

# 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 groundbreaking 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**