European Children's
Film Association
Association Européenne du Cinéma
pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

interviews

The Secret Floor

Girls Don't Cry

Cinekid

King of the Wanderers

Docs in the Netherlands

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Journal

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Photo: The Secret Floor

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NO IDLE SUMMER

Autumn is a busy time for the ECFA community. The new season, starting after the summer break, requires many decisions to be made. In September, ECFA Juries return to work, people travel to festivals and industry events, many of us prepare educational activities for the new school year, and, as always, budgeting and fundraising for next year are in progress.

The ECFA Board of Directors did not waste its time this summer. After a face to face meeting in late June, we moved on with work in smaller thematic workgroups that prepare board decisions by assessing and developing our lines of work. A "Code of Conduct" Workgroup, announced at the AGM in February, is working on processes within the organisation, clarifying roles for Board & Team members, now and in the future.

Some work doesn't happen behind the scenes, but out in the open: Schlingel IFF invited ECFA to organise an industry event during this year's festival in Chemnitz, one of the European Cultural Capitals in 2025. Board member Mariella Harpelunde Jensen took up the responsibility to prepare and moderate what we call "The ECFA Exchange", a lively exchange on children's film production and challenges in various European countries, which will take place on Sunday 28 September and Monday 29 September.
Even more visible was ECFA's Workshop Warehouse 2025, which took place in Bologna during the Cinema Ritrovato Festival, in collaboration with the Cineteca di Bologna and the Screen the Future European Children's Film Festival Network. There, a group of 56 expert professionals from 21 countries took the opportunity to exchange experiences and best practices in film and audiovisual education.

Last but not least, interesting news was coming from Brussels this summer: In July, the European Commission shared its proposal on the next MFF, the seven-year budget of the EU for 2028-2034. Creative Europe's MEDIA strand, where many ECFA members routinely seek funding, is doubled to €3.2 billion for these seven years.

Please keep in mind that our communication thrives on your initiatives; feel free to contact us about anything you think is important to share.
–
Pantelis Panteloglou
ECFA President

ECFA Communication Survey

ECFA is reaching out to all of our recipients to gather your feedback on our communications. What do you need and what do you get from ECFA's communication and information channels nowadays? This anonymous survey will help the ECFA Board and Team to assess the success of our communication efforts and adjust them to your needs.
It only takes 5 minutes of your time to fill out the survey here. Deadline: 1 October 2025.

Norbert Lechner about THE SECRET FLOOR

“This devaluation of human values returns”

We have seen war films for children before. But what about the calm before the storm? The period preceding major war conflicts is often more interesting, providing insight into the thought processes of citizens who allow themselves to be persuaded by “the greater good”. Almost 100 years later, such processes remain virtually unchanged: us against them, our superiority versus their inferiority.

Karli’s parents are renovating an old hotel. However, the broken elevator takes him to “a secret floor”, a journey back in time to 1938, in the run-up to the Second World War. There, he meets Georg, the shoe-shine boy, and a Jewish girl named Hannah. Karli’s knowledge of war history is limited, but enough to know that Hannah’s future is in severe danger. Meanwhile, some of the hotel’s visitors become increasingly determined, and soon, belligerent chants can be heard from the lounge.

Here’s a dilemma for you: THE SOUND OF MUSIC or GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL?
Norbert Lechner: Neither of them. For both scriptwriters and me, the inspiration came from a novel called ‘Menschen im Hotel’ (‘Grand Hotel’), which has been adapted for film several times. In 1929, Vicki Baum wrote about residents in a hotel in Berlin and how their lives were intertwined. Sorry to disappoint you, but no SOUND OF MUSIC.

Karli’s mother has to teach her son the basics about what happened during World War II. Are German children, in general, unaware of what that war was all about?
Lechner: According to statistics, a big percentage of children and young people know frighteningly little about National Socialism. Karli’s conversations with his mother allow us to frame the situation for children who aren’t properly informed, without giving away the complete story. After the screening, they can ask their parents or teachers for more details. Due to that premise, Karli reacts rather naively to the situation. They hunt down thieves in the hotel corridors, instead of making sure Hannah gets the hell out of the country.

You chose a particularly interesting moment to set the story. In 1938, the war hadn’t started yet. But we see how people began to embrace the ideas of National Socialism and put their trust in the new regime.
Lechner: I wanted to show with what self-evidence this fascist thinking entered people’s minds, which led up to all the dreadful things the Nazis later did. In the spring of 1938, there was the so-called *Anschluss* of Austria; our story is set shortly after the annexation. We see how in the middle of this upheaval, the ideology is spreading fast, and flags with swastikas appear everywhere. It was like a wave that spread rapidly.

This helps us understand why mankind was so receptive to this ideology. Like Georg, the shoe-shine boy, who talks like a child of his time, with all the prejudice and dogma

that implies.
Lechner: He is a naive boy with no other reference than what his parents and teachers tell him. Only through his encounter with Karli and Hannah does he get the chance to take on a different perspective. Often, young people found this upcoming ideology refreshingly modern. Their parents and grandparents saw the impending disaster, but for youngsters, becoming National Socialists was a way to rebel against previous generations. This zeitgeist helps you understand how things could have gotten this far.

Bruno, the bar pianist at the hotel, asks Karli a pressing question: If you are from the future, can you tell me if the Nazis are still in power in your time?
Lechner: When we started to work on the film, we could never have guessed that in Germany today, right-wing parties are winning the elections. The possibility that they would gain power on such a large scale had never occurred to me. Moreover, we thought that for children, war had become a distant and abstract concept. But this is no longer the case. Recently, war has become something very concrete for them.

Karli cannot assure that the world has become a better place. We can take our complaints to an international court, but despite Strasbourg and The Hague, there is no guarantee that we live in a time of justice nowadays.
Lechner: Preparing this film, I felt a growing concern about the world we live in today, and so did screenwriters Katrin Milhahn and Antonia Rothe-Liermann. But nowadays, at least, we have a choice. Jewish people didn't have that; they couldn't do anything. There is still discrimination and exclusion, but Karli believes we have better chances to come up for ourselves. One challenge for Karli when traveling back in time is the temptation to intervene, while the basic premise of time travel stories is that you can't change the past.

One scene that cut off my breath takes place in the hotel bar, where followers of the Nazis start to sing a song. How was it to be in that room during the recording?
Lechner: Cold shivers were running down my spine. I staged the scene as if it were a wave. When the first one raises his right arm, the others follow. When we rehearsed the scene with the choir, the most difficult aspect was to capture this fascist tone - the singers couldn't overcome their resistance, and it all sounded way too gentle. Our music consultant and composer worked with the singers to capture that self-assured, determined tone, like it was sung at that time. When we shot the scene, I was fighting my tears behind the camera, being so shocked by the impact.

You have used a few archive clips.
Lechner: We have thoroughly discussed what kind of clips we should use. When scriptwriter Antonia Rothe-Liermann learned about National Socialism in elementary school, in the second class, she saw a film about Auschwitz, and for several months, she had nightmares. We want

to inform children, not traumatise them. We used documentary film excerpts from the deportation, in which you cannot clearly distinguish what exactly is happening. After the test screenings, we decided to cut out the dramatic images of Jewish refugees' shoes and suitcases we had been using; children experienced them as shocking. Those test screenings urged us to be very careful.

The story is set in Austria. Where was it shot?
Lechner: We had three main locations. In Bad Gastein in the Salzburg region, we filmed in Hotel Europa, which is no longer a hotel in operation; most rooms have been turned into apartments for permanent residents, but some are still for rent during the holidays. There was another historic Grand Hotel in Semmering, near Vienna, which is nowadays a hub for cultural events. And then there was the studio in Luxembourg, where we shot the elevator scenes and went behind the scenes of the hotel.

The hotel is like a labyrinth where kids chase suspects through corridors and hide behind furniture. How did you work with that location?
Lechner: It was a challenge to make the two hotel locations look like one.

In Semmering, we filmed in the hotel bar, the library, and the breakfast room. It looked like a labyrinth indeed, but not every part of the building was in a perfect state. While the Hotel Europa was immensely big, with its long, straight corridors, it didn't look exactly like a labyrinth. Both hotels also differed a bit in terms of design. Our art department worked with colours and patterns to blend them together like a sort of unity.

Only once, Karli makes a funny reference to YouTube. If you wanted, you could have made THE SECRET FLOOR a comedy about the contrasts between different eras, a confrontation between the 30s and our contemporary world. But you decided not to do that and maintain your focus on the dramatic story.
Lechner: The film has plenty of funny moments, which make the drama even stronger; they allow a moment of relief before things get serious again. Although the audience is amused and entertained, at the end, they are confronted with the film's closing panel, which mentions that the Nazis murdered 6 million Jewish people.

Here's another quote for you: "It's time to sweep out the dirt."
Lechner: *"Es wird Zeit, den Dreck wegzukehren."* That kind of language was used in those days; it's also the lingo used by Hitler in 'Mein Kampf'. Jewish people were referred to as dirt or scum. This whole devaluation of human values returns nowadays in the rhetoric of right-wing parties. Georg, at a certain moment, says to Hannah that she doesn't look Jewish. It makes Karli wonder: "How would you see that?" This lingo was commonly used by the generation of people who lived through wartime; the Nazis built on a long-standing anti-Semitic tradition.

How was it for the young actors letting themselves be swept up in an extraordinary era?
Lechner: In the story, the brothers Heinrich and Herman are raised in a family with Nazi sympathies. The big brother wants to walk in his father's footsteps. We worked a lot with the young actor, helping him own the character. During rehearsals, we worked mainly on his physical tension. His body had to be under constant pressure as a consequence of the way these kids were raised. In this corporal upbringing, education was something like a military drill. Children nowadays have a totally different approach to their bodies, which you can tell by their posture. That was a key work point.

–
Gert Hermans

Sigrid Klausmann about GIRLS DON'T CRY

"Countries regressing in their stance on women's rights"

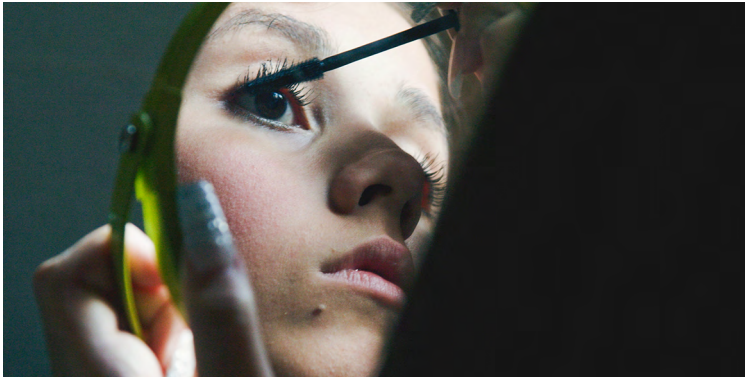
Six teenage girls from around the globe, each facing unique challenges, but united by one desire: to live freely and on their own terms. Face to face with puberty, Nancy, Sheelan, Selenna, Nina, Paige, and Sinai resist unjust and cruel traditions (such as female circumcision), social pressure, and stifling beauty compulsions. After her much-discussed documentary NOT WITHOUT US, Sigrid Klausmann did not change the formula, but she did change the approach: *"Since the day my granddaughter was born, I started wondering what kind of life she would live, being a girl."*

You know what happens after exactly six minutes and 27 seconds in your film?
Sigrid Klausmann: Euh… no…

The first girl starts crying! The title promised us that girls don't cry!
Klausmann: It was the first shooting day with Sheelan. When she started talking about her father, tears suddenly rolled down her face without a whisper or a sound. Normally, I wouldn't point a camera at a crying face. But as she seemed completely in control, we discreetly used that picture.

What do your protagonists have in common?
Klausmann: Most of them are not very talkative or confident, but they all have a unique story to tell. I filmed three episodes in the UK, Serbia, and Germany; my co-director, Lina Luzyte, filmed in South Korea, Tanzania, and Chile. Young people at this age, much more than the younger kids in NOT WITHOUT US, are scared to be exposed. In South Korea, a local researcher tried to find me a girl who rejected the largest beauty industry in the world, but all the initial candidates refused. Luckily, we found Sinai.

In Germany, you found Sheelan, a Yazidi girl.
Klausmann: The Minister of Culture in the state of Baden-Württemberg is a fan of our educational project 199 LITTLE S*HEROES, and she wondered how the daughters of the Yazidi families who were invited here in 2015 were doing. These women are traumatised; even in Germany, they are afraid that one day they will be found by IS. Social workers found Sheelan for us; her family was the only one open-minded enough to engage in this project, even if it took a long time for them to feel safe.



