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

*interviews*

**Spilt Milk**

**I Accidentally Wrote a Book**

**Les Films du Préau**

**Spotlight on Estonia**

**IDFA Youth Doc Training**

# Journal

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*Photo: Spilt Milk*

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# TRANSISTION

The ECFA member organisations are powered by professionals whose work in their field is often underestimated by the broader industry. Most of us are not rewarded with money and fame, but rather with the recognition from our audiences and the satisfaction derived from the impact of our activities. There is much to be gained through our work, which has proven quite resilient despite the continuous shifts in the audiovisual industry, film production, and distribution.

If there is one person who embodies this truth, it is ECFA's outgoing Secretary General, Felix Vanginderhuysen. Having been active in this business for 45 years, Felix is living proof that investing time and effort in addressing the needs of children and youth audiences within the audiovisual industry is a well-justified endeavor. Such a long tenure is rare, and given his pivotal role in the creation, development, and functioning of ECFA, it is essential to emphasise that we wouldn't be here without him.

As ECFA transitions into a post-Felix era, the board members are fully aware of the responsibilities that accompany this process, which officially began a few weeks ago and will continue in the coming months. Our main responsibility is to represent our members in the best possible way.

As 2025 draws to a close and ECFA members prepare for a short break over the holidays, we present this latest Journal edition. We are simultaneously preparing the ECFA Awards process, as a yearly tradition, before we reconvene in person for our Annual General Meeting in Berlin in February. The results of our recent survey on ECFA's communication have been received, and we are working diligently to adjust our operations in the most effective way possible.

It is clear that we will be hitting the ground running in the new year. This period of transition is less about the replacement of one person, and more about strengthening the collective leadership and voice of ECFA. We are excited about the year ahead and the possibility to collaborate with you on protecting and promoting quality content for children and youth. May your holidays be relaxing, and we eagerly anticipate our reunion in Berlin this February.

–
Pantelis Panteloglou
ECFA President

**SAVE THE DATE!**

**ECFA will have its Annual General Meeting on Saturday, 14 February in Berlin. We're hoping to meet all members at 15:30 at the Vertretung des Freistaates Sachsen beim Bund, Brüderstraße 11/12.**

# Brian Durnin about SPILT MILK

## "Smoking is a quintessential part of depicting Dublin"

What makes a film typically Irish? Lots of chatter? Check! Coffee, beer, and cigarettes? Check! Grey streets of an industrial town in decline? Check! And a friendly director and producer visiting Zlin, who explain the background to their story in great detail? Double check!

Bobby dreams of becoming a detective, like his TV hero Kojak. When his big brother Oisin goes missing, Bobby and his friend Nell sink their teeth into the case, which sends them descending into a dark, criminal underworld. Their quest refers to incidents from the early 1980s, when parents raised their voices against local drug dealers who were destroying their families. Producer Laura McNicholas sums up the film's arena: *"A child from a working-class background, discovering himself against a backdrop of socio-economic agitation. Ultimately, SPILT MILK is about a kid understanding the love he has for his family, acknowledging that the world is a bit darker than he expected."*

**Bobby is introduced through a brilliant sentence: *'You always have a plan, and you always get in trouble.'***
Director Brian Durnin: Sounds exactly like my life. Bobby's got a huge imagination and a big heart; he sees the good in things, but he's missing how much his best friend needs him to be there for her. Throughout the story, he understands that, regardless of all his plans, he needs to start becoming aware of the people who are being good to him.

**What's the importance of brothers? Are you the younger brother?**
Durnin: I'm the older one and felt a certain responsibility to guide my siblings in life, whether or not they sensed that. As an older brother, you're seeing the younger ones making their mistakes. My sister was wild; she got in more trouble than I did. In SPILT MILK, Bobby looks up to his brother Oisin, but he doesn't want to be like him. He's very much his own person.

**He doesn't want to be Oisin. He wants to be Kojak!**
Durnin: 'Kojak' was big in the 70s, and it was all the time rerun in the 80s; 'Kojak' was always on TV. Even into the 90s, in Ireland, we had our national broadcaster, and maybe one or two English channels. Daytime TV featured many detective shows: 'Murder, She Wrote', 'Ironside', 'Kojak'... Bobby genuinely admires that tough guy, who takes no crap. If there was going to be Kojak in the film, I wanted a scene that had a purpose, a thematic foreshadowing. I watched every episode of Kojak - there are over 100 episodes - and ended up finding a clip with a cool quote and a little wink.

**I suppose this cost you some money?**
McNicholas: The more people were in the clip, the more we had to pay. So we picked a scene with just Kojak in it. But the football archive scenes were even harder to get. The price charged by the English FA for archive material

was astronomical, and eighties football was not archived in Ireland. Luckily, our Scottish co-producers could acquire some material. Our editor, Colin Monie, is an amazing mega-brain. He always knew exactly where we were in the timeline of the movie and was obsessed with details. He only wanted to use games that were really played during that short period. I was like: 'Who cares?' But for him, it became massively important.

**Another substantial part of your budget must have gone to cigarettes!**
Durnin: In the 80s in Ireland, literally everybody smoked. The adult actors couldn't smoke in the room with the kids, even though the cigarettes were fake. It was a lot of work, figuring out who could smoke and when. But that's a quintessential part of depicting Dublin in 1984.

**Which you have done very meticulously!**
Durnin: A lot of the look is in the colour tones. I had some key references, like British photographer Tish Murtha's social realist reportages about Northern England, and my own family photo albums. Everyone was wearing different shades of brown in those days; the world looked almost sepia. Several people told me: You transported me back to my own family in the 80s.

**For that, you needed to find the right location.**
McNicholas: Dolphin House is Dublin's largest remaining public housing flat complex, built in 1957. Many people have moved out, and many properties are empty. We took over a few units. In terms of production design, the O'Brien family flat was pretty much designed like a time capsule, straight to the '80s.
Durnin: Those social protests actually did take place there, in Dolphin House.

**Were those protest scenes based on historical facts?**
Durnin: The same thing happened in several flat blocks. All of those communities were feeling abandoned; they weren't getting enough support from the police or the state. People were dying there; they needed to make a statement.

**You must have incorporated many childhood memories, not only in the narrative, but into the details. I suppose you once built towers out of beer mats.**
Durnin: That's based on me, spending


time in pubs as a kid; my father was an alcoholic until he quit drinking. Until the age of 12, I was a pub kid, playing under the tables as my dad's social life was centred around pubs and bookies, around drinking and horse racing. These things were acceptable back then. People used to drive to places, drink, and then drive home, in a car full of smoke, with six kids with no seatbelts on. It was such a different world.

**I bet you were doing a lot of jumping jacks in gym class.**
Durnin: We had a gym teacher called Ollie. He was full of energy: *'Here we go, high knees! High knees!'* A muscular man in his fifties, like Popeye. He could balance one of those Swedish benches on his chin and walk around the gymnasium. My school had this big, old gym hall where we climbed the ropes. That's straight out of my life. I don't think PE is like that anymore.

