as many details as possible, while still keeping the attention on the characters.

Which are a father and a daughter, sharing a beautiful bond.

Racicot: The inspiration comes from my own experience as a father. You want your children to be happy, you want to see the spark of joy in their eyes. Sometimes it’s difficult to achieve, but when it happens, that moment is magical and inspiring. When the girl’s drawing comes to life, seeing his daughter’s joy is what makes the father so happy.

Then the tone changes drastically. There is a bang on the door and the police are invading the house. What is happening? Is the father punished for having dreams?

Racicot: In this dystopian world, imagination is prohibited; the totalitarian regime wants to keep control over everything. So when their neighbour

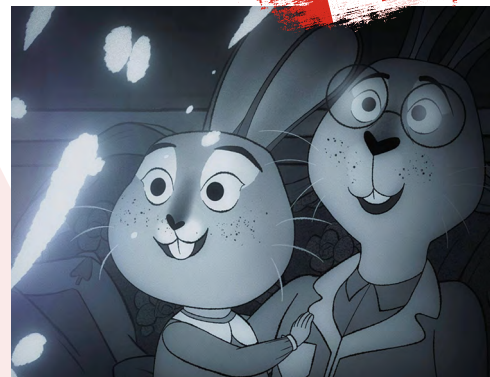
- who is all the time peeking and spying on them - spots a glimpse of magic, she calls the police.

Why did it have to be rabbits?

Racicot: The whole premise came to me one day when wondering what a rabbit would see when it goes into the magician’s hat. Rabbits are not particularly tough to animate, but it’s not easy. It’s never easy! We tried to recreate a feeling of traditional animation by using a much easier cut-out process. We did the few scenes inside the magician’s hat in traditional animation and it took us way longer to finish them. We animated the entire film in approx. eight months, and it took another eight months - simultaneously - to do the traditional part.

You also took great care of sound and music.

Racicot: I love sound! Doing the visuals



is amazing, but then when you add the Foley and sound design, that is such a liberating moment, as if you’re watching a completely new film. It adds so much depth and volume to the image. For the music I wanted something classic, as I was inspired by many classic music scores. One that I really love is *LES TRIPLETTES DE BELLEVILLE* by Benoît Charest, who actually lives in Montreal. When he accepted, we felt so blessed to have him on the team.

—
Gert Hermans

Based on a Zlin Film Festival podcast

Focus Québec at the SCHLINGEL Festival

The SCHLINGEL Film Festival puts the Canadian province of Quebec in focus in its 28th edition, which starts on 23 September. With a comparatively small population of 8.5 million people, Québec's production output is more than remarkable. In the field of children's and youth films, numerous feature films have been made in recent months, eight of which will be shown at the festival.

These films deal with history in such a sensitive way that even difficult topics can be presented without a certain heaviness that often sticks to them. This kind of storytelling can certainly inspire filmmakers in other countries. The films from Canada's predominantly French speaking province play a mediating role between American and European cinema. This is an interesting aspect for possible future German and European co-productions.

"As director of a young audience festival, I am of course familiar with the name Rock Demers, known as a Québec producer with an enormous cinematic range in children's films on a global scale," says festival director Michael

Harbauer. "In a way, this focus is also a tribute to Rock. With his knowledge and tireless dedication, he has created opportunities to help filmmaking for the younger generation achieve a unique status. The seeds he planted in the 80s have borne precious fruit. SCHLINGEL is proud to present this focus with the support of the Québec film industry." Many of the eight programmed films in SCHLINGEL still bear the traces of his inspiring mission.

ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF ASHA (German premiere – Children's film competition)



With ADVENTURES IN THE LAND OF ASHA, director Sophie Farkas Bolla takes the audience into the life of nine year old Jules, who suffers from a rare skin disease and moves to the

countryside with his family. In the forest, the boy meets Asha, who belongs to the indigenous Meskwaki people. Together they set out to find Asha's parents and the cure for Jules' disease.

COCO FARM (German premiere)

COCO FARM by Sébastien Gagné, deals with the idea of building a business. After Max reluctantly moves to the countryside with his father, he discovers that eggs from the farm taste so much better than those from industrial animal husbandry. Together with his cousin Charles, he decides to found the animal-friendly Coco Farm and thus implement a clever business idea. (See interview)



ECHO DELTA (International premiere – Junior film competition)

This film by Patrick Boivin focuses on 10 year old Etienne. He and his little brother David are obsessed with aliens. When David dies in a lightning strike, Etienne is convinced he has been abducted by aliens and does everything he can to get his little brother back. But sooner or later the boy has to face his grief.



BILLIE BLUE (German premiere)

Director Marilou Wolfe follows the summer of 16 year old Billie, who falls in love for the first time alongside work at the water park and spending time with her friends. Unfortunately, Billie is not the only one who has an eye on regional cycling champion Pierre. Her sister Annette also tries to get closer to the beau, which puts the



relationship of the two siblings to the test. (See interview)



YOU CAN LIVE FOREVER (Youth Film Competition)

Directors Sarah Watts and Mark Slutsky focus on a blossoming relationship between two teenagers in the 1990s. Jamie is sent by her parents to a Jehovah’s Witness institution. In the strictly religious group she falls in love with Marike, but this relationship has serious consequences for both of them.



KATAK, THE BRAVE BELUGA (German premiere)

In this Québec animated film by Christine Dallaire-Dupont and Nicola Lemay, the young beluga whale Katak sets out from his peaceful river estuary on a journey to the Arctic Ocean. There he hopes to find his grandfather, the legendary conqueror of the dreaded killer whale Jack-Knife, in order to reunite him with his dying grandmother.