Their story is one of unprecedented horror.
Klausmann: What does it mean to lose a brother, a father, and many more people close to you, not even being 100% sure if they are dead or not? The photos on the wall are like a gallery of people that they've lost. The genocide took place in 2014; they were captured for 10 months before they could run. Except for Sheelan's older sister, Sawsan, who was held in captivity for eight years.

Then the unbelievable thing happens when her sister suddenly returns home.
Klausmann: This was completely unforeseen. I had the chance to film a conversation between Sheelan and Sawsan, but I didn't have an interpreter — I had to rely on Sheelan to trans-

late the answers. Her translations were very brief. Later, in the editing room, I got to fully understand what Sawsan had said, and I was deeply touched. She has been through unimaginable suffering. Women like her were sold for a pack of cigarettes. She suffers from back pain, and several of her teeth are ruined.

All protagonists face negative emotions that impact their lives: fear, anger, sadness... Which emotion would you say hinders them the most in rebuilding their lives?
Klausmann: Sadness, definitely. Anger might fade over time, but sadness can stay with you for the rest of your life.

In your film, there is writing on a mirror that says: 'I love me'. For me, that line was essential for the entire movie
Klausmann: That's Selenna! I found her through her mother's foundation for parents with transgender children. She has four children and was pregnant with Selenna when her husband left her. Selenna just turned 16 and has spent her first vacation with her father! In two years, she will have her operation. Did you read the signboards in the demonstration? *"I love my trans daughter."* How powerful can a statement be?! These are little

elements in the film that we can learn from and that make you wonder how issues apply to our own society.

Here's another quote: 'I don't know what it takes to become part of a country.'
Klausmann: So many kids ask themselves this question: What do I have to do? Sheelan speaks German without an accent, attends school in Germany, pays her bills with German money, and still, she doesn't know what it takes to be considered 'German'. Millions of kids around the world will recognise similar problems.

What do GIRLS DON'T CRY and your earlier project, NOT WITHOUT US, have in common?

Klausmann: They were both made by a similar concept that I developed for the 199 LITTLE S*HEROES project, which started 15 years ago, in which we give children a voice. After NOT WITHOUT US, we shot another series of individual portraits. Then COVID–19 came, and we stopped producing. From the day our first grandchild, Franca Lily, was born, I started wondering what kind of life she would live, being a girl, at a time when we see several countries regressing in their stance on women's rights. Both in the US and in Europe, I see so much destructive energy. This awoke a strong urge in me to make this film, my husband and producer Walter Sittler felt the same. We're a small team, just me and him shooting and producing films, and organising the fundraising.

I listed some arenas that the girls have in common, like education, beauty & fashion, tradition, racism, family bonds, poverty...
Klausmann: The first thing they have in common is that they are teenagers, and wherever you go around the world, teenagers will fall in love. Paige mentions "feelings I never had before", Nina speaks about the butterflies in her stomach... But she also talks about a man who said inappropriate things to her in a shop. I want the boys in the audience to grow sensitivity and make them realise what this does to a 14-year-old girl. Did she tell the man to shut up and get lost? No, she put her head down and

walked out.

What about poverty?
Klausmann: I went to the UK for a story about teenage pregnancy, because the numbers there are significantly high. I didn't go to the Brazilian favelas; I picked a country that seems similar to mine. During the pandemic, the numbers increased in England because people couldn't visit the doctor for contraceptives. Among families living in poverty, those figures rose even more. I filmed in Coventry, where one out of four children lives in poverty.

Living rooms are a chaotic, unappealing environment for filming, especially with seven people crammed together - of which two are babies - and with two dogs in the kitchen.
Klausmann: These are typical English workers' houses with small rooms; walking through the front door, you immediately enter the living room. It was raining a lot, we had to take off our shoes, but the place was always spic and span. Paige told me, 'I love cleaning!'. Just like Sheelan's family. 'We're five girls, and together, we keep the house spotless.'

You can feel the importance of education for many of those girls. Nina says, 'Before I get married, I want to finish my school.'
Klausmann: Not to repeat the mistake that her mother made, who never finished school, and now, for whatever reason, needs her husband's help. Often, Roma girls will quit school after the sixth grade to get married soon. In the UK, Paige put school on hold in the fourth month of her pregnancy and returned for the exams after she gave birth. 'When Dawson was crying, my teacher took care of him.' Going to college would be too challenging for her. While she is at school, her son goes to nursery school, for which she has to pay. She can't combine the two. In Korean society, I got a sense of over-education. The pressure is so strong that it suffocates an entire generation.


Sigrid Klausmann

Traditions are also important, especially for Nancy from Tanzania.
Klausmann: 230 million women in the world are affected by FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). With the influx of "new Germans", the issue is also being brought to our country; some families want to maintain their traditions and find a doctor in Germany who is willing to perform the procedure. A gynaecologist told me that he had already helped 450 women with reconstructive surgery after FGM.

Why did the ending need to be hopeful?
Klausmann: There needs to be hope; otherwise, you shouldn't make this film.

I found the scene where Sinai from Korea responds to her trainer's applause to be a particularly hopeful sign. Her reaction seems almost out of proportion.
Klausmann: He never clapped for her before; she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. 'Finally, somebody told me that I did well enough.' Honest compliments are so important; this is a lesson for life. Our society is all about being successful, pretty, and perfect. But what if a child doesn't see him or herself like that? Imagine having parents who tell you all the time that you're too stupid, too fat, too loud, not pretty enough... These are small signs of hope that you discover when watching the film attentively. Sinai didn't win the World Championship BMX, but participating was a great experience for her.

Some habits are particularly persistent.
Klausmann: When Nina's father passes his wife a plate to wash, he doesn't mean to be rude or harsh. It's part of his habits, but still, work needs to be done in that area.

We didn't talk much about cinematography...
Klausmann: When the content is strong, I wouldn't focus on the aesthetics of the Tanzanian landscape, as beautiful as it is. We worked with different cinematographers, and in the end, I brought it all together, with good results and a fantastic team: my editor, Gregory Schuchmann, and my daughter Lea, composer of the soundtrack.

–
Gert Hermans

No adult in sight in the Nordic short selection

Each year, the NoJSe network selects the best Nordic short films for streaming and screening in the Nordic region. The films in this year's selection have a striking theme in common: children left to themselves, outside the adult gaze, with no parents, teachers, or guardians around to guide or set limits. The films explore the beauty and/or terror of the parallel worlds children create when left to themselves.

In PUDDLE (VANDPYT, Maria-May Backhaus Brown & Mads Theodor Bonde, Denmark), Anna's father might physically be there, but mentally, he is somewhere else. He forgets to buy groceries, or to collect her from after-school care. Yet Anna transforms the gloom into sunshine and pizza. Creativity becomes her shield, a way of conjuring joy in an otherwise neglected home.

THE SMELL OF HUMAN (LUGTEN AF MENNESKE, Johanne Helgeland, Norway) follows four girls at the fragile borderland between childhood and adolescence with the iconic architecture of social housing projects in the background. When one finds an abandoned fledgling, empathy and belonging collapse into a struggle for power. With no adults to intervene, the girls must negotiate loyalty and cruelty on their own terms.

In WARRIOR HEART (KRIGERHJERTE, Marianne Ulrichsen, Norway), 12-year-old Vilja clings to wrestling, though she fears pain and loses every match. Her parents' divorce upends her life. When Thea - the confident daughter of her mother's new partner - arrives at the club, Vilja's sense of self crumbles further. On the mat, she must face not only rivals but also the loneliness of being left to manage heartbreak alone.

RITUAL FOR THE RAINBOW (Hanna Maria Anttila, Finland) takes the trope even further by showing four left-alone children who lead a parallel life in a bleak scrapyard. Refugees from unsafe homes, the four survive by shooting rats and collecting bottles. Through magical rituals, a witch-girl promises to teach them to believe in themselves. Yet the vulnerable can fall prey to new forms of power.

PUDDLE

These films compose a haunting portrait of children roaming in landscapes they must interpret alone. While the unsupervised child is often related to positive imagery in the Nordic children's literature and film (Pippi Longstocking, Ronia), these films shed light on the socially conditioned lack of adult care and the immense vulnerability this entails.

At the end of the programme, though, a different note emerges. CANTEENS OF KINDNESS (KAERLIGHEDENS KANTINE, Astrid Askberger, Sweden) celebrates Rosa, who cares for pupils every day in the school canteen. In this tribute to everyday kindness, we glimpse what all the other films imply by absence: how transformative it is when a grown-up truly sees and supports children.

This year's NoJSe selection thus illuminates the vulnerability of being outside of adult care and strategies to cope with it, but also hints at the small gestures that can make a difference.

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Lotte Kragh

NoJSe - Nordic Junior Sessions Network consists of five Nordic children's film festivals: BUFF ICYFF, Sweden; Kristiansand ICFF, Norway; BUSTER Film Festival, Denmark; Oulu ICFF, Finland; and RIFF, Iceland.

WORKSHOP WAREHOUSE II

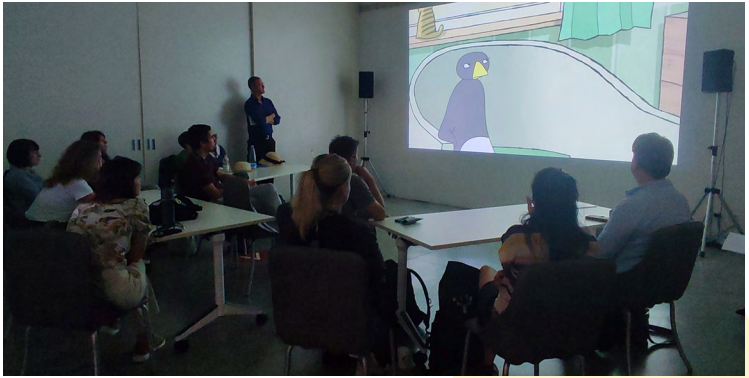
With the second edition of the Workshop Warehouse, ECFA once again showed itself at its best with a well-designed project (the hands-on experience of media education workshops), with strong partners (Cineteca di Bologna, Il Cinema Ritrovato Festival, Screen the Future European Children's Film Festival Network, co-funded by the European Union), for a clearly defined and undervalued target group (film education professionals). 56 professionals from 21 countries made their choice among eight workshops on offer. Here's an impression…

"Book of Sounds": highly sensory workshop, based on artistic work by Laura Cattabianchi, in which pieces of paper become vehicles for auditory imagination

"Liquid in Motion": the impressionist experimentation in colour, shape, and substances brought participants closer to the ground

"Make Some Noise": a hands-on foley workshop, designed to inspire DIY approaches to collective sound creation

"Cinematic Installations for Kids": objects leave the screen magically to occupy space among us



"Seeing Beyond Sight": audio description as a tool of inclusion, but also of philosophical insight on images we see with our eyes or our minds

"Catching Little Light Ghosts": multifaceted, funny, hands-on installation inviting children (and adults) to develop their imagination

"Direct Film Experience": a video feedback loop turns into a playground for bodies and objects, voices and soundmaking devices

"Mini Movie": experimentation on AI tools that can be used in a film & media education context

DaBUF presents 'Culture for All'

In collaboration with Salaam Film Festival, DaBUF (Danish Children's & Youth Film Clubs) hosted a series of film-and-dialogue events for socially disadvantaged families across Denmark who cannot afford a visit to (or do not find their way into) cinema theatres. The aim of the 'Culture for All' initiative is to offer the most vulnerable families a collective cultural experience. Screenings, moderated by Salaam's presenters, are held in local cinemas and hosted by local children's film clubs. Often, a bus facilitates transport for participating families to and from the event. Thus, DaBUF draws the families' attention to more affordable local cultural offerings, such as children's film clubs!

Film clubs as cultural ambassadors

The project runs over two years, from January 2024 to December 2025, with a total of four screenings at each location. So far, there has been ERNEST & CELESTINE: JOURNEY TO GIBBERITIA (Julien Chheng & Jean-Christophe Roger, France), the classic MY NEIGHBOUR TOTORO (Hayao Miyazaki, Japan), and the Danish children's film ROBOT BROTHER (Frederik Meldal Nørgaard). In the next and, for now, final round of the project, clubs can choose between Danish titles THE CHILDREN FROM SILVERSTREET (Mehdi Avaz) and IQBAL FAROOQ AND THE SECRET RECIPE (Tilde Harkamp). Salaam and DaBUF agree that watching - on the big screen! - and talking about films together creates a truly special experience. There is a shared belief that children's film clubs and local cinemas are obvious cultural ambassadors, thanks to their unique and nationwide accessibility.