**Have you enjoyed yourself with clothes and props?**
Durnin: Oh, yes! John is wearing one jumper that belonged to my wife's father, and the other is my father's. I was just bringing in whatever I could find. There's a radio from my granny,

the little side table in the apartment was the one that my father had beside him, with an ashtray on it; he would sit there and smoke 60 cigarettes per day in a chair that was molded around his body, watching horse racing and Kojak.

**Is the rhythm of the dialogues something you had to work on, or was it all there?**
McNicholas: That's all natural; it's banter. There's a kind of playfulness in how Dubliners talk to each other, and there's definitely a musical element to our accent. There's some bad language in the film, but that's how people communicate, particularly in the inner city. It's conversational rather than aggressive.
Durnin: We come from a generally dark, rainy country, so we're reliant on our personalities to get the energy into life.

**SPILT MILK seems to be an ode to motherhood. Behind Bobby's mother's weary facade, you can still see a twinkle of light.**
Durnin: Dani (Danielle Galligan) is incredible. During COVID, we invited her for an online table read, and she was just brilliant! We were wondering if maybe she was too young, but when somebody nails a part that much, it'd be crazy not to give her the role. She was always intended to be a young mother, but we styled her a little older. Nobody questioned Laurence O'Fuarain as Bobby's father, although they are both around the same age.

**They look totally credible together.**
McNicholas: It was important that they felt like a couple. They look a bit worn out because they don't take good care of themselves, but potentially, they're a handsome mum and dad.
Durnin: I showed Laurence the reference photos of my father, and he showed me his, and they looked exactly the same, with the same moustache. Laurence usually looks rather buff, like a hunky guy. But he said, All I'm going to do is go to the pub every night and drink pints with my father - which he did. And no gym! I told them both beforehand: I'm not going to do make-up on you. This should authentically feel like the eighties, when people were worn out because they had no money to look after themselves. They hardly knew where the next meal was coming from. They were relying on their wits to keep them going.

**Asking you about the title comes from a silly typo that I made, writing in my notes about a film called SPLIT MILK.**
McNicholas: I can't wait for our Croatian premiere, which we will have in… Split!
Durnin: We didn't want something too literal; it's more like a state of mind. Spilt Milk indicates something like, ok, that's happened, now let's move on. Bobby is not going back to being a little kid. He puts the hat down; he's still playing games, but something has matured inside him. He loses some of his innocence, but not his imagination. He just has new information; he knows the world isn't perfect.
McNicholas: Brian and I, being both parents of young boys, talked a lot about resilience. You want your kids to dream, but you equally want them to have resilience because they're going to need it. That's kind of sad, but it's also a good part of growing up, being able to deal with things when they don't go your way. Ultimately, this is a film about parents wanting their kids to have the freedom to dream, and unfortunately, lots of kids don't get that freedom.

**SPILT MILK seems like a big labour of love.**
Durnin: My connection to the story was obviously personal, based on my kind of upbringing. But I also felt privileged to tell a story about our city, about where we come from.
McNicholas: As Dubliners, we love Dublin. The film captures the essence of what it is to be a Dubliner, even in difficult times. All characteristics that we would associate with Dublin, the sense of humour, the banter, the resilience, I don't think any of that has changed.

–
Gert Hermans
*Brian Durnin & Laura McNicholas were guests of the Zlin Film Festival*

# Nora Lakos about I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A BOOK

## "A spider that could do the job"

Nina's home is a cosy place. Every evening, the whole family snuggles up to watch an old detective series on television; that is to say, her little brother and dad. Because mummy is no longer there; she died a long time ago, so long ago that Nina can't remember her. She hardly notices that she misses her mum. Until dad meets the charming Detti. Suddenly, Nina panics: who was her mum really? And why can't she remember what she looked like? Nina loves reading and wants to write a book herself. So she starts digging into her memory. Over her shoulder, we read the story of a young girl growing up into a teenager.

With I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A BOOK, Hungarian director Nora Lakos has created one of the most surprising and original youth films of the year. This super collector of ECFA Awards already caught the Journal's attention throughout the production and release process. Now the director has her say about the end result.

**How many times did you regret having chosen this title?**
Nora Lakos: I didn't. We are receiving very positive feedback on the title. It's not one you would forget easily.

**It doesn't happen often that people think that the credits are the best part of the movie. However, in your film, you unleash all your cinematic powers to present the names in a playful, creative way.**
Lakos: Yes, we indeed have cool credits. We wanted to introduce the audience to the visual world of the film from the beginning. We have 195 scenes, which is double the average number in a film. Especially the first 20 minutes are extremely fast and rich, both in dialogues and in visuals, creating a flow and establishing our full cinematographic spectrum.

**You're having your name on a skateboard!**
Lakos: Almost the entire opening scene was filmed in one shot, in which live action, animation and VFX were combined. The choreography was complex, incorporating a boat, a bicycle, and Nina's aunt jumping in and out of the frame, while Nina speaks directly into the camera. We often rehearsed that sequence, testing the perfect timing. The printing of the names on various objects was mostly done in post-production, but we wanted it to have an analogue feel. The film contains many technically demanding scenes, for example, the one in which Nina turns into an animated figure made out of words and then falls apart.

**The hats on the wall, the merchandise in the stationery shop... every single frame in the film looks like a poster, meticulously designed.**
Lakos: The production designer, the cinematographer, the costume designer, and I have known each other for a long time; we know each other's tastes and preferences. Together, we figured out the costumes, the background colours, the animations, etc. All this, we repeated 195 times, creating a kind of matrix to guarantee a unified look, evolving with the main character's emotional arc.

**How would you define that unified look?**
Lakos: Bauhaus! The family home is an example of Bauhaus architecture,

which fits the story. The way we tell it is down-to-earth, dealing with serious topics, but at the same time elevated and playful. The rules of Bauhaus are quite similar: strict, in terms of using only primary colors and specific shapes, which at the same time makes room for playfulness. Our challenge was translating that architectural style into the entire production and animation design.

**Have you ever dared to break that style?**
Lakos: The house of Lidia, her mentor, is a completely different world, with earthy colours and designs. Lidia provides a calm haven in a turbulent world. What the production design did to that place is amazing. The area around it was empty, a flat car park with just one tree, but in the film, the garden is overgrown with blooming bushes, and the house is decorated with care. We've been shooting there for the first six days, and the entire crew loved that set. It was painful to leave it behind, knowing that all that beauty was going to be destroyed.

**In many children's films, fathers are the odd characters. What a relief to meet this single father who creates a harmonious home for his children. And he's well dressed!**

Lakos: Detti gives him a 10 out of 10 score. He's a widower; he has to be the mother and father at the same time, and he does whatever he can to provide his children with a stable home. I've travelled around the world with this film and did many Q&As, but the only country where the audience sometimes asked me if the depiction of the father wasn't too idealistic was in Hungary. When a caring, sensitive father is something you have problems believing in, this says something about your society.

**He is an animation director. Through animation, he not only expresses his feelings, but the family also finds a way to connect to their grief.**

Lakos: This short animation gave us another format to discuss grief, one that fit our young audience. This story element was inspired by my daughter. The first time we were flying in an airplane, she looked out of the window and asked: Where are all the dead people? She connected the sky with heaven. That's why the animation starts with that question.