BUTTERFLY TALE (International premiere)

This Canadian-German co-production by Sophie Roy provides an insight into the animated world of Patrick the butterfly. Patrick’s wings are too small and therefore he cannot fly. However, he doesn’t let it get him down and does everything he can to fly south together with his swarm of butterflies – also to impress the unapproachable Jennifer.

HOW TO GET YOUR PARENTS TO DIVORCE

In Sandrine Brodeur-Desrosiers’ film, Justine pushes a crazy plan to get her constantly arguing parents to divorce. To do this, she sets up her own court in which her friends should act as judges and lawyers. But little by little the situation seems to be slipping from her fingers.



INSIDE ANTHONY’S HEAD

In this short film, director Anthony Drolet takes us on a bizarre journey in which young Anthony courageously faces the threat of humans, monsters and the elements.



—
Nadine Luther



The BILLIE BLUE Team

“Summer is a woman!”

If feminism starts with giving compliments, then BILLIE BLUE is a truly feminist film. Director Marilouf Wolfe, screenwriter Sarah-Maude Beauchesne and lead actress Lilianne Skelly continuously pat each other on the back, and the way they express their proudness about each other - rightly so! - and the film - rightly so! - is contagious and encouraging. The film's sprawling, summery atmosphere continues perfectly on the terrace of a café in Zlin, where BILLIE BLUE celebrated its international premiere at the festival, and where I swoon in a flood of summer freckles and friendly voices.

At 16, Billie is lagging behind with her peers. In a hurry to catch up, she begins her summer as a lifeguard at the water park with her friends and her oh-so-perfect older sister. Everything goes wrong when both siblings fall for Pierre, a talented local cyclist. Fortunately, a long summer grants you a lot of time to grow up and discover what you really want from life.

Opening with a menstruation scene makes it clear what this film will be all about...

Sarah-Maude Beauchesne: About girls, transition, and the real stuff that happens in a woman's life; including menstruation and period blood. It's not a blue liquid like in TV commercials, it's blood. If we want to talk about women, we talk about blood, tears, sex, desires, and feminism. Our main goal was to be authentic; this is how Marilouf made the movie, this is how I wrote it and this is how Lilianne acted in it.

Marilouf Wolfe: Initially the visual image of the blood was not in the script. But the film contains many poetic scenes in the water, so I thought an abstract visualisation of menstrual blood through water in the first images would set the tone.

Authentic means: true to what happens among girls at that age.

Lilianne Skelly: What you hear in the film is truly the discourse among me and my friends in Quebec. But I didn't improvise - all the words were there



and they were perfect.

As important as the female approach is the summer setting.

Beauchesne: The summer became a character on its own; summer is a woman! Because winters are so cold, Quebec only gets lively in summer. That is when everything happens: you fall in love, meet new friends, live your life... As a teenager I worked in a water park all summer long; that part is taken from my own life story.

Skelly: I grew up in the town where the water park is located, about an hour away from Montreal. It's where I spent many summer days, and in winter I work there as a skiing instructor,

as the place turns into a skiing hill. Wolfe: Summers are also visually more interesting. That park was a perfect playground for me in the depiction of countryside-life.

But it wasn't a perfect playground for Lilianne.

Skelly: BILLIE BLUE was a summer movie, shot in the fall from September to mid-October, once the water park closed. We had some lucky days when it was 30° and sunny, but much more I remember one night when it was 10°, everyone was wearing winter coats and I had to go into the pool wearing nothing but a bra and underwear. We couldn't even shoot the en-



tire scene and had to finish it in the studio. Me and some crew members took a special training in feeling comfortable in the water - how to control the ear pressure and breathing - as I had to act underwater with my eyes open. And I wasn't the best swimmer in the first place.

The result is a bunch of dreamlike, surreal swimming scenes that seem to mark every new chapter and look magnificent.

Beauchesne: Those scenes were already in the book on which the film is based. The book is rather contemplative, it's all about words and feelings and not a lot about action. I had to find a way to translate those feelings into images and the swimming scenes contributed to that.

Wolfe: They helped us to take our time to tell the story the way it should be told. Billie's heart has many steps to take, which is something we shouldn't rush.

There were 700 candidates for your role!

Skelly: I felt lucky to be chosen. I don't study acting or cinema, I study science and want to become an astrophysicist. Maybe being tall helped me to get that role... I had a bit of a transformation for this film, and I liked it.



The BILLIE BLUE Team - Sarah-Maude Beauchesne, Lilianne Skelly & Marilou Wolf

My natural hair colour isn't red, but it was coloured for the movie and then afterwards I kept it like that. And they gave me extra freckles!

Every teenager has their reasons to feel different or clumsy. Is it a burden to be tall?

Beauchesne: Every teenager has issues about their physical appearance or personality, and being tall can be a burden. My burden was being late on everything; it was weird to lag behind on all my friends, not knowing what life as a woman would be like.

The original title - COEUR DE SLUSH - fits beautifully with the movie's atmosphere.

Beauchesne: Slush is a kind of summer drink. Coeur de slush stands for a heart that melts, that is sweet, that changes... Slush comes in different colours, and Billie likes it blue - it makes her tongue turn blue. Outside Quebec the title of the book was changed into BILLIE LOU, and then for the movie BILLIE BLUE was the title that should resonate internationally.



One quote to remember: "Guys drink, girls cry, and in the end no one is happy."