For many participating families, this was their first cinema visit. After an ERNEST & CELESTINE screening in Herlev, Christine Scheel-Hincke from the Social Housing Association wrote: *"On this first trip to the cinema, there were many impressions - light, darkness, sound, smells, and popcorn. Thanks to the bus, we could bring along people who otherwise would never have come to the cinema. Thank you for offering this opportunity to so many; we are sure that children and adults both had a good experience."*

Children of Silver Street

The organisers are grateful for such enthusiasm. *"We are delighted that events can be realised with support from the A.P. Møller & Wife Chastine McKinney Møller Foundation for General Purposes, the Augustinus Foundation, Roskilde Festival, and the Cinema Club Denmark Foundation. We also send a big thank you to the volunteers in the children's film clubs, as well as the local cinemas and social housing initiatives for welcoming the project so warmly,"* says DaBUF.

MovieHouse Helsingør (photo_ Nicolai Perjesi)

Slurping on soda

In Helsingør, after the event, a father came up to presenter Vibeke Muasya, specifically thanking her *"for telling all the children that everyone has the chance to pursue their dreams, no matter how difficult their circumstances or backgrounds."* Some participants have a refugee background and often bring their entire family to the movies, even though the event is actually targeting the 7 - 12-year-old age group. That saves costs on babysitters for the little ones. It is not always easy to manage an event with an audience of such diverse ages, who are not used to visiting a cinema. There may be small children who need comforting, and there may be whispering voices around the theatre, translating dialogues for those who don't understand Danish.

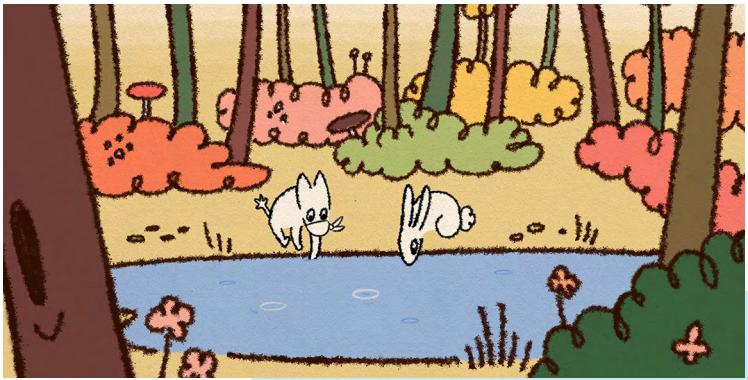
Such challenges are easy to overcome, and paid back in smiles and happy faces, eating popcorn and slurping on soda. Salaam's presenter, Malene Holm: *"I was simply elated when I left the Megascope in Horsens yesterday. I had prepared myself for a bit of everything, but I was completely blown away by how good they all were at being in the cinema. A super attentive, interested, considerate, and grateful audience."*

–

Kine Bjaaland Dahl
On behalf of DaBUF

Philippe Kastner about WOLFIE

“Some pretty good barking”



A cute little dog runs across the room, bumps his head against a table leg and looks into the camera, sadly whimpering. That dog is Wolfie, and he was just born from the pen of an illustrator whose creations magically come to life. Because of a smudgy ink stain, Wolfie has to go through life with an inky nose. Chaos is Wolfie’s great talent, and that has consequences for the illustrator’s work. WOLFIE, the charming yet stylish Famu graduation film by Czech animator Philippe Kastner, is currently competing for the Student Academy Awards and has already won the heart of one cat lover.

The illustrator in the film is initially rather harsh with Wolfie. How much do you care for your creations?
Philippe Kastner: A lot! I usually don’t create characters to fit a story. In general, I create the characters first - or they kind of appear to me, and only then do I create a story for them. Even if sometimes I make them suffer, I care a lot for them.

I wouldn’t be asking you this question if it weren’t for that moment halfway through the film when I thought: This is all super nice, but how is he going to resolve this story? That’s why I wanted to know: What came to you first, the idea for the beginning or the ending? How did you find a way out of the narrative premise?
Kastner: To be honest, there was a moment in the scriptwriting process that I was exactly in the situation you describe. When I was halfway done, I didn’t know how to finish the story. Even when we had the storyboard done and I was ready to start animating, I was still rewriting the ending; I must have written at least 10 versions. It all started with the concept of an illustrator drawing animals and hanging the pictures on the wall, as a kind of window into the outside world. And there was the character of Wolfie, for whom the story was created.

Drawings coming to life… Isn’t that the essence of animation? Now that you have captured that, you can rest on your laurels for the rest of your life!
Kastner: I don’t think so! Many more stories are waiting to be told. I remember when I bought my first tiny graphic tablet and made my first computer animation; it was like magic. I kind of felt like the illustrator in WOLFIE.

A tablet? You don’t work with a pen, like the illustrator does?
Kastner: The backgrounds are hand-drawn, using ink, water, and watercolour, but I animated on a computer. I do draw with a pen sometimes! Animating WOLFIE with a pen on paper would have been fun, but it would have taken me years.

The illustrator is striving for perfection until Wolfie enters the stage and destroys it all. Is perfectionism a torture for an animator?
Kastner: That is indeed a big issue for me, and it was one of the reasons for making this film. When the animation was basically finished, I went through the movie almost frame by frame, to erase one line here, cut one second there… You know, God is in the details, but so is the devil. It depends on the stage of work you’re in. At the beginning, you go with the flow, making sketches; perfectionism at this stage would just hold you down. But once you enter the technical production phase, you need to be very precise.

It would sound rather stupid to ask you what the movie is all about. In-

stead, I'll give you three options and ask you to comment on them. Option one is that this movie is about embracing our imperfections.
Kastner: That is indeed the main theme. Happily embracing accidents and not being tied down by perfectionism.

The second option is that WOLFIE is a tribute to joyfulness and playfulness.
Kastner: This goes hand in hand with the previous option. Perfectionism and professionalism are one end of the spectrum; the other end is just playing around, trying things out, and making mistakes. You need to find a balance between those two polarities.

The third message is that the magic is not in the ink, but in the creator.
Kastner: That's a nice one! I agree with that. By this logic, anything that you create becomes magical because the magic is within you.

Any other sub-themes that need to be mentioned?
Kastner: Yes! The bond between the illustrator and Wolfie is like a parent-child relationship. You need to accept the possibility of your children becoming something which you didn't plan for them, and if you see that this makes them happy, you can embrace it, even though you didn't like it at first. You might understand that the imperfection that you found in your child is actually a special gift. And there's also the theme of the artist as a creator, a godlike persona who creates the animals and places them in the forest. But what if one of the creations rises against its creator?

For Wolfie's facial expression, you didn't have much to work with except the eyes and ears. But still, your heart breaks every time this little creature stares into the camera!
Kastner: Wolfie is inspired by my dog. I always try to keep my characters very simple; throughout my entire life, I've been drawing stylised anthropomorphic animals. And if there is no need for them to speak, I don't even give them a mouth. What also helps is the voice acting, as subtle as it is. The guy who did it isn't even an animal impersonator; he's an actor whom my sound designer met on a movie set, where he was acting out some weird ritual for which he needed to bark. My sound designer approached him, saying, "You know, that was some pretty good barking you did; can you try on smaller dogs too?"

I must admit that when I was watching the film, I completely forgot that WOLFIE is a student movie!
Kastner: This was my graduation movie. Currently, I'm preparing my next project, which will be an animated miniseries. It's interesting to compare the difference between launching a project in a school context or in 'the real world'. My producer, Tereza Havlová, launched her company, BATCH film. We're in a very early stage of development; I presented the project at the Karlovy Vary Festival, in the context of the Incubator project for young filmmakers.

You're currently running for the Student Oscars!
Kastner: WOLFIE has been nominated for the Student Academy Awards, competing with six other animations, out of which three winners will be chosen. So… Los Angeles, here I come! Even if we don't make it, being nominated is already a win for me.

–
Gert Hermans

Michelle Lemuya Ikeny & Kevin Schmutzler about NAWI

"My future is not defined by where I come from"

Nawi dreams of studying and changing her life. When she finds out her father wants to marry her off to an older man, she refuses and decides to fight for her future, transforming from a hopeful, talented student into a symbol of determination.

NAWI makes an impact on several levels. First, there is the film, combining an intersection of Western and non-Western narrative motives with a fascinating ending that leaves you completely knocked out. And then, there is the conversation with a director who is deeply committed to how his film can contribute to a better world, and seems to be finding the right ways to do so. And with young actress Michelle Lemuya Ikeny, who is ready to address UN meetings, but for now sticks to festival ceremonies, as she was recently honoured in Zlin (Youth Jury Award) and at Raindance (Best Feature).

Kevin Schmutzler: At the cradle of the project is Learning Lions, an educational NGO, based in Turkana, the region where the film is set. My brother Tobias and I consider ourselves 'impact filmmakers', exploring how films can help change the world, bit by bit, project by project. Learning Lions contacted us in 2017 with a request: We have a bunch of talented students, especially females, who would love to learn about filmmaking. It sounded like a crazy plan, making a film in the Turkana region, where no film had ever been shot before. It's such a remote place; once you leave the town of Lodwar, there's nothing but desert, all the way to South Sudan or Ethiopia. Learning Lions was super engaged, and after our first film workshop in 2017, we kept fantasising about embarking on a bigger project together. So we started looking for stories.

What kind of stories?

Schmutzler: It would be inappropriate for white men to tell stories about Turkana. We understood that authenticity could only be achieved through local authors. During the pandemic, we launched a writing contest throughout East Africa. Different from what we expected, 75% of the submissions were coming-of-age stories, and most of them came from female writers, telling of young girls being married off. One story stood out. It was written by Milcah Cherotich, a creative woman who works as a team counselor and a tour guide. Milcah is from a neighbouring tribe, but we involved students from Learning Lions to ensure a truly authentic story from Turkana. In a writer's room, we worked with students and alumni. One of them was Apuu Mourine, who became one of the film's co-directors. This team of local co-directors was crucial; we didn't want to give people the opportunity to accuse us of doing injustice to reality.

What should we know about Turkana?

Michelle Lemuya Ikeny: Turkana is a semi-desert, an extremely dry region with mainly poor inhabitants who generally stick to the traditional culture and wear traditional clothing. It's an extensive land with few inhabitants.

It's where I was born and where I've grown up. Most of my family is quite educated. Because they attended school, I don't feel in danger of being married off, and I will have the chance to complete my education.
Schmutzler: During shooting, Michelle was preparing for exactly the same exam as the one we show in the film. And two months after shooting, she finished best in the county, reliving that film scene.
Ikeny: When they took me on their shoulders, I suddenly realised: this feels familiar! I've done this before! And like in the film, I was interviewed on national television.

The film highlights the importance of education.
Ikeny: Our lack of education is why Turkana is still considered a poor region. Politicians come, offering small money, and these uneducated people end up falling for that small bribe and vote for them. It's an endless cycle. Education enables people to earn their own money and no longer depend on the government, and it helps them to make better decisions.

For good education, you need good teachers.
Ikeny: Teachers are hard to find in this remote region, and candidates might

Kevin Schmutzler & Michelle Lemuya Ikeny

be scared off by the local border disputes.
Schmutzler: We visited every school in the county for our casting and found Michelle at the Queen of Peace School, the first school built by Learning Lions in that region. That closed the loop for us! It proves that education opens doors; education is the key to the future, the key to dreaming, and to dreaming big! It makes you wonder: What do I want from life? If you're not educated, how would you know about the options that you have?

NAWI describes one individual case. But a million cases together have an impact on the entire society, and on the lives of future generations. While we feel sorry for this one poor girl, the film addresses a much bigger problem in a much broader context.
Schmutzler: When we screened the film for the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, UNICEF presented the current figures: every 2.3 seconds, somewhere in the world, a girl is being married off. These numbers are just absurd! NAWI provides emotional access to someone living in that situation, with all her pain and fear, and with all the obligations she feels towards society. We depict this whole cosmos of dreams, hope, and guilt.

Is every girl permanently afraid of getting married off? Or do girls accept it, thinking that there must be positive sides to something that has been established for so long?
Ikeny: Some girls understand that they can have big dreams and be more than just a wife. They are the ones getting afraid: I'm not going to be a doctor or an engineer, because I'm going to get married off. Others accept their fate as something that they need to do in their life.
Schmutzler: NAWI has two audiences. We can evoke feelings of indignation or anger among international audiences, which might result in concrete action. But we also address the local audience within the communities, where we raise a dialogue and introduce different perspectives.