**What more can you tell about those animated parts?**
Lakos: The film is a Hungarian-Dutch co-production. Two Dutch girls, Quita Felix and Frederieke Mooij, took on the animation job together. One of them was very skilled in visual design, the other had a strong emotional sensitivity; a perfect match. The cut-out animation connects our story about writing with the use of paper.

**The relationship between Nina and Detti is a bumpy ride.**
Lakos: Only when meeting Detti, Nina realises that she never overcame her grief. She was too young to mourn. She doesn't even know how it feels to have a mother, because she can't remember ever having had one. The crisis with Detti unfolds when somebody mistakes them for a mother and daughter. Suddenly, it all feels too fast, too close, too early.

**The spark between them ignites immediately when they meet on the boat. What was it like filming on a ship?**
Lakos: Challenging. We filmed on the huge Balaton Lake; once we left the shore, there was no way back… until, after 20 minutes, we discovered we had forgotten the main prop, the notebook, on the shore. Moreover, we couldn't stop the boat or keep it steady; it kept moving, so the light kept changing, and we had to figure out ways to block out the sun.

**The family loves watching 'Murder, She Wrote' together.**
Lakos: I'm happy that we could license

this family-friendly crime series, even if that wasn't easy, as it fits the story greatly. The words 'She Wrote' in the title correspond nicely with the element of writing in our story; in the series' opening credits, you see Angela Lansbury typing the script on a typewriter.

**Your story is based on a book by Dutch author Annet Huizing.**
Lakos: I fell in love with this beautiful novel at first read, but writing the script was challenging. The book is so compact that I ended up with a 40-page-long script, so I needed to write another 50 pages for a feature film, plotting a journey for the main character. I created a more complex mother character for Nina to explore, through the song at the sewing club, the visit to mum's former school, the scene with the cake…

**I have the feeling that there is more to tell about this cake…**
Lakos: I remember my grandmother baking that cake when I was a child. Later, I asked my mother to do it, but it was never as good as my grandma's. For the film, I asked my mum again, and it was the best and most beautiful version she had ever made. After shooting the scene, the crew started eating, and it was gone in five minutes.

**You took your script to the Cinekid Script LAB.**
Lakos: That helped me a lot. My coach was Mieke De Jong, who was a great fit. The script was written during COVID times; we mostly met online. Our pitch at the Cinekid co-production market won the Eurimages Co-Production Award, endowed with €20,000. That helped us a lot in convincing the Hungarian National Film Fund about pre-production funding.

**As soon as you finished the film, you embarked on a crazy festival tour, winning one award after another. What lends your film the universal appeal that resonates with audiences worldwide?**
Lakos: That tour started at JUST Film (Tallinn), where we won the Best Film Award, and it hasn't finished yet. We already won 23 awards, as we speak. We won two ECFA Awards in one week! This film speaks to a generation of youngsters, aiming for perfection; they're expected at all times to tell how everything is okay. While the first step in healing your soul, like Nina has to do, is to admit that not everything is perfect. Only when admitting your problem can you work on overcoming it. That message is universally relatable.

**In all those Q&As you have done, was there a surprising question that often returned?**
Lakos: In one scene, a spider descends into its web and lands in Lidia's teacup. Children want to know about that spider. Was it real? Initially, we wanted to use VFX, but that was way too expensive. Our animal wranglers promised us a spider that could do the job. In 20 minutes, we got the shot, with 20 people standing around, trying to direct the spider to the perfect spot. The spider got out unharmed; it looked okay when it left the set.

**Was it invited to the premiere?**
Lakos: With its entire family!

**Your triumph continued in Hungary, where the film became a box office hit.**
Lakos: We released I ACCIDENTALLY WROTE A BOOK in January; after four weeks, we had more than 100,000 admissions. Meanwhile, we're over 160,000, which is amazing for a domestic family film with a weird title and a child protagonist. In May, it was released on the Hungarian Netflix, where it was in the top five for several weeks.

–
Gert Hermans
*Nora Lakos was interviewed on behalf of JEF.*

# Distributor Emmanuelle Chevalier about Les Films du Préau

## "Distribution is no exact science"

If children's film is a virus, Les Films du Préau has been a superspreader for 25 years! As a French distributor specialising in (short) films for children, Emmanuelle Chevalier is searching for titles that fit Les Films du Préau's vision: films from all over the world, in all possible formats, always with a high quality standard, always tailored to children, and with a strong preference for animation. On the occasion of their 25th anniversary, we ask Emmanuelle about Les Films du Préau's impact on the French market. But I forgot to ask the most important question... What is that bloody peacock (Préau) doing in their company name?

Emmanuelle Chevalier: I founded Les Films du Préau 25 years ago, in 2000, together with my associate at the time, Marie-Agnès Bourillon. From the beginning, we had a clear goal: to offer the kids audience the same diversity we saw in children's literature. There was plenty of choice on the book market, with books for specific age groups, often dealing with strong subjects. We didn't have that in cinema, not in France, and probably not much elsewhere. But at the festivals, we were introduced to an enormous wealth of animated shorts, even for the youngest children. We surveyed young audiences, parents, and cinema owners and came up with the idea of creating short film programmes. Those compilations lasted less than an hour and were thus adapted to children's attention spans. That was a revolutionary idea. We experimented with grouping short films thematically or by country of origin.

**This recipe for compilations was copied by others, who all had to learn that simply putting good films together doesn't work. You need a certain expertise to know what fits together in a programme.**

Chevalier: Those films need to respond to one another; there needs to be a connection, a unity, regardless of different techniques or directors. That's the most complicated part of a programmer's job, but also the part that I'm most attached to.

*THE BOY AND THE WORLD*

**A true eye-opener was LES CONTES DE LA MERE POULE (Tales of Mother Hen). How was it possible that a compilation of Iranian shorts could become so successful?**

Chevalier: Very successful, indeed. People were surprised by these Iranian shorts, made with wool or fabric... Those screenings were an experience in culture and craftsmanship; we toured extensively in cinemas, often decorated with Iranian carpets and serving Iranian snacks. The market for that programme was surprisingly large; 20 years later, the film is still being shown in schools. Many of our compilations have a long lifespan; they are shown to new generations and thus become classics. As a distributor, we don't have the budget to handle the release of a French feature. Actually, we have never distributed a single French feature title. That is why we are searching for films from Iran, the Czech Republic, or Scandinavia to serve our audience.

**What is the position of live-action in Les Films du Préau's catalogue?**

Chevalier: We do one live-action title per year, often for older children. We look for projects we are passionate about, often with a more serious subject. The release is often difficult, but it is important to give these kinds of films a reason to exist. We choose

*TALES OF MOTHER HEN*

those films from the heart; titles that strike a chord with us. We can get involved in an early phase with animation, but live-action movies we mainly find at the festivals. One exception was the Dutch feature KIDDO by Zara Dwinger that we discovered at the Cinekid market; we immediately liked the project. The same happened to the Belgian documentary FANTASTIQUE by Marjolijn Prins. We got intrigued by the director's plan, which we followed for about 5 years. In March 2026, we will release the film in France.