Beauchesne: Throughout the teenage years there is a permanent silence between boys and girls when it comes to communication about feelings. When Billie tells Pierre that yes, she wants to come to his house, she wants him to be "her first one", that is such a bold thing to do. As a teenager I lacked such truthful conversations with guys. When I saw all the boys here in the audience, I felt like 'yes, soon they will find out that you actually can speak about real feelings with each other'.

So far, you had one screening for the 'beau monde' on the opening night, and one school screening for teenagers.

Beauchesne: The boys showed a lot of interest. I'm happy that they will hear the message too, and understand the discourse and the interiority. The story is told from a woman's point of view but it is essential for men to listen.

Skelly: Many boys came to talk to us and were curious. And some adults



came to tell how the film made them nostalgic about their first love. I like it when different audiences show different reactions.

Wolfe: Though one man came to tell me how the opening scene made him feel uncomfortable.

The bonding between the sisters feels very real to me.

Beauchesne: My relationship with my sister is by far the most important relationship in my life, and the most complicated one.

Skelly: Like in the film, I have a sister that is two years older than me. Nowadays she's living on the other side of Canada so I'm seeing less of her but over the last few years we've grown much closer. I could easily relate to that bond in the film.

And there's Billie's father, who is in some way truly heartbreaking. He is doing the best he can, driven by nothing but good intentions.

Wolfe: He is loveable! Beforehand I was wondering what a father could add to a story about teenagers. But after shooting with François Létourneau, I'm ashamed that I once doubted his role. He has such nice scenes that add some comic relief to the movie. Whereas teenagers sometimes fly up high, he brings things down to

earth again.

What's the year?

Wolfe: The year is now! But we have indeed plenty of vintage references: the car, the walkman and cassettes, father's Dark Metal Combat computer game (I really like that name!), the music of Joe Dassin... I hope that mixing all these references will help the film to look timeless and age well. The producer wasn't sure how my musical choices would go down with youngsters. But what worked for STRANGER THINGS should work for us too! Those songs have been around for 50 years and teenagers have the choice if they want to further explore some of the new musical references that we offer them.

That music must have cost a fortune! You even have Elvis on the soundtrack.

Wolfe: We had a budget to pay a full fee for three famous songs, and then for the other ones - like Elvis - we did a re-recording, with a female voice to better match with Billie's feelings.

Colleagues in Quebec have been knocking on the doors of producers and funders for ages, begging for support for young audience films. Where does this 'Quebec wave' sud-



denly come from? To whom should we give the credit?

Wolfe: When I was young there were so many films from Quebec. I grew up on the 'Tales for all' from Rock Demers, and they've been so important to me. They've planted many references in my mind - I was proud to do voice acting in the animated remake of THE DOG WHO STOPPED THE WAR! Beauchesne: All those movies are in my heart forever. They made me who I am today.

Wolfe: Then for many years there was nothing. Producers kept on pitching, but those projects never got picked. Why has it suddenly changed? Based on a legacy from the past, I guess now the right people have found each other

at the right moment.

—
Gert Hermans



Nordic Think Tank



The NoJSe Network creates a new Nordic Think Tank to investigate the ever changing world of film and media for young audiences.

Part of the NoJSe Network's mission is to explore the future landscape of children's media and enhance collaboration within the industry. This year's focus has been set on co-creation. That is why we are organising the inaugural NoJSe Think Tank in October, during BUSTER, which is dedicated to examining the power of co-creation in media and film for children and youth through a Nordic lens.

As Catherine Sordal from Kirstiansand Int'l Children's Film Festival puts it: "We need to think creatively in a new media reality where children and young people consume much more than just movies in theatres. They stream, game and follow online personalities, they participate in and create content within large online communities, and cultivate their online friendships. Our work with films and media for young people only makes sense if the content reaches an audience and is meaningful to them. The Think Tank aims to identify

who in the Nordic region has successfully reached young audiences, who launched visionary ideas, and who can offer new perspectives."

The Nordic region has a long-standing reputation for its commitment to children's rights, equality, and progressive educational approaches. Building upon these foundations, the NoJSe Think Tank brings together a mix of film professionals and researchers from across the Nordic countries to celebrate the diverse cultural heritage, linguistic richness, and storytelling traditions that make the Nordic region so unique.

"In the Nordic region, we have a tradition of engaging in dialogue with our young audience regarding the content we produce for them. Over the years, we have improved our ability to gather knowledge about the 2-16-year-old target groups and engage in dialogue with them. However, how do we maintain the pace of research and knowledge sharing in a constantly evolving media market? Additionally, how can producers, distributors, and filmmakers improve their ongoing sharing of ex-



Barnefilmfestivalen

periences and findings? These are the key aspects that the Think Tank aims to address", says Mariella Harpelunde Jensen, Head of Programme at BUSTER.

The session's discussions, suggestions and ideas will be consolidated into a report that will form the basis of NoJSe's guidelines for the next year and will be presented at the Berlinale in February 2024, during the annual ECFA meeting.

The members of the NoJSe Think Tank in 2023 are:
Helene Mohlin, Producer, Sweden

Kajsa Næss, Director, Norway
Ninna Palmadottir, Director, Iceland
Veera W. Vilo, Actor/Screenwriter/Producer, Finland
Jón Hammer, Producer, Faroe Islands
Niels Alberg, Consultant and Researcher, Denmark

NoJSe - Nordic Junior Sessions Network consists of five Nordic children's film festivals: BUFF ICYFF, Sweden; Kristiansand ICFF, Norway; BUSTER Film Festival, Denmark; Oulu ICFF, Finland; and RIFF, Iceland.