How do you make that happen?
Schmutzler: Last week, we screened the film at a girls' school as far from anything as you can be. Among the 300 pupils were many who escaped from their marriages. This school has no access to water and no proper sanitary facilities, but it offers access to

education for families who cannot afford school fees. Michelle recorded a video message to encourage girls to keep dreaming. The day after the screening, they all sat down and wrote letters to each other, and to their "future me". Milcah was there and encouraged them to keep those letters and read them out loud every day.

In this way, the film serves a larger campaign.
Schmutzler: With donations collected through the film, we built a boarding school for girls, with scholarships for those who have been rescued. Our next plan is to have a cinema truck going from village to village, with counsilors engaging in a dialogue with the elders. Milcah and Apuu have recently taken the film to small communities, organising screenings on market days. Afterwards, young men approached them to say that they no longer wanted to marry an underage girl. Such a change from within means a lot to us. We had requests from NGO's in Sudan and Tanzania to bring the film there and show it to local communities. With the Girls First Fund, we have found a sponsor willing to participate in the desert project, and we are in the process of purchasing a suitable vehicle.

The film introduces a 'Child Protection Officer'. Does such a person really exist?
Ikeny: This function exists indeed, but it's not as effective as you may hope.
Schmutzler: After the world premiere in Nairobi, a lady working for UNICEF came to me and said, "I spotted one mistake in the film! A child protection officer could never afford a car. He would always go by taxi." The structures are there, and through a slow process of change, hopefully one day they will become more effective.

There is a heartbreaking moment in the film when Nawi says, "better not to look up at the sky anymore". Does it mean people should give up their ambitions?
Ikeny: I believe in dreams; my future is not defined by where I come from. The fact that I was born in Turkana doesn't mean that I should stay there and become someone's wife. I believe in personal efforts to achieve success. That's why it's good to have dreams; as long as you keep your dream in mind, you won't accept someone suppressing your voice. I'm multi-passionate; there are so many things I want to do in life.

The hardest thing is to make the right choice among all your dreams.
Schmutzler: One of the questions we asked in the casting was: What is your dream job? What do you want to be in life? Michelle answered very specifically: A neurosurgeon! Not just a surgeon, but one of the most responsible and demanding jobs in the entire surgical field! My dad is a neurosurgeon, so that immediately sparked some positive feelings.

The strictness of the parents in the film is striking, and can be enforced through corporal punishment, as in the case of the father and his son, Joel.
Ikeny: I envy children from other continents, who can voice their opinions, and parents listen to them. In Kenya, when your father tells you to do something, you do it. The same applies when he instructs your mother, because she is not allowed to refuse. As said in the film, "Women are there to be seen, not to be heard." A father can marry his daughter off without consulting her.

In the film, boys ride bicycles, while girls sit on the back.
Ikeny: In the villages, girls usually don't ride bikes, but I'm a city girl. I used to ride a bike when I was nine, and I got the hang of it.

You're travelling as an ambassador of the film. Is this what Nawi

describes as 'my hello to the big world'?
Ikeny: At film festivals, people listen to me and consider how I think about things. That makes me happy! I'm talking with different people about the needs of my community. In Turkana, I'm just a child with nothing important to say. And there's another world out there that I want to discover through my dream of becoming a neurosurgeon. I'll be moving somewhere to study, maybe even abroad.

How was it for a director to work under such extreme circumstances?
Schmutzler: There are so many stories to tell, you wouldn't believe it! On our way to the island, our boat ran out of fuel in the middle of this gigantic lake. We got stuck in a fishing net. When our truck got stuck in a muddy riverbed, it started raining - it hadn't rained in years - until the river flooded. Everyone was evacuated, but the truck was still there when the river came…

A film without a spring flood wasn't an option?
Schmutzler: When we included a spring flood in the story, everybody in the writer's room was like, We'll solve that problem once we get there… Together with our DoP, Klaus Kneist, I developed a brilliant plan. Through a clever shot list, we would fake a spring flood in a shallow lagoon near Lodwar. But after the rain, suddenly there was a 300-meter-wide river between us and the other shore. So we decided, let's shoot the spring flood in the spring flood! We found a small river branch, where the stream was still immensely powerful, which makes it even more convincing. I still shed tears over our brilliant shot list that never came into play.

Were there other unexpected barriers to overcome?
Schmutzler: Goats! They are not the type of animals that you can train easily. We always had a herd of a hundred goats on stand-by on set. Whenever you see goats in the film, which is probably every second shot, there are three people just outside the frame, trying to keep those goats in place with goat food. The goats all grew fat during the shoot! If we weren't paying attention for a minute, they had spread everywhere, and we had to gather all the animals again. In total, we must have lost around three days on rounding up goats.

Opinions on how the film should end probably differed.
Schmutzler: In the writers' room, the Learning Lions students convinced us that a happy ending wasn't an option. It feels like we made the right choice. Any other solution would be an insult to all those girls who experience this in real life. You don't want your audience to think, 'phew, I'm glad she made it; so things aren't so bad after all.' Big dreams will pass on from one generation to the next, until at some point they will be realised. This happens only gradually.

What kind of support are you seeking exactly?
Schmutzler: The work of what we call the "Nawi Initiative" is based on four pillars. First, constructing or improving school facilities. Then, financing and granting scholarships to girls who cannot afford education, especially girls who have been rescued from being married off, and who lose the support from their families. Rescue and intervention teams, combined with safe houses. And finally, prevention through counselors, open dialogues, cinema trucks, etc. We are bringing together international partners and international money with local NGOs and initiatives that are familiar with the problems - and know how to solve them. At the end of the movie, we have integrated a QR code that brings audiences to www.nawi.film. There, everyone can make a donation that will be invested 100% in those projects.

–
Gert Hermans

Allah Is Not Obliged

Animation, Belgium, Canada, France, Luxembourg, 2025
Directed by Zaven Najjar
Prod.: Special Touch Studios, Creative Touch Studios, Lunanime,...
World Sales: MK2 Diffusion
Phone: ++33-1-44-67-30-30
sales@mk2.com
www.mk2films.com

Arco

Animation, France, 2025
Directed by Ugo Bienvenu
Prod.: Remembers, MountainA, France 3
World Sales: Goodfellas
Phone: ++33-6-69-53-65-39
feripret@goodfellas.film
www.goodfellas.film

Brides

Feature Film, GB, Italy, 2025
Directed by Nadia Fall
Prod.: Neon Films, Rosamont, Bankside Films
World Sales: Bankside Films
Phone: ++44-20-76-36-60-85
films@bankside-films.com
www.bankside-films.com

Brightly Shining

Feature Film, Norway, 2025
Directed by Ida Sagmo Tvedte
Prod.: Motlys Film
World Sales: Reinvent
info@reinvent.dk
www.reinvent.dk

Bumblebee's Summer

Feature Film, Croatia, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2025
Directed by Daniel Kusan
Prod.: Interfilm, Zillion Film, Krug Film,...
World Sales: Interfilm
Phone: ++385-14-66-72-90
interfilm@interfilm.hr
www.interfilm.hr

Caterella

Animation, Norway, 2025
Directed by Lisa Marie Gamlem
Prod.: Storm Films
World Sales: TrustNordisk Film Int'l Sales
Phone: ++45-29-74-62-06
info@trustnordisk.com
www.trustnordisk.com

The Crown Prince and the Return of the Tyrant

Feature Film, Sweden, 2025
Directed by Tord Danielsson
Prod.: Unlimited Stories, Nordisk Film Prod., Sveriges TV,...
World Sales: Unlimited Stories
info@unlimitedstories.se
www.unlimitedstories.se

Dancing Queen in Hollywood

Feature Film, Norway, 2025
Directed by Aurora Gossé
Prod.: Amacord, Nordisk Film Prod.
World Sales: LevelK
Phone: ++45-48-44-30-72
niklas@levelk.dk
www.levelk.dk

Dandelion's Odyssey

Animation, France, Belgium, 2025
Directed by Momoko Seto
Prod.: Miyu Prod., Ecce Films, Umedia Prod.,...
World Sales: Indie Sales
Phone: ++33-1- 44-83-02-27
npalenzuela@indiesales.eu
www.indiesales.eu

Hacking Hate – An Online Infiltration of the Far-Right

Documentary, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, 2025
Directed by Simon Klose
Prod.: Nonami, Elk Film, Fuglene
World Sales: Cargo Entertainment
Phone: ++1-21-29-95-81-39
contact@cargofilm-releasing.com
www.cargofilm-releasing.com

The Light of Aisha

Animation, Spain, Germany, 2025
Directed by Shadi Adib
Prod.: Castelao Prod., Mago Prod., Peng! Boom! Tschak! Films,...
World Sales: Filmax Int'l
Phone: ++34-9-33-36-85-55
filmaxint@filmax.com
www.filmaxinternationalsales.com

Little Amélie or the Character of Rain

Animation, France, 2025
Directed by Maïlys Vallade, Liane-Cho

Han
Prod.: Maybe Movies, Ikki Films, 2 Minutes,...
World Sales: Goodfellas
Phone: ++33-6-69-53-65-39
feripret@goodfellas.film
www.goodfellas.film

Little Caribou

Animation, Ireland, 2025
Directed by Barry O'Donoghue
Prod.: Barley Films
World Sales: WT Films
Phone: ++33-1-42-61-09-83
sales@wtfilms.fr
www.wtfilms.fr

The Little Elephant in the Forest

Feature Film, Netherlands, 2024
Directed by Meikeminne Clinckspoor
Prod.: 100% Film, Dingie
World Sales: 100% Film
Phone: ++31-2-06-39-14-02
info@100prcnt.film
www.100prcnt.film

Mary Anning

Animation, Switzerland, Belgium, 2024
Directed by Marcel Barelli
Prod.: Nadasdy Film, RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera, La Boîte,...
World Sales: Be for Films
Phone: ++32-27-93-38-93
pamela@beforfilms.com
www.beforfilms.com

Olivia and the Invisible Earthquake

Animation, Spain, France, Belgium, Chile, Switzerland, 2025
Directed by Irene Iborra Rizo
Prod.: Cornelius Films, Citoplasma Studio, Bigaro Films,...
World Sales: Pyramide Int'l
Phone: ++33-1-42-96-02-20
sales@pyramidefilms.com
www.pyramidefilms.com

Oskar, Patsy, and Baltic Gold

Feature Film, Poland, 2025
Directed by Magdalena Niec & Mariusz Palej
Prod. & World Sales: Shipsboy
Phone: ++48-6-07-81-63-42
szymanska@shipsboy.com
www.shipsboy.com

The Secret Floor

Feature Film, Austria, Luxembourg, Germany, 2025
Directed by Norbert Lechner
Prod.: Kevin Lee Film, Amour Fou
World Sales: Playmaker
Phone: ++49-89-38-09-12- 88
worldsales@playmaker.de
www.playmaker.de

Sleepless City

Feature Film, Spain, 2025
Directed by Guillermo Galoe
Prod.: B-Team Prod., Sintagma Films, Buena Pinta Media,...
World Sales: BFF
sales@bffsales.eu
www.bestfriendforever.be

The Songbirds' Secret

Animation, France, 2025
Directed by Antoine Lanciaux
Prod.: Folimage, Les Armateurs, Lunanime,...
World Sales: France TV Distribution
Phone: ++33-1-56-22-68-38
sales@francetv.fr
www.francetvdistribution.com

Stitch Head

Animation, Germany, Luxembourg, 2025
Directed by Steve Hudson
Prod.: Gringo Films
World Sales: GFM Animation
Phone: ++44-20-71-86-63-00
general@gfmanimation.com
www.gfmanimation.com

More information on all these films you will find on our website:
www.ecfaweb.org/european-childrens-film-network/feature-films

Jessica Cohen, Esther van Driesum & Hidde de Vries about Cinekid

"First playful, then professional"

It is not easy being Cinekid! Despite changes in staff and location, the festival has managed to remain a leading player in the European children's film landscape. To the professional audience, the festival more and more seems to have an 'industry profile', a field in which they have been playing a pioneering role for years. We wanted to find out how Cinekid has evolved in this respect from Jessica Cohen (Cinekid for Professionals Co-ordinator) and Esther van Drieseum (Head of Studies for Cinekid LABs). But Cinekid clearly wants to continue to fulfil its role as an audience festival, so we invited Head of Programming - Film & Series Hidde De Vries to join the table.