**Looking back on 25 years, can you recall a beginner's mistake where you completely misjudged a film's chances?**
Chevalier: I wouldn't call it a mistake. We believe in all our films, we love them, and we hope they will work. Some of them didn't… but that's not a mistake. Distribution is no exact science; there is no fixed recipe. You can only try, but you can never know. We try to assess a film's chances, but our 25-year catalogue allows us to take a risk now and then.

**Let's put it positively: What was the biggest surprise of a film that worked, that you might not have expected?**
Chevalier: I already mentioned LES CONTES DE LA MERE POULE, which was a positive surprise. And 20 years ago, we released the South Korean live-action film JIBURO by Lee Jung-hyang. Such releases were rare in French cinemas, but that film continues to be shown regularly (nearly 1 million admissions). The timeless story about a boy and his grandmother transcends generations; the film hasn't aged a bit.

**Meanwhile, you continue your pedagogical work.**
Chevalier: That is something we've been attached to from the very beginning. With every release, we created additional materials, such as study guides, exhibitions, quizzes, games, modelling clay, or discussion guides for educators, in which substantive themes are elaborated. We do all this to encourage children to discuss films after the screening and gain a better understanding.

**What has Les Films du Préau, as a distributor, contributed to the French production market?**
Chevalier: Our short-film programmes opened a few doors; for the first time, shorts were screened not only at festivals, but also for the general public in the theatres. This formula has since become widely used. This resulted in more competition, but a broader and richer offering that wasn't there 25 years ago. It might have helped filmmakers and producers realise that there is a life for short films outside occasional festival screenings. Shorts for children are not only being picked up in France, but also in Spain, Belgium, Scandinavia... in every other country where there is a specialised distributor for children.

**For your audience, Les Films du Préau screenings are often their first encounter with films being screened in a cinema. That is an impactful experience, something they might remember for the rest of their lives.**
Chevalier: We are well aware of that, and we try to take that responsibility seriously. Our local contacts explain to children how a cinema works; suddenly the room will go dark, the screen will be big... Cinema screenings are a collective experience, in which we share emotions with people we don't know. It's something special, and I am proud that we can contribute to it.

–
Gert Hermans
*Emmanuelle Chevalier was a guest at the CEE Animation Forum*

# OUR NAME IS FOREIGNER

Piece by piece, Selin and her siblings carry their parents' living room out onto the street, first the lamp, then the rug, then the sofa. Once everything is set up, they sit down and stir their tea with loud, deliberate clinks. They all grew up in Switzerland, yet they no longer want to feel ashamed of their Kurdish roots. With this film, Selin Besili turns the camera on herself and her siblings, pointing to the everyday racism migrant families face in a place that is supposed to be their home. What unfolds is a confrontation with powerlessness and the persistent feeling of being an outsider, an attempt to reclaim space, identity, and the right to no longer hide who you are.

OUR NAME IS FOREIGNER was shown at the 24th edition of doxs! dokumentarfilme für Kinder und Jugendliche in Duisburg. The film received the "Große Klappe" Award, chosen by the Youth Jury, who pointed out that they could empathize with the topic and believed that many viewers could develop a personal connection to it. This became clear in the Q&A at the festival: The teenagers were highly engaged, sharing their own experiences of growing up as migrant kids in Germany. The discussions with Selin and the audience made clear that daily racism is still an urgent issue that teenagers care about.

Selin Besili's film blends intimate interview sequences with her three siblings, each of them speaking about their individual experiences, with scenes like a visit to their aunt's small garden plot. Handheld footage shots give the film a close, authentic feeling, and are combined with scenes of the family gathering, or the siblings performing their symbolic act of recreating their living room outdoors.

As a viewer, you're deeply moved by their stories: being bullied at school, slowly gaining confidence when meeting more kids with migrant backgrounds, and learning to speak openly about it all. Even though the topic is serious, the film also has light-hearted and hopeful moments that create a strong sense of closeness.

OUR NAME IS FOREIGNER is Selin Besili's graduation film, created with a team largely made up of friends and collaborators with post-migrant backgrounds, so her family could feel comfortable on camera. She has just started her career as a young filmmaker, and it would be wonderful to see more of her work for young audiences in the future.

–
Sina Musche

OUR NAME IS FOREIGNER (UNSER NAME IST AUSLÄNDER)
Director: Selin Besili
Switzerland, 2024 | 20'52"
Production: Hochschule Luzern - Design Film Kunst
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**The Doxspot column is published with the help of the *doxs!* festival for children & youth documentaries in Duisburg. www.do-xs.de.**

doxs! DOKUMENTARFILME FÜR KINDER UND JUGENDLICHE

# BROCCOLI, PLEASE!

## How Europe's Children's Documentary Film Is Currently Cooking, Mixing, and Fermenting

*An IDFA report*

At the YES-Think Tank 2024 in Bochum, the scent of vegetables hung in the air when Ingvil Giske (TODD & SUPER–STELLA) charmingly provoked the industry: When choosing food for our children, we give them vegetables. But when it comes to films, we suddenly opt for narrative soft-serve ice-cream. One year later, German producer Katharina Bergfeld (CIRCUS BOY) added: Outside the documentary 'aficionados bubble', documentary film is as tempting as broccoli to Bart Simpson. Her conclusion: It has to be served with the highest standards, if we want its healthy, strong, nourishing qualities to shine. That isn't fair, but a reality we have to face.

On the other hand, the timing for a discussion couldn't be better, as Europe is currently experimenting with new recipes for children's documentaries. Recently, D4K-Alliance, of which ECFA is also part, launched a five-day training at IDFA (International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam).

The so-called YOUTH DOC TRAINING feels like a mobile test kitchen. From 17 to 21 November, 15 filmmakers from Germany, Flanders, Poland, and the Netherlands have been working at the Goethe-Institut Amsterdam on one central question:

**What does a documentary film taste like that truly speaks to young people and trusts them with something real?**

The answers are as diverse as the participants themselves. Experienced directors and producers such as Bettina Timm, Sandra Trostel, and Filip Jacobson carry years of craft and curiosity, while emerging voices bring fresh shoots of perspective: Noa Meli, Geertje Hadderingh, Eva Gemmer, Jules Mathôt, Nina de Vriendt, Pola Rader, Sarah Van Dale, and Selle Inti Sellink. From the artistic and educational sphere come Arne Bunk and Tanja Bächlein, who merge fine-arts thinking with participatory filmmaking. Producer Nina Payrhuber and director/producer Agnieszka Kudelska bring their experiences from Belgium and Poland into the group, two countries currently characterised by interesting developments in the production and funding of documentaries for children. Each participant represents a distinct signature: radical formal experiments, political curiosity, humour, sound-driven approaches, essayistic structures, poetic hybrids, and a shared commitment to social urgency.

