Pola Sell & Barbara Englert about THE PATH OF HANDS AND FEET

"Make clear that they can be loud"

They were not driven by cinematic aspirations or big production companies. They simply recognised a social need that they could fulfil with a film. That is why directors Pola Sell & Barbara Englert went to a Taekwondo school in Offenbach, Germany, and spoke with a bunch of young girls about their fragile self-esteem and the empowerment they find in a sports club, where girls learn to come up for themselves without boys, parents or teachers looking over their shoulders.

Pola Sell: We've filmed in a martial arts school for young women, but the film is not at all about sports. It's mainly about mental health issues and how Taekwondo helps them overcome them. The sports club was our arena, a safe space. Steff, the founder and coach of the school, teaches the girls how to find peace with their bodies. Their problems are easily overlooked, but when speaking with them about delicate subjects, they opened up.
Barbara Englert: Problems like depression, body culture and eating disorders need to be addressed to make a change. We combine these conversations with bits of animation, for which an illustrator was drawing a kind of 'inner pictures' of the girls and brought them to life. We called it an anime-doc.

You could have done several individual portraits, but decided to shoot a group portrait.
Englert: All these girls are coming from different countries and cultures, but problems they all have in common. In the diversity of that school, sharing similar problems is what brings them all together.

How to start such a project?
Sell: Steff introduced us to the girls. We had an open meeting, we explained our plans and figured out who wanted to participate.
Englert: Before we came with a camera, we observed the group for two entire days.

All this must have helped; those girls seem really at ease with the camera.
Englert: At the start of the day, we met with the girls over breakfast. We sat down for two hours, eating together and talking about all things in life. That's how we got them so relaxed.
Sell: Steff was often there too. She boosts those girls' confidence.

Did you know beforehand that body image and eating disorders would be the number one problems?
Sell: We were expecting more problems with discrimination, but body image pressure has become omnipresent for girls growing up nowadays, and it's not going to get any better.

What do these girls find in a Taekwondo school that helps them so much?
Sell: The way Steff treats them is not about who can be the fastest, who can kick the highest - it's always about everybody having her own unique talents, Focusing on individual qualities helps these girls in their self-acceptance. It might be a part of Taekwondo culture, but it's definitely also a part of Steff's wonderful method.
Englert: I was touched by one girl

saying she was no longer afraid to go alone on the streets at night - a fear known by almost every woman. If Taekwondo could help you find that security in yourself, isn't that just amazing?

They all emphasised the importance of being there among women only. ***"In the presence of boys, we always have the idea that we should prove ourselves."***
Sell: If a safe space is needed, it's easier to create it only with girls. But still it's hard to believe how boys in our society are still taught to be strong and competitive.

Did you make any special efforts in pursuit of cinematographic ingenuity?
Englert: For the scene in which they kick stone tablets, we went to a theatre to get some extra lighting. And the red carpet floor in the school was not exactly flattering for your skin tone. That was a problem to solve in post-production.
Sell: We had a lot of close-ups for facial expressions. The only decisions we had to make was whether to focus on hands or faces. For the sport scenes we often used slow motion.

They elegantly contrast with the rather static, introspective set up of the interviews.
Sell: All the girls had to wear their daily clothes, because they're not representing the school, they're simply representing themselves. Except for the two little sisters, who were too proud about their sports clothes.
Englert: This is where the paintings came in. We wanted more than just 'talking heads' so we used a paper backdrop as a canvas for animated illustrations. Sometimes the girls' stories are hard and confronting, and we want the audience to feel with them, not only through words but also on a different emotional level, created through these drawings.

The animation is rather subtle and discrete.
Sell: The budget was one thing. And we wanted a type of animation that didn't suck up all the attention from what the girls are saying. Those drawings, made in real paint - there is nothing digital about them - often underline a kind of transformation process.

One of the things that Steff wishes for her girls is "having the chance to be loud", thus implying that girls in our society still keep quiet too often?
Sell: Society teaches us to always be nice and humble and not to cause problems. Therefore it's important to make clear that they can be loud in coming up for themselves. Thanks to Steff!

It's difficult to understand who she is: a super athlete or a psychologist? A coach or an activist or maybe a surrogate mother?
Sell: All of that, to say the least.
Englert: For me, she is in the first place a mother, or a very good friend.
Sell: Definitely also an activist. She doesn't force anything upon her pupils but teaches them how to love yourself and how to respect others. That's the kind of activism that makes our society a better place. And she is a very good observer, using her little antennas to detect precisely everything that is going on in those girls' heads.
Englert: She isn't loud, but rather soft. She teaches them meditation, which is a powerful tool for young girls to find your inner self and learn to appreciate it.

Why did you choose a 45' duration?
Sell: To make the film accessible for schools - fitting into the timeframe of one lesson. And then you can have another hour to talk about it. It's simply great that the Bundesverband Jugend & Film (BJF) picked up our film and is now preparing a study guide for it. Schools are a great place to screen and discuss THE PATH OF HANDS AND FEET.

–
Gert Hermans