

# Ikoro Sekai about programming for young people at TIFF Next Wave

## “Impact and attendance are parameters to measure our success”

What is the most debated question at European youth film festivals? How to get teenagers to our event? Seminars are held in which young people are questioned about it. But TIFF Next Wave in Toronto just does it.

Searching for the magical spell, we approach Ikoro Sekai. May we call him the programmer of Next Wave? No, that is what the young people do themselves. With Ikoro as coordinator and manager.

Ikoro Sekai: TIFF has its flagship festival in September, but with this big cinema with six screens permanently at our disposal, it made sense to shift a large part of the organisation's energy towards our year round programming. During the pandemic we were shut down, but afterwards, the audience that seemed most ready to come back were the young people. Therefore we developed a strategic plan focussing on the 14-24 and 24-35 age categories.

**How much is this structure built**

**upon the old Sprockets festival for children?**

Sekai: The initial Sprockets split out into two initiatives: TIFF Kids for children and TIFF Next Wave for young audiences. Next Wave developed from the idea of engaging 12 high school students in a committee to programme the festival, as an authentic 'by youth for youth' event. Many festivals engage young people as co-programmers but few festivals have young people completely in charge.

**Many festivals wonder how to do it.**

Sekai: It helps to work in Toronto, a huge multicultural hub where a lot of young people are working in the arts or have aspirations in film. We draw on those resources. For our opening event called Battle of the Scores, a young filmmaker creates a short film and then we invite three bands to create different scores. The film plays on the screen while the bands perform live on stage. Thus we are getting not only the film but also the music community involved.



**Do you also draw on the resources of TIFF, a prestigious international film festival?**

Sekai: We engage all of the brilliant staff who are working there. During every programming cycle, they come and have workshops with the young committee, with whom they share typical programmers' questions and dilemmas.

**The real secret of having young people involved...**

Sekai: ...Is to do it consequently, having them to do the job. This is most important! It should be more than just a facade. The community that I work with are extremely passionate, proud of what they do, and they own the space that we give them. It is up to them to decide what guests and events they want and what the film



programme will look like.

### **You provide them with titles to choose from?**

Sekai: Out of the 80 titles that I watch in a one-year-programming-cycle, we select the top 40 for the committee. They have bi-weekly meetings in which we plan one festival component and watch a movie together. Afterwards they write down their thoughts; young people might easily change their opinions after conversations with others, so it is important to have this moment of private reflection. Then we have a discussion among 12 young people who all have different experiences with film. They all see different things in a film and have lively conversations about whether films should be part of the programme or not. Some titles are obvious, some are not, and it's those ones in the middle that bring up the most lively discussions.

### **Is there a social responsibility with the festival?**

Sekai: All festival programmes are free for anyone under 25. Next Wave doesn't bring in any revenue. In strategic discussions about the Next Wave programme, impact and attendance are the parameters to measure our success.

### **But the question that every festival seems to struggle with, is how to get that teenage audience into the cinema.**

Sekai: Many festivals have school programmes as an important component of their event. But our programme is entirely public; we need to get young people to come to the cinema all by themselves. 'By youth for youth' is an essential element of our marketing approach. It's important to have our young committee involved in marketing campaigns - they should know how to address their peers. Often through local partners we'll invite special communities from the city for a film that might resonate with them. Last year's RYE LANE (by Raine Allen-Miller, UK) was a beautiful black love story, so we invited young black organisations. Nevertheless we're more and more considering creating a Next Wave school programme.

### **With the risk of getting labelled as 'educational' and losing your 'public' branding.**

Sekai: Exactly. This is why schools will never be in the core of our programme. Our focus will always be with young people directly. That is what makes our festival unique.

### **Is the promotion happening 100% online?**

Sekai: We change with the times. We mainly use TIFF's social channels, like Instagram, X and Letterboxd. We now have a partnership with TikTok - we'll be using this platform to reach out to our audience, and to invite TikTok creators to get them involved with the festival.

### **What type of films are programmed in TIFF's Next Wave?**

Sekai: Last year SCRAPPER was one of my favourites. In her Q&A director Charlotte Regan had the entire cinema laughing with stories about her young lead actress, a rambunctious young girl who grew up in a tough area. We usually have a couple of French coming-of-age films. For our opening film was ADOLFO we had director Sofía Auza coming over from Mexico City. After the committee watched the film, they didn't want to fill out feedback forms. *"We love this movie so much; we just want to talk about it."*

### **Tell me more!**

Sekai: Usually we have a premium screening, to draw out a big audience - like last year's SUZUME, a Japanese box office hit by Makoto Shinkai. We programme at least one animat-

ed film to please the community of young animators in town. For the first time we will have a programme with short films created by young people (aged 14-25) as our closing night. Seeing all these young filmmakers getting blown away by having their film in a TIFF screening, is sensational. Friends and family in the audience are particularly loud with cheering and screaming.

### **Will you one day bring some titles from Toronto to present them to European audiences?**

Sekai: Currently many strong youth-focused Canadian films are touring the European festivals. I LIKE MOVIES (by Chandler Levack) was one of the committee's favourites last year. I don't see my role that much as bringing Canadian films to other festivals but when here in Schlingel I stepped into the screening of I LIKE MOVIES, it was so cool to see how German youth connected with the film just like kids in Canada do.

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Gert Hermans