They were guided by three mentors who themselves push at the boundaries of the genre. Filmmaker Niki Padidar has shaped IDFA's youth programming for three years and kept reminding the group that "you have to find allies" - in audiences, in institutions, and in each other. Martijn Blekendaal sparked a small revolution in the workshop by questioning the role of young protagonists in children's films. He showed examples in which children are the intended thinking partners, but with adult protagonists, like a mysteriously vanished artist in THE MAN WHO LOOKED BEYOND THE HORIZON. Blekendaal unravels

a significant issue like discrimination through playful genre codes: superhero storytelling (THE INVISIBLE ONES), collage forms, or slapstick-like false starts. Scenes often run only 20 seconds to 2 minutes, edited in the rhythm of social media. Inspired by poetry, Martijn says, "You may not understand every line, but you feel the whole." Sanne Rovers brought her own unique vision to the documentary world. Like her fellow mentors, she urged participants to challenge conventions, push creative boundaries, and, above all, trust their instincts as filmmakers.

Their approach connects directly back to Giske and Bergfeld. Both insist that children should not merely be "served" but taken seriously. No hidden sugar substitutes, no overcooked conflicts. Bergfeld put it sharply:

**Children's films are broccoli – but broccoli can sparkle if you arrange it well.**

The D4K YOUTH DOC TRAINING programme radiates exactly this confidence. This theme echoes strongly throughout IDFA's broader industry programme. For instance, in the Industry Talk "Documentaries for Youth: Safe Spaces and Sharp Edges",

filmmakers, educators, and festival organisers were invited to examine the fine balance between protection and empowerment. In an era when young viewers can access nearly anything online, the panel explored how documentaries can be bold and honest without neglecting care. Speakers included doc-expert Anne Rethfeld (DAE), festival director Gudrun Sommer (DOXS RUHR), and educator Alyxandra Westwood (Netherlands Film Festival), with Signe Zeilich-Jensen moderating. The panelists discussed how creative and ethical decisions shape what younger audiences see, how far filmmakers can push the boundaries of discomfort, and which responsibility festivals and educators have in framing these works.

**Concern**

Current Future is a cross-sectional youth programme curated by Niki Padidar. Rather than isolating youth films in a separate section, IDFA programmed them intersectionally throughout the entire festival lineup. Current Future showcases works that challenge conventions, embrace complexity, and create room for curiosity and uncertainty. The aim is to give young audiences access to the full spectrum of contemporary documentary ideas.

It's a wonderfully provocative programme, yet it completely replaced last year's important competition for audiences aged 6 - 12. This decision has been met with concern across the children's film community. Filmmakers who were first discovered by IDFA precisely through that competition are deeply worried about losing an essential platform that helped launch and position their work.

In this context, the D4K Alliance's ambition extends beyond just a training week - they are part of a larger lobbying effort aimed at fostering a documentary shift. D4K is acutely aware that in times of financial cuts, the children's film sector must stay alert and continue to receive structural support to strengthen its impact.

After one week immersed in children's documentary filmmaking, the future feels promising, like a summer market stall: everything smells good, much of it is delightfully crooked, and every variety brings a fresh perspective. The most important insight of the week was distilled by Martijn Blekendaal with a gesture almost too exuberant: "There is a whole world to win." And in the background, the D4K Alliance continues working toward its overarching goal: strengthening co-production, fostering exchange, and building a real infrastructure for children's documentary film across Europe: a network that makes broccoli shine again.

–

Gudrun Sommer

Thanks go to Signe Zeilich-Jensen

*Photos: Annalena Wandt / Institut für Bildung und Kultur*

# Screenwriter Tijs van Marle about TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT

## *"A jumble of trees and children"*

His name runs like a thread through the Dutch children's film boom: Tijs van Marle, screenwriter of a wide variety of stories for young audiences, from the upright SCRAP WOOD WAR to the exuberant SUPERTEACHER, from the colourful MY GIRAFFE to the hyperactive MISTER TWISTER franchise. Van Marle approaches scriptwriting as a craft. Having TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT, his recent collaboration with Meikeminne Clinckspoor (CLOUDBOY, DOOPIE), screened at the Schlingel Festival, was the perfect occasion to ask him about this craftsmanship.

Two sisters, Ollie and Nim, get lost in the woods on their way to a family celebration. Ollie feels responsible for Nim and is sceptical about her sister's encounters with hummingbirds and baby elephants in the forest. In a race against time to arrive in time for their special performance, Ollie learns that not all responsibility is with her; sometimes she can also "cling to Nim's tail". In this joyful melting pot, someone is always dancing on the table or tumbling across the screen, and often both at the same time. The right to be different is celebrated enthusiastically. Tijs van Marle felt closely involved in the final result.

**Let's go back in time, to the moment when two people met in a coffee bar in the Dutch village of Castricum...**
Van Marle: Meikeminne and I both live in Castricum, but had never met. Until one day, I received a message: "Hey, we're youth film colleagues. Let's meet up.' That's how we got together. I had been thinking for a long time about doing something with the popular Dutch children's song 'Little Elephant in the Forest', which children sing every day at nursery. I had been annoyed by the song's message about not letting go of your mummy. *'Because then you'll lose your way and you'll be sorry.'* My child had to sing that every day! A song about being fearful and dependent! I wanted to use this familiar IP, in consultation with Meikeminne, but reverse the message.

*TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT*

**But that still didn't give you a story.**
Van Marle: Meikeminne thought it was a good idea, but she had one condition. She had enjoyed working with actress Romy Heere before, and she wanted her in this film too. I know a few families with a child who has Down syndrome, and I noticed that all family members, young and old, were involved in helping that child. So I extended the theme of the song to a young sister who has to take care of her older sister and take responsibility, whether both sisters want to or not.

**You reversed the roles between the two sisters?**
Van Marle: Nim also wants to take care of someone, from time to time. That's why it's Nim who, with the help of a little elephant, leads her sister Ollie back to the campsite. For once, she gets to be the big sister.

**Nevertheless, Ollie is the voice of reason.**
Van Marle: It couldn't be any other way. We wanted a main character who is a bit of a "little mother", forced by circumstances. Until this adventure

makes her let go of that role. Ollie is sometimes sceptical about the things her sister sees. But when the sound of the trees guides them in the right direction, Ollie gets convinced. She learns to open herself up to magic.

***'Everyone is different, and it doesn't matter at all.'* Was that the premise of the story?**
Van Marle: It was something Meikeminne strongly insisted on. We still joke about it. *'If it were up to you, they would all have worn tracksuits,'* she rightly claims. Throughout the writing process, I concentrated on the structure, the songs, the characters; I had no idea how we were going to embellish the story. It was only when Meikeminne got her teeth into it that diversity and inclusivity came to the surface. We collaborated intensively on the script throughout the entire writing process, and then she poured that message of connectedness over it like a sauce. That's how that colourful cacophony of cheerfulness came about.

**Which has become pretty extreme!**
Van Marle: It's not everyone's cup of tea. We could have made a much more boring film that would have been more widely accepted. This story is not non-committal, not middle of the road. We received criticism; some people think it's too woke. But without holding back, Meikeminne went ahead with it, and I find that very brave!


*SCRAP WOOD WAR*

**You usually do go all out, too, don't you? Films such as MISTER TWISTER, DUMMIE THE MUMMY, and MASTER SPY pull out all the stops.**
Van Marle: That depends on the market I'm working for. My more subdued films, such as SCRAP WOOD WAR and BON VOYAGE, both directed by Margien Rogaar, were originally intended for television. I wrote MISTER TWISTER on commission, for a different market. For that, I drew on other sources of inspiration.

