

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

The Ukrainian Veselka Children's TV Studio



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was this a sign to immediately close the studio?

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



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

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

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

How did the children deal with these changes?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless you're still making new plans.

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



Dina Ibrahimova

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

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

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

–
Volodymyr Diagilev