One common rule in the world of children's films says: never start a festival in the capital.
De Vries: More than half of all Dutch arthouse tickets are sold in Amsterdam. Those arthouse fans have children, whom they want to enjoy similar content, so they take them to Cinekid. But there is strong competition from other events, and we are facing a shortage of venues, which is why we have partially relocated to Amsterdam-North. Financially speaking, the city is one of our biggest supporters, but Amsterdam is becoming more expensive by the day. We are no longer focused exclusively on Amsterdam; the festival is disseminated across 40 locations, covering virtually the entire country.

May I confront you with a quote that I found more than once on your website, stating that *"Cinekid is the biggest children's and media festival in the world"*?
De Vries: That was a statement from the era of former director, Sanette Naye, but I'm not sure if it's still true. The industry has changed. For instance, consider the Smile Festival in India, a country where the scale and scope are much bigger! Nowadays, I always say that we are the most fun festival!

The work of Cinekid is divided into three pillars: the festival films, the education, and the programme for professionals. Do they evolve simultaneously?
Jessica Cohen: They are intrinsically linked. Many speakers in the Industry Forum, our conference during the Cinekid for Professionals programme, are recruited from the Medialab or the Festival programme. The benefit of sharing the same venue is that each department can feed off the other.
De Vries: We see ourselves as a nursery, a breeding ground for children's film culture. There are examples of filmmakers who were in our children's jury as kids, then attended film school, their first film premiered at the festival, and now they have a project in the Script LAB, which will later participate in the Junior Co-Production Market. Through nourishing the industry, we will have more, better, and more beautiful films, in contrast to content that is fed to children today, which is only out to sell brands and products.

Do you each focus on your own sections, or do you constantly keep the

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bigger picture in mind of how to strengthen each other?
Cohen: The editorial line of the festival is also in the industry programme, but it's important to talk and think together about the bigger picture and the trends on the horizon. It's also a matter of necessity to combine efforts, as we don't have endless resources.

Festival visitors might have the impression that your focus is shifting from an audience festival towards an event for professionals.
De Vries: Recently, the festival has taken on a more corporate identity. This might raise the impression that we are mainly there for professionals, which isn't the case. Cinekid attracts 70,000 visitors yearly, and only a small percentage are professionals. This year's campaign will emphasise that we are first and foremost a kids' festival; first playful, then professional.
Esther van Driesum: Do you have the feeling that families have become less important for us? In my experience, so many family activities take place inside and around the cinema.

In Cinekid's earlier location, the Westergasfabriek, families with children were everywhere. They're less visible nowadays.

©David Hup

De Vries: Our new location in Amsterdam-North has brought about a radical shift in our audience. Cinekid used to focus on a small niche, an elite, whereas nowadays the festival attracts a much more diverse audience. Cinekid is funded by public money, so it makes perfect sense that we should reach as many types of audience as possible. Furthermore, you are overlooking the decentralisation across different locations.

That's how you actively bring children's cinema to a nationwide audience.
De Vries: Last year, 43 locations organised their own festival during the autumn break. Every year, we acquire the rights to four titles for redistribution. Local cinemas purchase that formula, for which they receive a package that includes a combination of physical (posters, flags, T-shirts, etc.) and digital marketing. Some bigger cities present additional films, creative workshops, and Medialab installations. Thanks to national funding, even the smallest communities can launch their own Cinekid and build up a local festival tradition in just a few years. In line with our mission, now everyone can go to Cinekid!

How are you impacted by the situation in the Dutch production market?
Cohen: The vision behind the industry programme is pan-European, and even beyond, but we always try to maintain a strong Dutch component, which is reflected in our partnerships. We have a strong relationship with several Dutch production houses.

Any Dutch premieres this year to be mentioned?
De Vries: Our opening film, KING OF THE WANDERERS *(see interview)*! Except for participating in the international competition, we do not have a premiere requirement for Dutch films because we don't want to limit their options for a national release. Thanks to our collaboration with broadcasters, we will have several TV premieres, like the return of the Zapp Docs! Five brand new short documentaries for young audiences will premiere at the festival this year.

What evolution did you see over the last 10 years in the Dutch production market?
De Vries: Box office-wise, Dutch children's films still account for a large share of the market. Even though it is mostly more commercial production, it is still nice that children have the opportunity to see locally produced content. One in five films supported

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by the Netherlands Film Fund are still young audience films.
Cohen: It's keeping up with the times. In practice, we see that only a small percentage of what kids are viewing is actually children's productions.
Van Driesum: Recently, in a talk with Lotte Bronshoff, Commissioner for Children's Films at the Film Fund, we noticed a shift from realistic content towards a celebration of fantasy. It stands out in just about all the stories she receives.

How was the Cinekid identity safeguarded throughout the recent staff changes, culminating in the coming of new director Joanne Oldenbeuving? What makes Cinekid still Cinekid?
Cohen: There are still core values to the work we do, one of which is the way that we involve the young audience, even in the industry programme. Through focus groups, they have a say in the feedback process of the Script LAB and the market. Before anything else, writers in the Script LAB will present their project to a group of kids of the right age.
De Vries: Also in the programming team, the Junior Crew is involved in the decision-making process regarding the poster, the campaign... They are picking ideas for Medialab installations to be produced and testing them. They hand out the Game Award, and this year, the Junior Crew will award their favourite short films.

The three labs are a crucial part of the programme for professionals: Script LAB, Director's LAB, and Producer's LINK. Where are we today in the timetable?
Van Driesum: We finished the selection for the next Script LAB, which will start during Cinekid. Participants will meet again during the Berlinale, and in between, they have online sessions with a coach. That structure spans half a year.
Cohen: The space for writers to spend six months focusing solely on the development is crucial, a phase that might often get overlooked or rushed.

I have the impression that from the Cinekid Script LAB, there's an unusually high percentage of projects that are being shot and actually being made into a film.
Van Driesum: Both the number and the quality of applications have increased, but selecting the projects is crucial. Over the years, we learned how important it is to meet the applicants online and not judge by the applications alone. We developed a good sense for evaluating the potential of projects by paying attention to various criteria: visibility, partners, financing, etc.
Cohen: The probability of production is around 50%, but that's hard to say, because many projects are still in development. I often read in their motivation how they are seeking a stamp of approval that the LAB can provide. The scope of the applications that we're receiving from around the world is another testament to that impact.

What can directors learn in the Directors' LAB? They are directors... they should know how to make a film!
Van Driesum: The Director's LAB focuses on working with children and non-professional actors. How to communicate with them? How to deal with them on set? How to take your script to the set? In general, our labs are as tailor-made as possible; we listen closely to the needs of every director. We already had experienced directors who had made several features, but joined the LAB for their first children's film.
Cohen: We create space for them to work together in groups with peer review, and they get a lot from just having time to talk to other directors.

The Producer's LINK starts from the idea that a successful children's film

©Pablo Hassmann

producer is something that could really exist!
Cohen: There are specific challenges and measures of success for a children's film producer. One of the starting points in the LINK is that they will always have to work collaboratively, because the landscape of public financing is less favourable for children's films in many countries. Another focus is on audience development. The Producers' LINK - a collaboration with Young Horizons Industry - is not project-based; it's more about personal development and their whole slate.

How big is the co-ownership that a festival feels for a project that has participated in all the labs?
Cohen: We reconnect with projects over the years and check in on them, aiming to create a relationship with producers. It's like a shared investment. We're not prescriptive; we're supportive as a platform that you can use at various stages.

Often, at festivals, you're looking forward to meeting people again. In the Cinekid for Professionals days, you get excited about people that you have never met before, but who can maybe present new insights. Cinekid is not afraid to fish outside the usual pool.
Cohen: What we're aiming to do, especially in the Script LAB, is to put into question the concept of 'What is a children's film?' The answer is not in a restricted set of guidelines. That shows in the consultants we work with; not all of them actively work with children's films. They have backgrounds in different types of storytelling.
Van Driesum: The labs are open to projects from outside Europe with different traditions of storytelling, which is very refreshing. Since all writers are working closely together, that's a great way to enrich our vision.

Dreaming out loud, who would be the 'mentor of your dreams' in the LAB?
Van Driesum: The name Andrea Arnold keeps on coming back. I adore her free, topic-and character-driven approach, which could be a great addition to the labs. As a professional, I feel very much inspired by her.
De Vries: I was fantasising about Danny DeVito coming back to Cinekid next year, to celebrate our 40th anniversary. It's been 30 years since he won the Cinekid Lion for MATILDA, which is still one of the best children's films ever made. If anyone has his number, please let me know!

–
Gert Hermans

Since July, a new Managing Director has arrived at Cinekid! Joanne Oldenbeuving brings a wealth of experience in children's culture with her, after her work for the Amsterdam Youth Theater School and several TV broadcasters. We were curious about the vision with which she will lead Cinekid to its 40th anniversary, and beyond. ***"Children's access to high-quality films and media is essential. These stories help them shape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. In my view, arts and cultural education foster empathy, knowledge, and self-confidence; qualities every child deserves to develop. Now, one month into my role as director, I am deeply impressed by the incredible team bringing such a remarkable festival to life, and I am truly excited for what lies ahead."***

Janne Schmidt about KING OF THE WANDERERS

“Chasing imaginary birds again”

When Meissy’s father Tom shows up again, after many years of absence, she is delighted. Her caring mother Lucy sees things differently, she forbids her daughter from having any contact with him. But Tom’s life out on the streets, full of fantasy, origami cranes and impulsive pleasure, is so exciting. Until Meissy finds out what her mother tried to warn her for: Tom is schizophrenic and suffers from hallucinations and delusions of grandeur.

Director Janne Schmidt participated in the Cinekid Directors LAB. Now her film, KING OF THE WANDERERS, is the Dutch crown jewel and opening film of this year’s Cinekid edition.

I stole a question from your film: What were the three best things that happened to you yesterday?
Janne Schmidt: My son gave me some sweet smiles. I heard that there is an interest in distributing KING OF THE WANDERERS abroad. And ultimately, we are all healthy.

In an interview in this ECFA Journal, Hidde de Vries (Cinekid) claims that, except in the Netherlands, no one would dare tackle the subject you deal with in KING OF THE WANDERERS.
Schmidt: I am Dutch, I think Dutch; my critical gaze could perhaps be typically Dutch. I found the theme very challenging. Psychosis and childish fantasies are sometimes closely related, and I found it interesting to connect them. Homelessness, poverty, and schizophrenia are serious issues, but children don’t just want to see films that are constantly fun and exuberant and where everything turns out well.

‘So I got all that imagination from you!’ says Meissy. I found that connection between imagination and what we call psychosis rather surprising.
Schmidt: Thanks to her imagination, she can picture what her father sees, but for Tom, unfortunately, it’s reality. Nowadays, people are often in search of their inner selves, and they use drugs or ayahuasca to induce psychosis. But when it comes from within, we find it scary and feel it needs to be suppressed. I find it interesting how humanity deals with that.
Barend van Balen: We show that delusions can also be beautiful, but as the film progresses, they become increasingly frightening. Until it becomes really dangerous, and that person needs help.

Schizophrenia is an intense, but very cinematic motif!
Schmidt: Because you can play with what you do and don’t see. When screenwriter Eveline Hagenbeek gave me the treatment to read, I immediately wondered: What if we show those psychoses on screen? That was an exciting idea! The problem is that this sometimes puts the perspective in Tom’s hands, and no longer solely with Meissy. Despite this choice we

have succeeded in telling the story from the perspective of our protagonist.

Many films have already been made about mental disorders, autism, ADHD, and so on. Why did you single out schizophrenia? It doesn't seem to me to be a condition that many children face daily.

Schmidt: The idea came from Eveline, who worked for the street newspaper. Initially, this was going to be a film about homelessness rather than psychoses. But there is a connection between the two; we researched that. Some people became homeless because they were psychotic, and some couldn't cope with the harsh life on the streets. Excessive drug use can trigger psychosis. Schizophrenia is often accompanied by megalomania, as in the case of Tom, who sincerely believes he is the King of Moldova. Lucy demonstrates very nicely how to deal with this. In that scene on the bench, she goes along with Tom's thoughts and addresses him as a king. Hopefully, the audience will pick up on this: that you don't just lock someone up, saying they're crazy; that only causes more chaos in their head. You can also approach that person differently.

Van Balen: Mental health issues and homelessness are often linked. Those

"confused individuals" we see as passers-by on the street, we're now experiencing within the context of a family.

In the scene on the bench, Meissy observes her parents without hearing the conversation (which we do hear). We feel that she is watching over our shoulder from her window.