Kwak Nohyun, Chairman of the BIKY Festival

“We respect the uniqueness of each and every child”

For me, the BIKY festival in Busan, South-Korea, opens the gateway to Asia, to Korean cuisine (which looks even more exotic in Busan than elsewhere in the country), to Korean hospitality, urbanisation, severe weather conditions and a smoke-free city. But does the festival also open the gateway to Asian cinema for children?

The programming is broad, open-minded and progressive. The only thing missing is domestic cinema, although BIKY - with input from dynamic colleagues such as Kim Sang-Hwa and Emily Jang - is doing all it can to encourage the production of children's films in the region, through lobbying or by organising an Industry Network during the festival. It is such initiatives that make BIKY the real youth film hub in this part of the Asian continent. The city is a candidate to host the 2030 World Expo, everywhere you'll see promotional billboards with the slogan "Busan is ready!" But how ready exactly is what I want to find out with Kwak Nohyun, Chairman of the BIKY board.

A festival is partly defined by its location, the city where it takes place. A city like Busan is hard to “read” for a foreigner like me. Can you give me a key to unlock the city?

Kwak Nohyun: Busan is the second largest city in Korea; the basis of its economic life is the sea port where millions of goods are imported and exported. Busan is known as Cinema City, with three pillars: BIFF (Busan Int'l Film Festival), BIKY (for children & youth), BISFF (for shorts) make Busan a popular place among cinema people.

What position can BIKY claim within this triumvirate of festivals?

Nohyun: I'm not a cinema person - I'm a law professor - but as Chairman of the Board I can say that we're the biggest, oldest and most established children's film festival in Korea, and we occupy a crucial place in the international scene. The festival has found its home in a huge building - we call it the Palace of Cinema. Moreover BIKY is not only a festival; it's also a platform, a market place and a school.



Busan Cinema Palace

Let's go one by one... When you describe BIKY as a platform, you mean that this festival can unlock the Asian market for film professionals?

Nohyun: Definitely! BIKY is the top in Asia. We are a marketplace for the entire Asian film industry and a platform for filmmakers and festival people to meet; every year a multitude of filmmakers are invited here. We select 60 feature films out of approx. 1500 submissions, we are highly selective. During the festival we have three forums: one for young people, one for adults,

and one for the industry. Out of 150 Korean film festivals, only seven are supported by the Cinema Promotion Fund, organised by the Korean Film Council, out of which BIKY is the only children's film festival.

You said BIKY is also a school. What do young people learn here?

Nohyun: We call it "movie reading". Students are invited to discuss what they see in a film; both watching and discussing are a part of our educational programme. Every year around



20,000 students from 450 classes take part in it. Every day we're having movie reading classes for which 200 to 400 youngsters are welcomed in the Cinema Palace. For me this is the most striking element of BIKY as an organisation. Film education is a great medium for students to be awakened; it can open gateways to themselves, their society and to global issues. Yesterday I saw how the film SEA SPARKLE opened our students' eyes to the lives in a Belgian fishermen's village.

How is that programme organised?

Nohyun: We make a licence agreement to buy films' rights for educational distribution. There are 17 provincial educational authorities in our country - Busan is one of them - and 6 of them enrolled in our programme, named "Buy one, get in for free". The idea is that if each authority buys one licence, the whole nation can benefit from it. Moreover we have trained about 50 teachers to conduct movie reading sessions, in which students dedicate 3 or 4 curricular hours to cinema. In Korea school time is extremely precious; this country gives a great importance to education.

Being an admirer of wonderful films like THE HOUSE OF US, THE WORLD OF US, KIDS ARE FINE and BOORI,



Industry Networking Days @ BIKY

and knowing that children's film production in South-Korea is limited, I wonder if there is a role for BIKY to play in boosting Korean production.

Nohyun: The most deplorable thing about BIKY is that we lack a satisfying number of Korean titles. This year, out of 60 feature films in our programme, only two of them are Korean. It is like that every year, in fact. Unlike several countries in the EU, Korean cinema authorities do not allocate a specific fund for children's film making. We carefully lobbied with Korean lawmakers and currently one proposal to allocate certain funds to children's movies is submitted. In our opinion children's movies are a public booth,

they should be nurtured. Otherwise children's films will seldom be made.

It's not only about funding. It's also about creating a 'good cinema' tradition. What does a film need to be a BIKY film?

Nohyun: This is not my expertise, so I can not speak as a chairman, but as a regular visitor of the festival. I see how BIKY films do not intend to be educational in the first place; most of all they should be attractive. The festival audience has very different preferences; following the requirements of our time, we keep our selection as diverse and balanced as possible.

All this brings me to one sentence that I often heard in the opening ceremony: "We are all unique".

Nohyun: That is BIKY's slogan. Translated in Korean it sounds like: "*We are good when we are different*"; differences should never cause barriers. We respect the uniqueness of each and every child, and only by that we can nourish the diversity and richness of our culture. This should be reflected in our programming and in every action taken by BIKY.

I see why BIKY needs a chairman that is both wise and diplomatic.

Nohyun: We have our Executive Director Kim Sang-Hwa, whom you all know. He used to be an animation director and a professor at the art college, but he dedicated his whole life to this festival. Without him there is no BIKY tradition. He is very stubborn to keep the festival for and by children. His spiritual mentor is Bang Jeong Hwan, who 100 years ago - in 1923 - launched the declaration of children's emancipation. Today BIKY is already raising the next generation of BIFF audiences, but BIKY has the right to also exist just as BIKY.