**It's remarkable how easily you can switch registers.**
Van Marle: Based on my craftsmanship, it's my responsibility to write within the context of the budget, the target audience, the distributor's expectations etc. I do like the broad register of big commercial films. MISTER TWISTER 1, 2, and 3 each reached 600,000 visitors with a simple message: take good care of each other! That is a huge number. With TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE ELEPHANT, I am working in a different register.

**MISTER TWISTER did not catch on abroad. Isn't there an international market for this kind of ludicrous elevated reality?**
Van Marle: I researched South Korean television; its method is very similar to mine. They make a distinction between the main characters and the supporting characters: the main characters play purely emotionally, while the supporting characters go completely over the top. The same film can combine an emotional story about love transcending death, with a man screaming and pulling two cats out of a top hat in his underpants – you can't imagine anything crazier! This is exactly what I do! In MISTER TWISTER, the main characters are realistic; the supporting characters are completely nuts. In every scenario, you have a dose of "heart" and a dose of "fun", and if you only allow the heart or only the fun, then you miss out on a large group of children who are looking for something more.

**The forest is a fascinating place; every tree, every branch holds the promise of adventure.**
Van Marle: Nature is valuable and omnipresent: Nim looking at a beetle, a squirrel on a branch, the leaves whispering to the children... You build a film on many themes that find their way towards each other; all these

*MISTER TWISTER*

*TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT*

thematic spearheads are connected, guiding and propelling each other. In this way, nature also found a place in our larger story.

**That forest appears to be one large entity, but did you film in different locations?**
Van Marle: The forest evolves with the children's emotions: the large spruce forest (when Ollie is sad), the hopeful forest... But finding the right forest was a disaster. We had found the ideal location next to a military training ground, but then the terrorism threat level in the Netherlands was raised, so we were chased away. Christian Paulussen, the DoP who also lives in Castricum, frantically searched for another forest. He called the municipal services, and we were allowed to film in the local forest at the last minute, almost in our back garden. I went to the set on my bicycle.

**The weather always seems nice in the film.**
Van Marle: That wasn't exactly the case. During the River Song, you see the storm brewing in the background. The girls were supposed to jump into the river that day for a water ballet, but it was raining, hailing... A floating car tyre was the best we could manage, and even that was quite difficult.

**Pacing was crucial. The intensity builds up to the maximum, and then you gradually wind it down again. Was that pacing already in the script?**
Van Marle: Of course. We start with a bang, with plenty of people and movement. Then there is total silence. Because they lose their way, the girls are alone for a long time. We had a few elements to use while they wandered through the forest for forty minutes. Meikeminne and I already felt it in the script, and even more so in the edit. We had to add some obstacles: a song, a little house, hunger, losing each other, finding each other... We had to keep a close watch on all these small steps so as not to get lost in a jumble of trees and children.

**Fortunately, those scouts come marching through. What are they doing there?**
Van Marle: They are our salvation, bringing life to the party. As a uniform group of strange characters in bright colours, they are also an ode to some great inspirers, such as Wes Anderson. The scouts provide a cheerful musical note.

**And a very handsome moustache.**
Van Marle: A mighty moustache! Imagine if the girls didn't find anyone by the river... Would it be responsible to show two little girls getting into a boat and rowing across? What kind of example would that set for our six-year-old audience? We carefully

*TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT*

*TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT*

discussed such decisions at length. Two girls, alone and lost in the woods, that's pretty intense. How long could we keep up that tension? I have a rule that something should never be scary for more than 30 seconds, but Meikeminne dared to stretch that standard a little.

**Meikeminne is known for having strong opinions.**
Van Marle: And I usually agree with her. You have to stand for something; making clear choices strengthens a project. Perhaps Meikeminne is demanding of producers because she insists on things that they see as nothing more than extra costs. Atmosphere and colour come with a cost. But she remains true to her vision, and that's great! Working for young audiences, we both have a mission. We easily agreed on several basic conditions.

**The film emphasises that being part of a family is very special.**
Van Marle: That's right, although the entire family sets a bad example when the girls switch caregiving duties. They all claim that Nim can't do it. They do it cheerfully and lovingly, but they do it nonetheless. That family, which collectively proclaims how fantastic family is, collectively helps to keep Nim small.

**I feel guilty about this question...**

**You never mention Nim as a child with Down syndrome, not in the film, not in your Q&A and not in this interview either. And by asking about it now, it's being mentioned after all.**
Van Marle: When we started the film, we sought cooperation with organisations to ensure we were doing things right. But after spending two years with Romy, that theme slowly faded into the background. By showing that everyone underestimates her – 'Nim can't do this' – we don't mention it in words, but we do mention it in deeds. To normalise a phenomenon, maybe all you have to do is simply show that it exists.

**What did you like most about this film?**
Van Marle: That I was so closely involved. With some films, it doesn't happen, and I don't mind. I love writing and have no ambition to direct. If I had directed TWINKLE TWINKLE LITTLE ELEPHANT myself, the film would have been much less rich in colour and emotion. But it was nice to follow it so closely this time.

–
Gert Hermans
*Tijs van Marle was a guest of the Schlingel Festival*

# Giovanna Ferrari about ÉIRU

## "We shouldn't waste it on things that do not matter"

ÉIRU, by Giovanna Ferrari, takes you to the mythical landscape of Iron Age Ireland. Powerful clans, locked in conflict, provide an ideal setting for an animated short film in fiery colours, set against a foreboding darkness.

One day, the village well runs dry, and an important task is entrusted to the young girl Éiru. When she descends into the empty well, the villagers place their fate in her hands. But what she discovers at the bottom has far-reaching consequences for the entire community.

Ferrari, making her directorial debut with ÉIRU, builds on her experience as a storyboard artist. Since 2014, she has worked at the Irish Cartoon Saloon Studio as Head of Story. The personal voice she brings to ÉIRU fits seamlessly within the Cartoon Saloon tradition: poetic tales about strong young girls, set against a backdrop of mythology and folklore.

Giovanna Ferrari: Not long before I started to write ÉIRU, Russia had invaded Ukraine. There was this feeling of being in a moment when history's pendulum was on the cusp of swinging back from a world of cooperation to a world of domination and violence. In all of Europe, we started to identify ourselves again through hating 'the other'. First, we define the others, then put them in a box, and hate them. In all this commotion, we completely forgot about mankind's most urgent problem… Climate change doesn't make a distinction between you and the other; we're all in for it, but we're too busy hating the others to fix the real problem. When I started working on ÉIRU, I hoped that the movie would have become obsolete by the time it was done. Unfortunately, that didn't happen; conflicts around the globe have expanded, and climate change is still just an afterthought for many administrations.