Schmidt: That scene shows the parents' perspective entirely, but we wanted to involve Meissy as well. By letting her watch secretly, it remains her story too. In the editing, we wondered whether we could push Meissy so far into the background. But thanks to Lucy's empathy, it remains interesting for the audience. It's all about the parents, but one of them thinks he's a king, with a cloak and a crown!

Halfway through the film, the word schizophrenia is mentioned for the first time in a scene where Lucy explains things to her daughter. Why is that scene placed exactly there?

Schmidt: Because it's a turning point. It's important not only for Meissy, but also for the viewers to know what's really going on. You can't keep the audience in suspense forever. It's time to contextualise the mother's harsh reaction; after all, it's quite drastic to forbid your daughter from having any contact with her father. But she's not just an "angry woman"; we explain why she's so strict, so that you understand her.

Before Tom arrived, that mother-daughter relationship was super sweet and positive.

Van Balen: She is a strong woman, a mother who can manage on her own. That is also the point of the film: Lucy continues to care for Meissy. This woman can do it on her own! The film shows that any family structure can be good, as long as the foundation is solid and affectionate. Not every family has to follow the traditional standard.

Schmidt: They radiate such a beautiful bond on screen, with all the sweet little things they do together. We created that bond by having the mother and daughter rehearse a lot. Niyara da Rocha Pereira (Meissy) and Yootha Wong-Loi-Sing (Lucy) played games together or went to an escape room. They also have great chemistry in real life, which you can sense in the film. A lot of work also went into Niyara's bond with Matthijs van de Sande Bakhuyzen (Tom). They had to be comfortable with each other to be credible. For example, that dance scene was meticulously rehearsed.

I was surprised that you suggested a life on the streets as the solution for Tom. How can you justify that socially?

Schmidt: Tom wants to be free and live his own life; he finds happiness in his freedom. He will never fit into the mould that the world considers "nor-

mal". We'd better accept that. In the future, he will find more stability in his relationship with his family. I think the ending still leaves the viewer with a warm feeling, but it does make you think.

In his acting, Tom strikes an interesting balance between being present and absent. He is there, but you sense that a part of him is missing.
Schmidt: Within each scene, we had to find a balance in the way Tom reacts. When can you look behind you because it seems like someone is whispering in your ear? When Meissy visits him in his tent at night, they have a loving conversation, and Tom is very attentive. But the next morning, he is chasing imaginary birds again. We especially didn't approach it as a children's film. We did with all the other characters, but not with Tom; we wanted to portray him as accurately as possible.

How important was the Cinekid LAB for you?
Schmidt: We were assigned a coach, along with several other projects. Thanks to those four days, I started thinking more about the project. I found it most interesting when adult actors played a few scenes, which we could discuss maturely. Even though they were playing the role of a child, the actors were able to express what they were feeling.

Did the environment in which you filmed also influence the story?
Schmidt: All around Meissy, you see bleak concrete. While she lives in a grey world, Tom lives in nature. Those

green, almost romantic places look very appealing to her. But as Tom becomes more psychotic, he is drawn more and more towards that concrete world. His environment becomes less and less green, with less nature, and therefore less freedom. More and more, he retreats into his mind.

Speaking of colours... You shot a film without any red!
Schmidt: I had to constantly remind everyone, including Production Design, that red was a no-go. If there was a red car in the background, we removed it in the colour correction. A red carpet was out of the question! But it is accurate; people with psychoses sometimes react strongly to certain colours.

I would like to compare the beginning and end of the film. In the opening scene, we go directly inside the head of the "King of Moldova".
Schmidt: We start the film from Tom's perspective. That's not obvious, but the scene immediately grabs the audience's attention. There's something fairy-tale-like about a king with his lackeys, and you wonder: Who is this man and why is he acting so strangely? What kind of world are we looking at? We didn't want to start the film with a crisis situation right away.

You save that for the end, when Tom feels a psychosis coming on in the train and completely derails.
Schmidt: It was a challenge to see how suspenseful we could make that scene. During their journey through the city centre, you feel that intensity building. We could only show that oppressive feeling through Tom's perspective; that way, the viewer feels the most extreme emotions. But Meissy also had to remain involved. It was an exercise in balance.
Van Balen: Throughout the film, the images of those delusions are always constructed in that way. It starts with something small, a nice image that only Tom sees, and then it adds up and goes from bad to worse.

–
Gert Hermans

What happened to the Dutch Touch? The Changing Landscape of Dutch Children's Documentary Film

For years, the Netherlands was regarded as a European leader in children's and youth documentary filmmaking. A strong public broadcasting system, dedicated editorial teams and initiatives like The Kids & Docs workshop created an environment for acclaimed films. Today, that ecosystem is under pressure.

In recent years, efforts for fair pay in the film and TV industry have led to higher wages and equalised budgets for youth and "grown-up" documentaries at the Dutch public broadcaster NPO. Dutch youth documentaries still perform well at international festivals and in schools, but recognition seems to be lacking. Feature-length youth docs struggle in cinemas, and both funders and broadcasters note a lack of interest from filmmakers. Innovative projects do emerge, but often without long-term support.

To explore what's happening, DOXS RUHR director Gudrun Sommer and film consultant Signe Zeilich-Jensen spoke with filmmaker Martijn Blekendaal (THE MAN WHO LOOKED BEYOND THE HORIZON, THE INVISIBLE ONES), producer Nienke Korthof (SHABU, THE CHILDREN OF MAVUNGU), and Hidde de Vries, Film & TV Programmer at Cinekid.

The 15-Minute Trap: When Format Becomes Formula

A key concern is the rigid 15' format, originally designed for TV scheduling. Dutch filmmaker Martijn Blekendaal made a successful 15' documentary for children (THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS). However, he has become sceptical about the possibilities offered by the legendary format. Producer Nienke Korthof (Tangerine Tree): *"It's like a poetry contest where every poem must be exactly four lines."* Broadcasters rarely support other lengths or experimental forms. This rigidity stifles diversity. Blekendaal warns against turning documentaries into moral lessons: *"Kids can handle ambiguity. They need emotional truth, not simplified messages. A good film doesn't answer questions - it raises them."*

SHABU

Who Leads the Stories?

Another shift is in story development. Previously, directors shaped the themes and vision. Today, editors often define topics, tone, and message, sometimes before a director is even involved. It might be efficient from a commissioner's point of view, but it risks uniformity.
Creative unpredictability - unusual perspectives, complex characters, unresolved questions - is now the exception. Blekendaal notes: *"We've moved from films exploring a child's inner world to ones explaining the world to children. That's a loss."*

Money Is There - But Not for Everyone

Paradoxically, budgets have risen (around €80,000 per short), but fewer films are getting made. Development and production require an effort that outweighs the reward. Broadcasters prefer series for programming ease, and producers see clearer returns. Emerging filmmakers face limited access to the industry. Experienced ones drop out.
Hidde de Vries (Cinekid): *"Newcomers struggle. We see great ideas, but they can't be made under current conditions."*

The End of Kids & Docs: A Lost Generation?

Launched in 1999, the Kids & Docs workshop produced over 200 films and served as a key talent incubator. Its closure, due to funding changes, left a gap. New, promising initiatives

like ZappDoc lack the long-term mentorship that shapes careers. The current landscape is fragmented. Linear TV is declining, while sustainable models for online distribution and educational outreach are still missing. Many films disappear after a brief festival run.

Serial Format: Opportunity or Trap?

Multi-part series (typically 4x15') are seen as a solution: more time, larger budgets, and better international prospects. But not every story needs four episodes. If the format becomes the default, structure sabotages substance.

New Voices, New Visions

Bold projects still surface. Korthof highlights her new series, which reaches out to younger audiences and challenges formal norms: OF RATS AND MEN by Thomas Willem Renckens, a story of Amsterdam told from a rat's perspective. There's a great potential in documentaries for ages 6-8, a group often overlooked.
"Younger children are visually literate but emotionally unguarded," says Blekendaal. *"With care and artistic integrity, we can reach them on a level deeper than any curriculum."*

THE INVISIBLE ONES

Access and Visibility: Still a Struggle

Children mainly discover documentaries via schools or festivals. Platforms like NPO Start are not child-friendly. What's missing is a digital space for easy discovery and rewatching. Blekendaal, Korthof, and de Vries all agree: the films that impact children most are often ones they wouldn't have picked themselves, with topics like migration, disability, or inequality. But to have impact, the films need facilitation, whether in classrooms or curated screenings.

Looking Forward: Internationalisation and AI

Language remains a barrier for European distribution. AI may change this, offering synthetic dubbing that preserves original voices. Though not yet fully ready, the potential is enormous.

Conclusion: Ideas Are Plentiful - What's Missing Is Courage

The Dutch children's documentary scene isn't dying, but it's struggling. Rigid programming slots in linear TV formats (even series' episodes need to be 15'), bureaucratic systems, and limited funding structures are holding it back. Still, there's hope: in bold perspectives, curious young audiences, cross-border partnerships, and in the freedom offered by non-linear programming. Blekendaal: *"I coach a lot of young filmmakers, and what I observe is that they're often afraid to experiment when it comes to youth documentaries. At the same time, many experienced documentary makers don't work in this field. Making youth documentaries is full of challenges, which many filmmakers don't realise. There's also the perception that a youth documentary must be about a child, which makes some ask themselves: Do I even want to make a film about a kid?"*

New Pan-European Initiative: A Step Forward

These challenges sparked a new training within the framework of the D4K – Docs for Kids Alliance, led by DOXS RUHR, IDFA, and the Forum für Kultur und Bildung Leipzig. Open to directors and producers from Germany, Flanders, Poland, and the Netherlands, the YOUTH DOC TRAINING will launch at IDFA 2025 (November 17–21). Focusing on networking and project development, the initiative aims to foster co-productions and renew the children's documentary genre. The Dutch Touch isn't gone — at least not for children's documentaries. The best is yet to come.
Check here for more information on D4K and the YOUTH DOC TRAINING.

The NPO Fund has a strong tradition of supporting youth documentaries, both as stand-alone films and in series, all in the 15' format. Since 2024, the Netherlands Film Fund and CoBO Fund have supported author-driven youth documentaries of up to 15' through the Zappdoc Campus. Within this scheme, the maximum support provided by the fund for a 15' film is €45,000.

–
Gudrun Sommer & Signe Zeilich-Jensen

CAN YOU SEE ME?

Eleven-year-old Mira loves to dress up for her school's carnival celebration. Beneath the playful costumes, however, lies a reality shaped by the absence of parental attention and Mira's quiet resilience. Her younger brother Leo is seriously ill, and her family's everyday life is dominated by hospital visits and the constant care he requires. With her parents absorbed by the medical struggle, Mira's own needs remain in the background, despite her help in looking after her two younger sisters, brushing their teeth, and taking on small tasks of care. What she longs for most is simple and universal: to be truly seen.

Leah Meinhof's short documentary CAN YOU SEE ME? (SEHT IHR MICH?) captures this longing with remarkable sensitivity. Without dramatisation or sentimentality, the film stays close to Mira's perspective, observing her small gestures, her silences, and the fragile balance between her playful imagination and the weight of responsibility she quietly carries. At the same time, the film acknowledges the strong bond that holds a family together and Mira's deep affection for her brother. The camera does not intrude; instead, it offers a space where Mira's emotions are allowed to surface on her own terms.

CAN YOU SEE ME? is a deeply empathetic portrait of a child navigating life in the shadow of illness. For siblings of sick children, the film mirrors an experience often left unspoken. For others, it opens a window into a dimension of family life, where strength and vulnerability coexist. In its quiet precision, CAN YOU SEE ME? becomes a film not only about illness, but about recognition, visibility, and the subtle ways children negotiate worlds shaped by adult concerns. Leah Meinhof's debut film showcases her ability to build trust with young protagonists and render visible what usually remains unseen.

After its premiere at the Hof Int'l Film Festival in October 2024, CAN YOU SEE ME? will address young audiences at the *doxs!* festival in Duisburg this November (10+ programme). Leah Meinhof has created a work that enriches not only the context of children's film festivals but also the broader conversation about childhood, resilience, and care.