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Gert Hermans

Parida Tantiwasadakran about YOUNG PEOPLE, OLD PEOPLE & NOTHING IN BETWEEN

“Once they went on a walk, holding hands”

Probably 7 year old Juice has never heard the word ‘Alzheimer’ before, but she surely realises something is changing about Grandma Lovely. As if her thoughts are all the time slipping through her fingers. Now Juice has a mission: to help Grandma Lovely to retain as many memories as possible. In the seclusion of a quiet countryside home, every memory becomes a small treasure.

YOUNG PEOPLE, OLD PEOPLE & NOTHING IN BETWEEN (screened in the BIKY Festival, Special Mention of the Jury) was made as a student short film, shot in Thailand by young American-Thai director Parida Tantiwasadakran:

Parida Tantiwasadakran: I know the title is long and obnoxious, but it refers to the concept I had in mind for the movie. I wanted to depict young characters under the age of 10, and old people over the age of 60; no person “in between” the age gap would

appear on screen.

It tells something about the perspective you took in making the film.

Tantiwasadakran: I just felt that older people in movies are underrepresented, and children are not taken seriously. I wanted to push back against those things. I remember being a kid and hated being infantilised and talked down to. Now I realise the elderly can also sometimes be infantilised. My grandma lived through so many difficulties - even war - she had to fight for food and duck underground. Not many films tap into their complexity or recognise the nuances that they live with.

‘Authentic’ was the first word that came to my mind.

Tantiwasadakran: The story is inspired by the woman who took care of me the first 14 years of my life; she wasn’t blood-related but I called her Grandma. When I went back to Thailand and



went to see her, she could hardly remember me. She knew who I was, but she would go all the time between me and my mum when recalling the past. *“Remember how I saved your life pulling you out of the river” - “Eh... that was my mum.”* She giggled about it, but I found it heartbreaking.

Did the decision to use a voice-over in the closing scene stem from that pain of not being recognised?

Tantiwasadakran: I really wanted a framing device for the film in order to refer to the past and talk about the future. You can say the most important words of the film come at the

end - *“I may have lost her but she never lost me”* - I couldn’t get this across without a voice-over and I thought it was beautiful enough to take the risk.

How was the chemistry between both actresses, young and old?

Tantiwasadakran: We had two informal rehearsals, reading the script and hoping to make them feel comfortable with each other. Once they went on a walk together, holding hands, which made me very happy. It was both their first main role in a film. Deedee Piamwiriayaku (playing Juice), who was only seven, memorised 20 pages. Her mum practised with her





every day, and so did Suwinya Kung-sadan (Grandma Lovely) with her daughter.

Behind this film is an international construction. You are Thai, living in LA, but working with a Thai team.

Tantiwasadakran: I was born one hour outside Los Angeles and grew up in Southern California but I would go back to Thailand every summer. I just knew that I had to make this film there. Years ago I met my translator (and the film's narrator), Chanakarn Kaewchaivijit, at an art gallery in Thailand and we became friends. Then, a friend had given me the name of a producer she knew, Pichsinee Wongthipphun. I pitched the project to her and she

said yes. Next was my fantastic DoP, Nisha Jurairattanaporn. That's how the team came together.

Is there also a Thai perspective on 'old age' to the movie?

Chanakarn Kaewchaivijit: It depends on each family, but in general Thai people do respect the elderly. It is very much in our culture to take care of them. But how much you would draw from their wisdom depends on individual family traditions.

In your film I recognise the entire Alzheimer process, with grandma trying to hide what is going on, until at a certain moment she can't hide it any longer, and that's when anger

and frustration set in.

Tantiwasadakran: I talked to many people and picked up knowledge from their stories. Two weeks before shooting, a friend told me the script was too cheery. So I added the scene in which grandma gets angry over losing her favourite cup. When I think about what Alzheimer's can do to someone, I feel compassion, but I never thought about the anger someone might feel, knowing that they are losing themselves. If you were once a bright and capable person, and you're conscious enough to understand what is happening to you, how can you not be frustrated and angry?

Then there is the closing scene...

Tantiwasadakran: ... often referred to as 'the cow scene'; it is the one scene that people recall from my movie. I actually remember my Grandma telling me as a child: do you know that cows are sad when their babies are taken away from them? They cry! That sentence broke my heart so much. I never forgot it and added it verbatim.

For that scene you actually needed a cow.

Tantiwasadakran: Cows have been an element throughout the film on an invisible level. But for that closing scene I had to call my producer and

ask her: tell me if it sounds crazy, I don't want to be a director from hell and I expect you to say no, but do you think you can get me cows? "Well... I guess that's not too hard." In Los Angeles, they might charge you a thousand per cow.

How can I justify a full page dedicated to cow stories?

Tantiwasadakran: The farmers were so generous - *"of course you can film here but I can't guarantee that the cows will come out."* Usually they came out for a walk around 5 PM and if the leader walks in your direction, the other ones might just follow. 4:45 PM comes and the whole team is lined up ready to shoot, and there they come, walking straight towards us, observing us across the line just like how we were observing them. They were probably curious and wanted to know what was going on. In terms of continuity, I tried not to freak out. All I could do was put my trust in the cows and hope they would walk really slowly and that it would all edit correctly. Even the last shot with the cows walking towards the horizon, I could never have planned it. They just did it.

