

OKTHANKSBYE

Screening for a hearing-impaired audience

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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





tures that works for both younger or teenage audiences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What about the crew?

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

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

–
Gert Hermans