CAN YOU SEE ME? (SEHT IHR MICH?)
Director: Leah Meinhof
Germany, 2024, 15'
Producer: Christina Marx
Contact: binkepauline@gmail.com

–
Luca Stradmann

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doxs! DOKUMENTARFILME FÜR KINDER UND JUGENDLICHE

Anne McCabe about THE BLUE FIDDLE

"We're not considered native speakers"

Melt that thin whistle, burn that bagpipe, and shave off those Guinness-soaked beards! No Irish jigs for me! But there is a very praiseworthy musical element to THE BLUE FIDDLE: the passing on of musical knowledge, the passion of musicians, and the simple, primal joy of making music together, whether or not around the table in a pub. And, of course, there is the cordial persona of Irish filmmaker Anne McCabe, who, after years of television work, is keenly enjoying presenting her feature debut at the Zlin Festival.

Ten-year-old Molly believes that if she learns to play the violin like her father and wins the national fiddle competition, she can wake him from a coma. In the rehab center, Molly meets grumpy Malachy, a former violin champion said to have "magic in his hands." With Malachy as her mentor, she sets off in search of musical magic and healing power.

Anyone who finds themselves at a screening of THE BLUE FIDDLE and doesn't like the sound of the fiddle is in for a challenging journey.

Anne McCabe: THE BLUE FIDDLE - or FIDIL GHORM in Gaelic - indeed celebrates traditional Irish music in a contemporary setting.

Does Ireland have a national fiddle competition?

McCabe: It's a phenomenon in Ireland, and it's a resurgence; music is everywhere, and traditional music is surprisingly popular. I had to find a little girl to cast in the role of Molly, who could act, play the fiddle, and speak Irish. Around 140 audition tapes came in; I was truly amazed. I thought the tradition only lived in the Western areas where Gaelic is spoken, but these tapes came from everywhere. This made me understand that Irish traditional music and the Irish language are very much alive. During Fleadh *Cheoil na hÉireann* (Music Festival of Ireland), 100,000 people gather in one town for a week, and there's music on every street corner. Every pub has music sessions from 10 in the morning right through till midnight. It's not just about the fiddle, there are also competitions for concertina, tin whistle, traditional singing and dancing, storytelling... all the national traditional arts.

I keep wondering how the Irish get away with it. In every other country, traditional music is regarded as dusty, old-fashioned, or even nationalistic.

McCabe: When we gained our freedom from Britain in the 1920s, the people who started the revolution had a vision; they weren't soldiers, but artists, writers, and poets. At the time of the Celtic Revival, we rediscovered our ancient roots. Our language used to be nearly dead, but was brought back to life. My father was the first generation of the Free State, and he valued that language so much that he sent me to a Gaelic-language school in Dublin, which was quite rare at the time.

If we were to see a Bavarian film with actors in Lederhosen, we would run out screaming. But when the Irish come, fiddling and riverdancing, we're delighted by the authenticity.

McCabe: The traditional arts were re-appropriated in a new form for the modern era. Bill Whelan took traditional tunes from Ireland, Spain, and even New Orleans, and made them into a fantastic piece of music and dance theatre called Riverdance, which became a worldwide phenomenon. Sinead O'Connor sang traditional songs with her haunting voice.

Can I mention Kneecap, the controversial hip-hop crew, rapping (partly) in Gaelic? Are they today's reference for the Irish language uprising?
McCabe: They feel passionately about minorities and minority language rights. They grew up in an activist environment, in the Irish language ghetto in Belfast. I love Kneecap!

The film features a lot of rain (and a bit of sunshine), Gaelic language, numerous fiddles being played, lush green colours, and a soundtrack that mixes Irish elements with a traditional score. How Irish can a film be?
McCabe: It's a great promotional video for Irish holidays! The Irish Tourist Board should be delighted! We chose a location that hadn't been used before; usually, all Irish language films are shot on the west coast, in the Galway area, or on the south coast in Kerry. This is the first time the audience is taken to the north coast.

Do you follow the advice from your film and ask yourself now and then, 'What is the best thing that happened to me today?
McCabe: Not often enough. This comes from our script author Patricia Forde, who's a brilliant children's writer. Nowadays, 'gratitude journals' are a popular way for people to overcome depression or anxiety by listing five things that they're grateful for each day. I have been working in television from a very young age, and as a young director, you work so hard and hold yourself to a very high standard. You give it your all until you burn out. Only as you get older, you learn to take it with a pinch of salt, telling yourself, "It's only a movie." When you're making a TV programme, standing out in the rain on a windy hillside, or hanging around Dublin City Center waiting for drug addicts at midnight in November, then you ask yourself: Why am I doing this?

After working for TV throughout your entire career, this was your first time filming for the big screen. What did you do to make it look like a big-screen production?
McCabe: Working with actors is my biggest skill. When I was casting Barry McGovern *(playing Malachy)*, I was aware that the actor had to hold a close-up on a big screen. And I had to persuade the funders and the Gaelic TV channel that his Irish was good enough. Like me, he's from Dublin, so we're not considered native speakers. He is our most famous Beckett actor, and I knew no one else who would have this craft. I wanted him from day one, but I had to fight for it. And he gave me back 110%.

And on the cinematographic level?
McCabe: Television is more dialogue-oriented, there are more close-ups, and more quick cuts. It's a different grammar and a different rhythm. My cinematographer, Ronan Fox, went to the funder, Irish Screen - the Ireland Film Board, to showcase three shots in a plea to use a wide 16;9 screen ratio: Malachy's bench, the tree, and the hairpin bend where the crash happens. That swung it! I had a great cinematographer; we agreed on almost everything.

Even on the slow motions?
McCabe: They came later, in the editing. Without the slow-mo, things weren't just dramatic enough. The moments were too quick; it needed more emotion.

There's a particular moment in the film when Malachy compares music to a river of notes.
McCabe: That was the moment in the

script that sold it to me! Composer Odhrán Ó Casaide comes from a family of five brothers who are famous traditional musicians. But he is also a professor of classical music at Dublin University, so he marries the two traditions. He explained to me how the tune he wrote mirrors the progress of the stream and the mountain, and then comes back, going round in circles. That scene took a lot of effort for Barry McGovern, a man in his mid-70s. I had to choreograph his moves, and then he had to redo them several times from different angles.

While playing the fiddle!
McCabe: He wasn't; that was cheating. The composer was standing at the side, playing, and Barry was miming. He was so concerned to get the fingering right; he was such a perfectionist.

THE BLUE FIDDLE takes us to a rehab place for people with brain injuries, called Tír na nÓg.
McCabe: The land of Eternal Youth. The design department went to great lengths to paint scenes of Tír na nÓg with Oisín on his white horse on the wall. It's a legend kids learn in school, but it's not really translated to a foreign audience in the film; we didn't want to explain too much.

It rings a bell with whoever has been working in children's film long enough to remember the white horse in the Irish youth film INTO THE WEST, called Tír na nÓg.
McCabe: Such a beautiful film! Molly's brother Jack is drawing a girl on a horse. That's the mythical Niamh with the golden hair. Molly refers to the legend when telling Jack that Dad has gone to the Land of Eternal Youth, where there's no sickness or death.


Anne McCabe

Molly seems like a genuinely good girl.
McCabe: Edith Lawlor *(playing Molly)* was 11 years old, she had never been near a camera before, never done drama classes, but she was a great singer and champion musician. She was so still and quiet, but when I looked through the lens, I saw this great interiority. Then she won the All-Ireland Fiddle Under 12 Championship. Suddenly, she was big! Edith is quite a serious child, which suits her character. When there's illness in a family, the eldest child trying to help the parent often becomes a little parent, who never fully lives her childhood.

Irish people read the future in a tea-cup?
McCabe: Don't you have this tradition? Old ladies, apparently, can read tea leaves, and Molly tends to believe in magic. Like she believes that Malachy got his magic from The Well… until she finds out that The Well is just a pub!

A pub is a place where people sit around a table, playing fiddle.
McCabe: Irish music is being played in pubs. This is how kids learn from the elders and pick up the tunes; melodies, styles, and techniques are being passed on. There are different fiddling techniques; the one in Donegal is different from the one in Kerry. To be honest, it's not my world. I didn't grow up with it.

I heard you saying that THE BLUE FIDDLE is mainly a film about hope.
McCabe: In today's world, hope is so much needed. I wanted to convey to the audience that things can get better, and you should never give up on your dreams. There's magic in music, or as we say in Irish… *"Tá draíocht sa cheol"*

Radka Hoffman about KRUTÓN

"BOO's main focus is on audience development"

KRUTÓN is one of the bigger mysteries in the children's film industry. The name is popping up more and more often. With Radka Hoffman, the Czech film organisation based in Prague also has representation on the ECFA board, but who knows exactly what they do? It's not as if KRUTÓN is involved in numerous aspects... It's as if KRUTÓN is involved in EVERY aspect of the film industry: education, industry training, distributing features, shorts, and documentaries... Is there something KRUTÓN does not do?

Radka Hoffman: We're not a production company! KRUTÓN, based in Prague, started as an association organising film camps and workshops for youngsters, and later set up a young audience festival, Young Film Fest. It started with a group of enthusiastic young people - one of them was Filip Kršiak, who is now KRUTÓN's CEO - and today, we are a solid, multifaceted cinema organisation.

Do you still recognise that spirit of enthusiasm in KRUTÓN today?

Hoffman: Definitely. People working here have a passion and a strong belief. We're a non-governmental nonprofit organisation; every year, we apply for several projects to different funding schemes, like the Czech Ministry of Culture, the Czech Audiovisual Fund, the City of Prague, the Prague 5 district...

Which is where the Kino Kavalírka is located?

Hoffman: Indeed. Kino Kavalírka is a cosy, independent boutique cinema, programmed by KRUTÓN. We have a summer bar in our beautiful backyard, and a programme that transcends cinema. We do not have traditional cinema seats, so we can easily clear the room for other activities, like regular traditional Slovak dancing class.

Do you mind if we dedicate the rest of the interview to Slovak folk dancing?

Hoffman: I'm not good at it, even if I'm the one on the team of Slovak origin. I prefer to focus on the cinema, that stands out for its friendly atmosphere and for the special programmes we curate.

Kino Kavalírka Summer Bar

And soon, in November, Kino Kavalírka will be hosting the first edition of the BOO Festival!

Hoffman: Yes, the BOO International Film Festival is the result of merging two festivals: ELBE DOCK and Young Film Fest. BOO's main focus is on audience development through various short film programmes for different age groups, including children, teenagers, and seniors. We not only screen films, but also engage in focus groups, Q&As with filmmakers, and a rich industry programme.

The name BOO suggests a horror festival!

Hoffman: It could also suggest films about cows! Actually, both extremities are combined in our marketing and graphic style, which is both dark and cute. BOO's industry section tackles topics in the field of audiovisual education and audience development, addressed in our International Industry Forum by speakers from around Europe, sharing best practices. There's also an international 'teachers to teachers' programme.

Not yet another platform! On your website, I already found an Audiovisual Centre, an Audiovisual Lab,

and an Audiovisual Hub…
Hoffman: They have different focuses (industry, education…), but they're all integrated. For example, our Lab will be a place for testing methodologies and collecting data on young audiences, for which we're planning to maintain an international approach.

Does that correspond to your involvement in FilmED?
Hoffman: In the international FilmED programme, supported by Creative Europe, we meet partner organisations from Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and North Macedonia to analyse existing methodologies for film education, and collect them on an online platform for educators and organisations, to implement them in their daily practice. FilmED supports audiovisual education on two levels. On one hand, there's the traditional teaching about cinema art, technique, history, cinematography, etc. On the other hand, films are used to address and understand socio-political issues and develop critical thinking skills.

Is there a KRUTÓN project that deserves our special attention?
Hoffman: Young and Short! The project addresses three age groups (3+, 12+, 15+); for each group, we preselect ten titles. Focus groups of the appropriate age discuss those films and compile the final programme. According to the peer-to-peer principle, the result of this democratic process is distributed to cinemas and schools.

Distribution is part of KRUTÓN's activities, more precisely, "alternative distribution of European films". Besides many short film programmes, your catalogue also contains features with intriguing titles like SATAN KINGDOM BABYLON.
Hoffman: That's a hybrid documentary by Czech directors Marie & Petr Šprincl, about conspiracies and tendencies supporting white supremacy in the US. It is true that at KRUTÓN, we are not afraid to provoke our audience from time to time, but we believe in the power of open debates. Another interesting title is BUTTERFLY VISION, by Maksym Nakonechnyi, because we insist on screening contemporary Ukrainian films and stories, and maintaining partnerships with several Ukrainian festivals. Our strength in distribution is in our size! The fact that we're small allows us to work locally and search the right audience for every project.