**The story takes us back to the heyday of the clans. Do Anglo-Saxon people still identify themselves with that image of the mighty warriors they once were?**

Ferrari: They probably don't identify themselves with the image of a bearded guy, wearing an anvil on his head, but they do strongly identify themselves as Irish. There is a deep sense of belonging to the land, which I find beautiful, but that can easily be exploited to associate discontent, housing crisis, and economic struggle with the idea of "the other", rather than reflecting on our own responsibilities and achievable solutions.

**Everybody watching ÉIRU has the same question: What's at the bottom of the pit?**

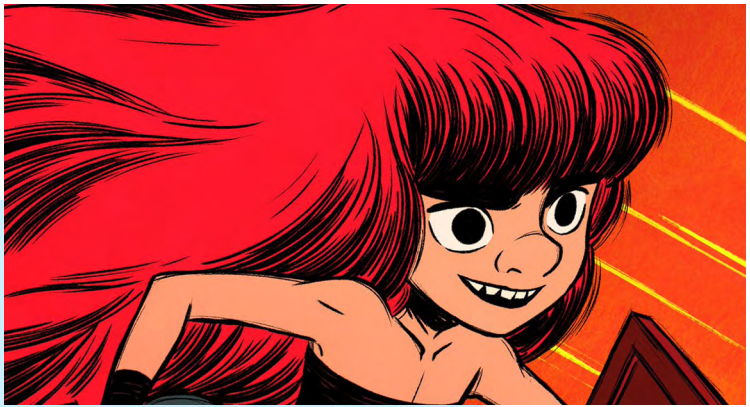
Ferrari: Éiru's descent into the bowels of the earth is not just a narrative journey; it's also imaginative. At the bottom of the pit, she finds a connective tissue between the land and the people, between humanity and nature, between the past and the present. There is the spirit of nature, which is a feminine, nurturing spirit, like the ancient goddess Bridget. Going down the well was very much a way of bringing that goddess to life.

**Who is this Bridget?**

Ferrari: A goddess that has survived for many centuries. She was so hugely important in Irish mythology that Christianity couldn't erase her and

made a saint of her, Saint Brigid of Kildare. Even nowadays, people believe in Bridget more than they believe in anything else. She is the goddess of fire, water, healing, and poetry, but also of forge and war. Bridget is omnipresent, in the water in 'healing wells', in the forces of nature, in the trees where people hang pieces of cloth to beg for healing. There's a lot of that in the movie, although it might not appear clearly to anyone who's not Irish. Bridget is also a goddess of justice towards minorities and the oppressed. That is why she encourages Éiru to listen to the stories, to the voices from the past, coming from victims of violence.

**Because violence in Ireland has hit particularly hard?**
Ferrari: In Ireland, recently, there has been a huge reckoning going on about all the things that have been done to women and children, all the systematic violence and abuse practiced by the church and the state. This reckoning helped Ireland to make a giant leap forward in terms of civil rights. Many progressive laws were implemented because of this. It wasn't a walk in the park; it shattered lives and families, but you can't look forward if you don't first confront your past.



**Cartoon Saloon has a clear visual and thematic identity. How did it feel to stick to that line in your own project, ÉIRU?**
Ferrari: The studio's entity is created by the people who are working there. The artists who worked on WOLFWALKERS and THE BREADWINNER are all moving in a certain direction. And this style came out exactly like I wanted it to be for ÉIRU. The folklore, the ecological concern, putting Bridget into the mix,... Such things are very Cartoon Saloonish. All the way throughout the genesis of the movie, I genuinely wanted to make a Cartoon Saloon film! I can't imagine myself wandering too far away from that style, because that's the direction I tend to go in myself.

**Thematically or visually?**
Ferrari: You can call it a philosophy. I have a passion for simplifying things as much as possible; I don't think there's anything that can be too simple. Like many artists, I like constraints. It's comfortable to know that there are certain limits; without constraints, I can't create. And another thing that I share with the team is the idea that getting the opportunity to make a film is so rare and amazing that we shouldn't waste it on things that do not matter.

**Your main characters belong to the Clan of Fire. Because they were visually more appealing than the Clan of Trees and the Clan of Rock?**
Ferrari: Bridget is the goddess of fire! You can use fire and flames for good or bad purposes; you can craft tools or weapons. You can use it to construct or to destroy. You can warm yourself or kill somebody with it. Moreover, the flames create a stunning contrast with the water.

**Is WOLFWALKERS the film that most closely resembles ÉIRU?**
Ferrari: I was indeed the storyboard artist for that movie, but ÉIRU has a tenderness to it that you will recognise in SONG OF THE SEA. That film was more floaty and magical; some parts in SONG OF THE SEA are really detached from reality, which is what I love best.

–
Gert Hermans

**This text was made available through CEE Animation, an umbrella of activities for promotion and development of the animation industry in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Read the full interview here.**

## Cotton Queen

Feature Film, Germany, France, Palestine, Egypt, Quatar, Saudi-Arabia, Sudan, 2025
Directed by Suzannah Mirghani
Prod.: Strange Bird, Jip Film, Storming Donkey Prod.,...
World Sales: MAD Distribution
Phone: ++2-02-27-35-79-37
distribution@mad-solutions.com
www.mad-distribution.film

## Defiant

Feature Film, Finland, 2025
Directed by Visa Koiso-Kanttila
Prod. & World Sales: Rabbit Films
Phone: ++35-85-05-90-12-31
jonathan.tuovinen@rabbitfilms.com
www.rabbitfilms.com

## Ella & Friends – Operation Otter

Feature Film, Finland, 2025
Directed by Elin Grönblom
Prod. & World Sales: Don Films
Phone: ++35-84-47-00-48-00
info@donfilms.fi
www.donfilms.fi

## Elvis Starling

Feature Film, Slovenia, 2025
Directed by Boris Jurjasevic
Prod.: Fabula, RTV Slovenija
World Sales: Fabula
Phone: ++386-15-13-25-51
fabula@fabula.si
www.fabula.si

## Fantastique

Documentary, Belgium, France, The Netherlands, 2025
Directed by Marjolijn Prins
Prod.: Serendipity Films, VraiVrai Films, The Film Kitchen,...
World Sales: Serendipity Films
Phone: ++32-499-46-36-95
info@serendipityfilms.be
www.serendipityfilms.be

## Forever With You

Feature Film, Italy, 2025
Directed by Fabrizio Cattani
Prod.: Minerva Pictures, Solaria Film, Ipotesi Cinema,...
World Sales: Minerva Pictures
Phone: ++39-06-84-24-24-30
sales@minervapictures.com
www.minervapicturesinternational.com

## Fränk

Feature Film, Estonia, 2025
Directed by Tönis Pill
Prod.: Allfilm, Talifornia, High Voltage
World Sales: Allfilm
Phone: ++37-26-72-90-70
allfilm@allfilm.ee
www.allfilm.ee

## Goat Girl

Feature Film, Romania, Spain, 2025
Directed by Ana Asensio
Prod.: Aquí y Allí Films, Avalon PC, La niña de la cabra,...
World Sales: Outsider Pictures
Phone: ++1-31-09-51-08-78
paul@outsiderpictures.us
www.outsiderpictures.us

## Grow

Feature Film, UK, 2025
Directed by John McPhail
Prod.: Orogen Entertainment, Sky Original
World Sales: SC Films Int'l
Phone: ++44-20-72-87-19-00
info@scfilmsinternational.com
www.scfilmsinternational.com