Contact: Parida at paridathebeat@gmail.com

Sharing thoughts at the YCN Conference in Zürich



YCN, the worldwide Youth Cinema Network for media educators and festivals screening films made by youngsters was launched informally in 2012. Today, the network has 30+ members from every corner of the globe. They meet yearly at a different location for the YCN Conference, in which YCN's main points of operation are decided upon. This year's conference took place during the 47th [Schweizer Jugendfilmstage \(23–24 March\)](#) in Zürich, Switzerland.

The Conference covered several topics, like...

1. Greener Film Festivals – How can film festivals become more sustainable?

Film festivals as cultural events are playing an important role in public life. Their organisational implementation can influence the public perception regarding sustainability. Festival teams, funders, sponsors and the audience demand for events that are run in a sustainable manner. The following aspects were discussed:

- The topic of sustainability is incorporated into many festivals

through thematic programmes that can create awareness.

- Not every aspect is in the power of the organising teams, e.g. sustainability of locations, energy, etc.
- Small points of improvement can save costs. For instance, 'avoiding waste' (e.g. surplus food, printed materials, merchandise etc.) can be controlled by each festival and is a substantial step towards more sustainability.
- Sometimes a seemingly sustainable option is not the best one. What if the transportation of vegetarian food is leaving a bigger ecological footprint than serving local non-veggie food (like fish or reindeer at the NUFF festival)?
- Encourage the audience and guests to travel by train and reimburse only those who do. Or find compensations, for example at FISH a local energy company sponsors CO2 offsets.

2. Audience Accessibility – How can film festivals be made more accessible and inclusive?

The goal is to welcome children with disabilities and their family members



in public places without causing fear or guilt. The means could be: socialisation and learning; integration and inclusion; learning tolerance and acceptable behaviour; making friendships; and in general making society aware of the difficulties faced by kids with developmental difficulties. Following aspects were discussed:

- Creating more open spaces for film education, even outside a movie theatre context. Perhaps a more open form of screening with short-

er film programmes can be considered, so that children don't have to sit still for too long. Opportunities can be provided to move around during the screening.

- Discussion and interaction with children before and after screenings so that they know what to expect, and - afterwards - process what they have seen.
- Contact with the target group: through schools, organisations, Facebook groups with parents or





specific websites. Over time, you can create a database of contacts.

- Keep the costs low or consider free access – budgets are in fact a crucial accessibility issue.
- Different programmes for different age groups might not be needed, as the audience often consists of mixed age groups.

3. Case study: filmkids.ch

filmkids.ch is a film school for children and teenagers (aged 8–18), founded in 2007 by film producer and arts manager Simone Häberling. Over the past 15 years, filmkids.ch has developed from a small non-profit association into a well-connected “institution” operating all over German-speaking

Switzerland.

4. Case study: Cinemini Europe

Cinemini Europe offers film festivals and educational organisations a practical method for working with young children, including a curated film catalogue, adapted activities and teaching materials. For Cinemini Europe, film education is not primarily about understanding or making films, but rather about experiencing. Playfully engaging with film offers children the opportunity to discover the world of moving images in a meaningful and fun way.

5. Case study: Filmhaus Basel

This unique cultural space in the

middle of the old town hosts the association “Verein für die Förderung der Begeisterung am bewegten Bild (VFBbB)”, meaning “Encouraging enthusiasm for the moving image”. The project was initiated by actors of the Gässli Film Festival and offers creative studios for filmmakers, workshops, a small cinema and space for exhibitions.

6. How is media education included into school systems and what role can YCN play?

This short study looks into the status of media education for 10-18 year old pupils in different European school systems, as well as the challenges and opportunities that educators are facing. The survey raises a range of questions, including:

- How much time is dedicated to media education in the curriculum?
- What are the main challenges faced by educators in teaching media education?
- What opportunities are there for students to learn about media?
- What types of media are being used in the classroom?

The next YCN Conference is planned for May 2024 in Rostock (Germany) in the framework of [FISH – FilmFestival](#)



[im StadtHafen.](#)

For more info on YCN please contact: Marija Ratković Vidaković (marijaratkovic@gmail.com) Antonio Britvar (antonio.britvar@gmail.com)

The Youngsters Making Film column is curated by YCN (Youth Cinema Network), a worldwide network of youth film festivals, organisations and film & media educators. YCN focusses on films made by young people, using their right to express themselves through moving images. For more info about Youth Cinema Network, check www.youthcinemanetwork.org.

Boris Paval Conen & cast about DOJO

“There are no warning signs at every street corner”

The first time Brandon enters a dojo - a judo school - is on the occasion of a burglary. Caught in the act by the judo teacher, he can escape punishment if he promises to come and train and to distance himself from Billy's gang, involved in robberies and petty crime in the neighbourhood. The proposal sounds tempting, but Brandon does not want to let down his best friend Stefano. Making the right choices becomes increasingly difficult.

Originally made as a “Telefilm” for Dutch television (supported by the CoBO Fund, in co-production with KRO & NCRV), this sports drama holds its own among all the youth films at the JEF festival in Antwerp, where we meet director Boris Paval Conen and his two main actors.

How to generate visibility on the big screens for a TV movie like DOJO?

Boris Paval Conen: We want this film to have a long life; we were always aiming for more than just a TV film. We had something special on our hands! I discussed with screenwriters

Ashar Medina and Evianne Lamme which way we wanted to go – make it big or keep it small? I wanted to make the kind of film that I would have liked as a child. The kick I felt back then, that's what I was looking for.

Which films are we talking about?