Imagine there were no budgetary restrictions, what would be your ultimate dream project?
Hoffman: For KRUTÓN, that would be a research project with data collection on film literacy among young audiences and teachers. That's our ultimate focus now. For me personally, it would be to curate the programme of films and then discuss it with young audiences around the world. I want to find out how teenagers understand cinema, how they evaluate genres, and how their opinion is influenced by aesthetics, music, or editing.

What does working at KRUTÓN offer you as a person?
Hoffman: With this variety of activities, there is constant growth; it will never be boring. And the KRUTÓN team is super cool! Because we are working in a potentially stressful environment - the film industry - it is a blessing to have open and transparent communication both on a professional and personal level.

–
Gert Hermans

YOUNG PEOPLE MAKING FILMS

Werkstatt der Jungen Filmszene

In June 2025, the young filmmakers' festival in Wiesbaden, Germany, celebrated its 60th edition, presenting over 70 films during four days. Leo, co-organiser and volunteer of the Werkstatt der Jungen Filmszene, grants access to his festival diary.

Friday, June 6: Sun is shining, birds are chirping – nestled in the middle of the forest lies the Wilhelm-Kempf-House, the festival centre for the Werkstatt der Jungen Filmszene. By the time the first filmmakers arrived, the auditorium had been converted into a professional cinema. For 150 young filmmakers, the festival finally began.

Opening: With 11 packed film programmes - 76 films in total! - the least you could expect was a very diverse programme. From documentaries about rural life in China to vampire comedies about love in everyday life, a wide range of films made by school classes, media projects, and film students from all over Germany was presented. The combination of cinematic diversity and interesting film discussion is what makes the Werkstatt unique.

The Werkstatt thrives on networking among young filmmakers. There are no prizes or awards; instead, the focus is on atmosphere and joint discussions. Friendships are formed, often leading to future joint film projects. And films are shot on site in the festival venue! It's inspiring how people of all ages quickly find common ground through engaging with the film medium.

Saturday, June 7: Today featured the highlight of the festival: an evening at the Caligari FilmBühne Wiesbaden, an old cinema gem with golden modernist decor. Seven selected films were presented on the big screen, followed inevitably by film discussions. A special anniversary feature: former participants came to screen their films from early editions, and spoke about their careers since then. This mix of contemporary works and 'classics' from the 2000s resulted in a journey through time and made the Caligari

experience even more exclusive.

Sunday, June 8: Take a look at today's workshop programme and be impressed!

- Workshop: 'Introduction to Puppet Animation'
- Lecture: 'What Does Directing Mean?' by director and former participant Veit Helmer
- Hands-on station: Stop motion
- Masterclass on 'Signs and Miracles' by director and former participant Florian Gärtner
- Workshop: 'Filmmaking with AI'

In the Open Screen Night, films outside the official programme were welcomed. A perfect opportunity for participants to showcase their projects and receive direct feedback on site… until the early morning hours.

Monday, June 9: With the festival closing curtains at noon, young filmmakers were still energetic and continued discussing, writing scripts and shooting additional scenes right up until the last minute.

Info: The Werkstatt der Jungen Filmszene is held over Pentecost in Wiesbaden, presenting works by young filmmakers from German-speaking countries. The Werkstatt der Jungen Filmszene is organised by Bundesverband Jugend und Film.

The Youngsters Making Film column is curated by YCN (Youth Cinema Network), a worldwide network of youth film festivals, organisations and film & media educators. YCN focusses on films made by young people, using their right to express themselves through moving images. For more info about Youth Cinema Network, check www.youthcinemanetwork.org

Celebrating Aardman's 50th Anniversary

"The 'ee' as in cheese"

I always thought that Aardman's mastery was in the creativity, the humour, and the stories. Since Will Becher's masterclass at the Zlin Film Festival, I got to understand that even with the best ideas in the world, you need perfectionism, endless patience, and an unyielding will to make each scene transcend itself in terms of execution, to achieve the level that Aardman is known for. Becher spoke about 50 years of Aardman animation and about his role in their marvellous body of work.

Will Becher: I wasn't even born 50 years ago when two schoolboys, Peter Lord and David Sproxton, started a company and named it after the first character that they designed and got paid for by the BBC. Aardman's first paycheck was £25.

Nick Park was a student at the film school; it took him six years to complete a two-year course in animation, but he had an idea for a film about two characters, Wallace & Gromit, who would later become icons of European animation. Peter and David invited him to Bristol - *"You can help us here, and we'll help you finish your film."* One of the projects they worked on was a music video for Peter Gabriel's 'Sledgehammer'. Because Nick was the new boy, he had to animate the parts with dancing dead chickens. Wallace & Gromit was his passion project. Nick borrowed what he saw in 2D and transmitted it into stop-motion, in a very cartoony way.

As a young boy who loved making models, I used to send my films to Aardman, along with letters asking for advice. Ten years later, I found myself as an animator on the set of WALLACE & GROMIT: THE CURSE OF THE WERE-RABBIT, like in a dream. Aardman was an established company, but it had energy and flair. The studio was on the site of a business park. When all the businesspeople came out in their suits at lunchtime, the Aardman crew fell out in their Hawaiian shirts, looking like students.

Sheep in Space

I worked on SHAUN THE SHEEP, first as an animator, then as a director of the TV series, and then as co-director of SHAUN THE SHEEP: FARMAGEDDON. The film premiered at the International Space Station for a group of astronauts, and then Shaun went into space. An enormous plane got decorated with a Shaun the Sheep design - these things you can't imagine when creating a character. A series of events led to Shaun becoming the world-famous sheep he is, one of which was one of the Spice Girls wearing a Shaun the Sheep backpack.

The premise is to present Shaun and the rest of the flock as slightly bored children, living in a quiet countryside place. The farmer is like a parent who never truly sees what mischief is going on behind his back.

Cheese x 1000

Being a supervising animator for WALLACE & GROMIT: VENGEANCE MOST FOWL, it was my job to create a char-

acter bible. The last Wallace & Gromit feature was made 20 years ago, in 2005. Wallace's face evolved with every new project. The more his facial proportions grew over the years, the bigger he had to act to achieve the same effect. By downsizing him again, we could be more expressive.

The mouth set is one of Wallace's defining elements. We have a set of approximately 15 mouth shapes, made of clay, so animators can easily change them in every frame. We have a complete range, from the neutral, "relaxed" mouth position to the "ee" as in cheese at the other end of the spectrum. For many years, Peter Sallis was the voice of Wallace, an actor with a lovely Lancashire accent. Since Peter passed away in 2017, we've been working with Ben Whitehead. We record the sound first, hundreds of takes, and then animate to it. We go through every single take, and then break the recording down into phonetic sounds frame by frame. Ben must have said the word 'cheese' over a 1000 times.

Dogs and brows

Wallace is obviously a big part of the duo, but Gromit is the key. Wallace is the talker, Gromit is the thinker. I like dogs a lot, although I never had one until recently. As a stop-motion animator, you're like an actor, trying to understand your character, and I've animated Gromit for 20 years. One scene in VENGEANCE MOST FOWL showed that special bond between dog and man, when Wallace would affectionately rub Gromit's head. Having a dog myself now, for the first time in 20 years, I was animating with some understanding of what I was doing.

Bitzer, the sheepdog in SHAUN THE SHEEP, is one of my favourite characters. We have a vast team of animators, and some of them are good at animating action scenes, or subtle drama, but for me, comedy and comical timing are my safe space! That's why I find such joy in animating Bitzer.

We have separate puppets for different poses; Gromit walking on two legs is not the same puppet as when walking on four. The most important part of Gromit is the face, and the most important part of the face is the brow. This is where he gets all his expression from. We have a special bible for that brow.

Building worlds

We use live-action videos as a shorthand for the animator to capture the performances accurately; they serve as a reference for acting notes. Digital effects have become more important. When working on CHICKEN RUN, we used huge painted theatre backdrops. Nowadays, working with blue screen is much more effective.

We're building realistic miniature worlds with a huge amount of detail. One thing that makes the Aardman world feel so real is the handcrafted textures, their grime and grit. About 25 people are working in the art department, making all these beautiful props. Every single brick is painted by hand. There's a glassblower in Bristol, making hundreds of objects for us. They're not key props - they're just somewhere in the background. Imagine working in an environment where every detail is so important. That's very rewarding.

We try to reuse props and furniture. Wallace's house is always the same house, probably repainted and slightly adjusted. But the more unique sets, like the aqueduct, there's nothing we can do with them, except recycle a few bits and pieces. Some parts might be featured in exhibitions, touring the world. And we have a storage site where props are kept in boxes, an archive of 50 years of Aardman props, but there's so much that we can't keep, unfortunately.

Feathers McGraw

WALLACE & GROMIT: VENGEANCE MOST FOWL started with an idea that Nick had when working on THE WERE–

RABBIT, 20 years ago. The character of a robotic gnome didn't exactly fit into that film, but he kept it alive, doodling and drawing in his sketchbooks. Meanwhile, people kept asking Nick what happened to Feathers McGraw, the penguin from THE WRONG TROUSERS. This was the perfect moment to bring the iconic villain back.

In THE WRONG TROUSERS, we were introduced to Feathers' overwhelming screen personality, but he wasn't in that film very much, so there was very little to work with. We went through the film looking for clues, and it turned out that every single shot of Feathers was different; he changed shape and height all the time. So it was quite hard to pin down what we needed, after he had been kept imprisoned for 30 years in a zoo. There's very little expression you can do with Feathers. He just has two pins for eyes; glass beads, basically. He has no brow, so all the expression comes from the movements, the speed, the tilt of his head, or sometimes from the camera movement.

The decision on how to have the puppets blinking is normally down to the animators, but not with Feathers McGraw. There were only a handful of animators who could work with Feathers, and we told them every day not to blink. The times that he blinks in the film are very precisely calculated, because it is a key signifier of his line of thought.

The unsung hero

There's always a bit of a rush on our films. There's never enough time or crew to make them the way we want to. There's a relatively small pool of animators that we can work with; we have a limited amount of space and a limited amount of puppets. This means, if we're starting to fall behind, we have to work smarter. We can't just grow bigger.

A feature film is a monstrously complex thing. We have a production manager coordinating 200 creatives. Every single animator has to be shooting - we can't afford to have people sitting around waiting. Every aspect of every shot across the film is pinned down to an old-school production board: 40 units, 45 locations... And every single day, something's moving around. It's like a jigsaw puzzle. Every morning, the production team and crew members sit together, going through the day, shot by shot... The production manager is the unsung hero of every Aardman film. In VENGEANCE MOST FOWL, we had 1,400 shots, 130 puppets, 45 shooting units, 35 animators, 20 miniature locations, and two directors. It's a massive success when all these elements and people come together in a well-coordinated way.

The animation supervisor works closely with the director. With VENGEANCE MOST FOWL, my focus was purely on the animation team. It was like a dream job, walking every day with Nick around the studio while he would brief the animators, and then I had to make sure that everyone followed the instructions. I worked on the bible and nurtured the junior animators. Working as a stop-motion animator, no one is looking over your shoulder all the time. You learn by doing it.

Close-up thinking shot

I'm also working at the Aardman Academy. In this training facility, we currently have 11 filmmakers developing their own projects. Some of my experience can help these young people, who have come from all over the world.

What is the most difficult? The perfect frown on a dog's face? Or a spectacular train chase? There are no easy shots; every single shot is complex and unpredictable. Often, seemingly simple shots rely on a particular piece of performance from a character, which is hard to capture through stop-motion. I remember one shot we had to re-record seven times, where Gromit tilted his head a little. That simple close-up thinking shot was a nightmare, as nobody could get the tone of the performance right. At the other end of the scale are the big setups that take a lot of set, a lot of lights, a lot of cameras, and a team to build up the whole thing. Aardman films are known for their high-action sequences. For the showdown on the aqueduct in VENGEANCE MOST FOWL, we had to take into account the scale of a boat, which we had to engineer on a scaffolding so that it could slide in and make pivotal movements in different directions. Can you imagine a piece of scaffolding, casting shadows on the sets and characters, who are meanwhile moving around on separate rigs? It's those challenges that the crew lives for: how are we going to do something that we've never done before?

In Zlin

I'm watching the works of a new generation of animators as a jury member in the Zlin Festival, and I find it fascinating. Sitting in the cinema with a young audience, it's refreshing to see how many films are combining new and old ideas, new and old techniques, in a celebration of the craft.

It's a privilege to take Wallace & Gromit to festivals around the world. They are well-liked personalities at Aardman, and I'm sending messages to the company to say how people at the Zlin festival love them. It's fantastic to see that Wallace & Gromit can still do it.

–
Gert Hermans

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