Conen: During STAR WARS, I was bouncing up and down in my cinema seat. I came out of the theatre all twisted up, thinking: what has happened to me now?

You state in the film, “Judo is for pussies.”

Delano Watchman (Stefano): That's how I thought about it when we started. I didn't know what to expect. But when I had to learn how to fall during the first session, I was amazed at what you could do by just using your arms and feet.

For me, judo is something very technical that an outsider can hardly understand. Every four years you'll find yourself sitting in front of the TV during the Olympics without be-



ing able to grasp the finesse.

Cones: It is an extremely physical sport. It always amazes me how much judokas get into each other's comfort zone. In our society, we usually keep a distance, but judokas just grab each other in the crotch and under the armpits. The matches - *randori* - are just one aspect. The most important thing about judo is exploring your body: It's about finding balance, not only physically but also in yourself.

Were you familiar with judo when you took on the project?

Conen: I used to do judo. I was very

small, so I had to fight girls - taller than me - and then I lost. No, judo wasn't my thing. But one of my best friends is a judoka with a master's title - the 6th dan - and when I was asked for this film, I immediately ran to him. He helped me look at judo in the right way and understand its philosophy, which is mainly about mastery.

In the opening scene, we're far from talking judo yet. With one main character on the lookout for a robbery, adrenaline splashes off the screen.

Conen: We dive directly into Bran-



don's world. It had to be not only exciting, but also fun, because for Brandon and his gang, this is pure excitement. We're looking exclusively through the eyes of the youngsters; not through the eyes of adults who blame them for committing a crime.

But in the next scene, we see him in the living room as a sweet, obedient boy.

Conen: As a child, you have a whole life your parents know nothing about. Brandon seeks with his friend what he can't find at home. At his age, you no longer follow the path laid out by your parents; you discover your own world. But then where will you end up? There are no warning signs at every street corner; things can just go wrong before you realise it. Brandon is a good boy; he wants to be there for his friend and family, yet he gets off track.

Actually, Brandon and Stefano are still kids, having pillow fights.

Conen: To lend those characters credibility, we had to consult experts by experience... like our young actors. Delano and Kymani played around all day, making the line between actor and character very thin. The conversation on the bike, the wheelies, the pillow fight... we had many of such



quasi-improvised moments.

We get to know less about Stefano's family.

Watchman: I am often home alone; my mother comes and goes at her convenience. That is why more and more I want to be part of that gang. I see Billy and his fellows as my big brothers.

In Billy's gang, all nationalities and ethnicities mix loosely.

Kymani Pinas (Brandon): That's what my group of friends in Amsterdam-West looks like... very diverse.

Conen: A distinction by colour and origin is something that is taught; you don't see it in children. You can make distinctions based on money or no money, problems with the police or

not, but not on the basis of skin colour.

With all these ethnicities coming together, you need a common language.

Pinas: Street language, like when I talk with my friends.

Your camera navigates always between residential blocks.

Conen: The Molenwijk in Amsterdam North is the only district not intersected by a highway. Surrounded by car parks, you can only enter the courtyard on foot or by bike. The place looks adventurous, intriguing, not the usual grey concrete. Our DoP Joris Bulstra constantly used colour filters; all those colours were chosen while filming. You need to make the right choice; there's no colour correction possible in post-production. Each scene has a colour and a feeling to go with it; the gang scenes initially all look very bright, but that feeling changes later on.

A yellow dim light hangs in the dojo, as if we're entering a temple.

Conen: This is one of the only judo rooms in the Netherlands that were effectively built as a dojo in the late 1970s. All judokas recognise that place; it is a piece of judo history.

You must have spent a lot of time in that place?

Pinas: I trained intensively for seven weeks. In my first judo lesson, we found out I had good skills for falling. Then we worked for weeks to train how to throw well too. I got better and better, but judo is no longer a thing in my life. Acting is - I gave up football for it.

Watchman: I preferred doing wheelies, and for the film I did some extra practise. The first time on a mountain bike felt weird, but a week later it went smoothly. At first I could only do about 3 metres, but Boris said, "*I want 100 metres!*" And I finally succeeded.

How lovely it is in the film to always hear that sound again - 'pets!' - every time a person goes down on the mat.

Conen: Those sharp hits are definitely one of the elements that make judo what it is. The satisfaction you feel when you hear your opponent hit the mat is unbeatable.

–
Gert Hermans

Sahim Omar Kalifa about BAGHDAD MESSI

Playing football in a minefield

Some 10 years after Sahim Omar Kalifa made a short film about a war victim with a football dream, **BAGHDAD MESSI** got a makeover as a feature film. Baghdad in 2009 is a hotbed of violence and terror. On the car radio we hear reports about a terrorist attack, after which the reporter says deadpan... "And now sports..." Director Sahim Omar Kalifa: "In Iraq, there were hundreds, sometimes thousands of deaths every week. Death and violence had become part of everyday life. I made a film about a child, Hamoudi, living in the most dangerous city in the world but not feeling the danger because he is possessed by his big dream of becoming a footballer."

Sahim Omar Kalifa: Iraqis always want you to make a choice: Barcelona or Real Madrid? Messi or Ronaldo? For the short film, we spent six months looking for a young lead actor and when we finally found him, he didn't want to participate. "I am not a fan of Messi. My friends will call me a traitor." In the end, he did participate, totally immersing himself in the role

and almost forgetting that he was a Ronaldo fan. He later met Lionel Messi and declared everywhere to be "so happy to shake hands with his great idol".

Can you briefly outline the situation in Iraq in 2009, the background against which your story takes place?

Kalifa: After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq went through a difficult period from 2006 to 2009. Especially in Baghdad, sectarian violence was everywhere, as the city is half Sunni, half Shiite. Walls were built to separate neighbourhoods, there were checkpoints raised by militias, there were countless casualties on both sides - Sunni and Shia.

Those militias in the film behave rudely and corruptly.

Kalifa: Those checkpoints were, for Iraqis, the worst moments of their lives. There were massive militias operating, not controlled by anyone. Checkpoints were manned by one militia one day and another militia the



next. You were always asked the same questions, but you never knew what the right answer was that day. If they asked you whether you were Sunni or Shia and you gave the wrong answer, you could get killed.

Bagdad is a war zone. At the opening scene, a text appears on screen: "People no longer live here, they merely exist."

Kalifa: Baghdad is a huge city; 6 million people live there. But the city had become hell. To reconstruct that situation, we shot in different cities: in Baghdad, Mosul and Erbil. From those

images, we pieced together the Baghdad of the time.

What a tour de force!

Kalifa: Filming in the Middle East is not easy but things are also possible there that would never work elsewhere. For that chase scene, 10 streets were blocked for 3 days. In Belgium, that's unthinkable. We had no budget to keep shops closed, but a government chief can arrange a lot with one phone call. The right cars and clothes from 2009 were hard to find. We needed as many as 40 cars to correctly reconstruct a streetscape.



All military vehicles were provided to us free of charge. And when we shot in Mosul, massive numbers of police and military showed up to help and protect us.

From Baghdad, his family moves to the countryside. Life would be safer in the village.

Kalifa: The contrast between Baghdad and the villages is huge. There are no militias there, no international forces, no checkpoints,... but there are mines. During Saddam Hussein's regime, the whole country turned into a minefield. The thousands of kilometres long border with Turkey, Iran and Syria was littered with mines to cut off smugglers and refugees. In every family you'll find people who lost a leg or an arm. Hamoudi losing his leg is the symbol of Iraq's dream being amputated.

How important is football to Iraqis?

Kalifa: As a result of British colonisation, Iraq was one of the first countries in the Middle East to embrace football. Iraqis are fanatical supporters. When Barcelona plays against Real Madrid, there is fighting in the streets of Baghdad. Saddam Hussein realised very well that football offered people entertainment; the sport got a lot of attention.



And how important is it to you?

Kalifa: Back in Iraq, football meant everything to me. I played every day. In Belgium, I got my residence permit, my parents and family were here and yet I wasn't happy. I wondered why I couldn't feel joyful anymore even though everything was going so well. It was because I didn't play football anymore. The films I make are always about things close to my heart, but never about myself. I never lived in Baghdad, I never lost a leg... but I did experience that big passions in life can make you happy.

Messi knows about the existence of this film?

Kalifa: The lead actor of the short film (2012) met Messi in Qatar by the intercession of the Football federation. Moreover, he got help from a Brit-

ish-Iraqi organisation, money was collected to make a prosthesis for him.... It would be nice if we could get something going again for our lead actor Ahmed Abdullah with this film. He has so many ambitions.

You found him in his city, Ambar?

Kalifa: That was the most dangerous trip I made in Iraq; IS was very active there. His story sounds extremely sad: Ahmed had lost his leg in a rocket attack on the same day his father died in an accident. He turned out to be an impressive actor.

I have never seen so many shades of grey in one film. In the opening scene, we drive through the city under grey buildings under a grey sky, everywhere is the colour of cement in 101 different shades.

Kalifa: Baghdad is a city that has survived misery and is now full of colour. In grading, we took out a lot of colour from the image. In that blue-grey backdrop, we gave extra colour to the people, who shine with joy and love, which adds to the contrast.

Walking the streets of Baghdad, are you 100% at home or do you somehow feel like a stranger in your own country?

Kalifa: Two years ago, as an Iraqi, I went to Baghdad for the first time, against my family's advice. The city is so big, full of people from different Arab and European countries. This place is thousands of years old, one of the most beautiful cities in the world. You walk through a historic setting full of interesting spots and friendly people. I have become a huge fan of Baghdad.

BAGHDAD MESSI will even run in Iraqi cinemas.

Kalifa: The cinema infrastructure there is standard, but through social media we will try to find our audience. Everyone in Iraq knows the short film BAGHDAD MESSI. Hopefully that has made the audience curious.

—
Gert Hermans



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Place de l'Amitié 6, 1160 Brussels, Belgium

Phone: +32 475 55 02 97

Email: mail@ecfaweb.org

Website: www.ecfaweb.org

Please send press releases, advertisements, questions & information to:
Gert Hermans, journal@ecfaweb.org

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European Children's Film Association

Phone: +32 (0)475 55 02 97

Email: mail@ecfaweb.org

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Contributors to this issue:

Gert Hermans (Editor)

Reinhold Schöffel, Felix Vanginderhuysen, Margret Albers, Gudrun Sommer, Jaroslava Hynstova, Becky Parry, Tanja Tlatlik, Uta Beth, Volodymyr Diagilev, Nadine Luther, Vera Kerekesova, Katarina Kerekesova, Marketa Pasmova, Marta Jallageas, Elisa Giovannelli, Jo-Anne Blouin, Michael Harbauer, Olivia Anna Christensen, Emily Jang, Marija Ratkovic Vidakovic.

Proofreading: Adam Graham

Design: Stefan Koeneke

ECFA website: Udo Lange