## King Matt the First

Documentary, Poland, 2025
Directed by Jasmina Wojcik
Prod.: Pinot Films, Fixafilm, Akademia Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie
World Sales: Raina Films
info@rainafilms.com
www.rainafilms.com

## King of the Wanderers

Feature Film, the Netherlands, 2025
Directed by Janne Schmidt
Prod.: The Media Brothers, BarraMedia, Caviar Film,...
World Sales: Gusto Entertainment
www.gusto-ent.com

## Maya 2

Feature Film, France, 2025

Directed by Michel Gondry
Prod.: Partizan Films
World Sales: The Jokers Films
Phone: ++33-1-45-26-63-45
info@thejokersfilms.com
www.thejokersfilms.com

## Meteors

Feature Film, France, 2025
Directed by Hubert Charuel
Prod.: Domino Films, France 2 Cinéma
World Sales: Pyramide Int'l
Phone: ++33-1-42-96-02-20
sales@pyramidefilms.com
www.pyramidefilms.com

## Miss Moxy

Animation, the Netherlands, Belgium, 2025
Directed by Vincent Bal & Wip Vernooij
Prod.: Phanta Animation, BosBros, Eyeworks Film & TV Drama
World Sales: Studio 100 Int'l
Phone: ++49-89-960-85-50
info@studio100film.com
www.studio100film.com/en

## Momo

Feature Film, Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, 2025
Directed by Christian Ditter
Production: Rat Pack Film, Westside Filmprod., Constantin Film Prod.,...
World Sales: Epsilon Film
Phone: ++49-89-67-34-69-80
info@epsilonfilm.de
www.epsilonfilm.de

## The Mortimers

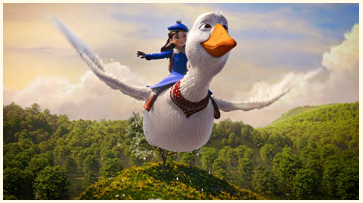
Feature Film, Spain, 2025
Directed by Álvaro Fernandez Armero
Prod.: B-Team Prod., Sintagma Films, Buena Pinta Media,...
World Sales: Filmax Int'l
Phone: ++34-933-36-85-55
filmaxint@filmax.com
www.filmaxinternationalsales.com

## Ninja Motherf*cking Destruction

Feature Film, Germany, 2025
Directed by Lotta Schwerk
Prod.: Lotta Schwerk Prod.
World Sales: Media Luna
Phone: ++49-221-51-09-18-93
info@medialuna.biz
www.medialuna.biz

## North

Animation, Germany, Luxembourg, 2025
Directed by Bente Lohne
Prod.: PictoryLand, Anima Vitae
World Sales: Studio 100 Int'l
Phone: ++49-89-960-85-50
info@studio100film.com
www.studio100film.com/en



## Rufus – The Sea Serpent Who Could Not Swim

Animation, Norway, Belgium, 2025
Directed by Endre Skandfer
Prod.: Maipo Film
World Sales: Sola Media
Phone: ++49-711-96-89-44-40
post@sola-media.com
www.sola-media.com

## A Summer in Summerby

Feature Film, Germany, 2025
Directed by Mara Eibl-Eibesfeldt
Prod. & world Sales: Wüste Film
Phone: ++49-40-4-31-70-60
wueste@wuestefilm.de
www.wuestefilm.de

## Wild Foxes

Feature Film, Belgium, France, 2025
Directed by Valéry Carnoy
Prod.: Hélicotronc, Les Films du Poisson
World Sales: The Party Film Sales
Phone: ++33-1-40-22-92-15
www.thepartysales.com

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

# SPOTLIGHT ON ESTONIA

Just Film celebrates its 25th anniversary. More than any other Estonian partner, it is the festival that, under the wing of its big brother PÖFF, puts Estonia on the map as a children's film nation. ECFA Journal celebrates its anniversary with a modest Spotlight on Estonia.

Mikk Granström, Director of Just Film, uses this milestone to take stock of the situation: "Our programme has grown in size, a special section for film professionals has emerged, film education is actively promoted daily, and young people have the chance to present their own films at Just Film. Altogether, this creates a kind of magical whole: not only are movies being watched, but audiences grow and evolve together with them. There is now an entire generation of visitors who once came to Just Film as children and now return with children of their own." Under the benevolent eye of Lotte from Gadgetville, the national symbol of children's culture, who is being honoured with a retrospective at this year's festival.

With its industry section, the festival also aims to serve as a stimulating factor for the creative side of the industry. With the support of the Estonian Film Institute, which has fostered an environment that encourages (co-)production. Strangely enough, they do so as one of the few European nations without a film law. Edith Sepp, Head of the Estonian Film Institute: "We try to keep it simple, so we prefer 'regulations'. Because we believe in talking to each other. This allows us to react fast to market changes. We are flexible, we are oriented towards new technologies, we are innovative, and our tax rebate system is very efficient. Estonians are brought up in a cold climate, so it doesn't help to talk about making fire. You just have to go and light it."

That's what Tönis Pill did, surprising young audiences in Estonia with FRÄNK, a daring piece of social realism that became an unexpected hit. At the Schlingel Festival, he explained his casually crafted promotional campaign, based on a clever and genuinely interactive use of social media. The other film interviews in this "Spotlight on Estonia" honour the Estonian animation tradition (the Animailm Studio demonstrates with short films like ROBOT LEO that there is life after the heyday of Eesti Joonisfilm and Nukufilm) and celebrate the Estonian national spirit (through the introverted yet wildly funny absurdism of BAA–BAA).

*LOTTE FROM GADGETVILLE*

Edith Sepp: "The perception might be that Estonia is Eastern European. But we're not! We don't feel part of that world. We belong to the Finno-Ugric language group, and we see ourselves as culturally Nordic." Another reason to put Estonia in the spotlight is its position as Russia's closest neighbour. More than any other European festival, Just Film remains true to its stance to "stand with Ukraine". Mikk Granström refers to this responsibility, which is reflected in the festival's jubilee catalogue. "It is a programme of hope, reminding us that nothing is ever lost, no matter how difficult or dark the world may seem, goodness and brighter times are always closer than we think, and together we can overcome anything."

–

Gert Hermans

# Kärt Väinola about Just Film Festival

## "Our history leaves us no other option"


An anniversary interview! In the shadow of the prestigious PÖFF or Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival, the Just Film Festival for young audiences is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Starting as a competition section for young people, Just Film has increasingly established itself among the leading European young audience festivals in recent years. Not only thanks to its film programme, but also to a robust industry section for professionals, programmed by Kärt Väinola and Alasdair Satchel. With panel discussions on all aspects of the youth film landscape and Works In Progress and Co-Production Market sessions, the industry days attract the attention of professionals far beyond the children's and youth film community.

When I first visited the festival many years ago, the programme was remarkably consistent. The films for teenagers were so uniformly depressing that I had to call my children to hear from them that their lives were not all doom and gloom. Wintertime in Tallinn only had a few hours of daylight, and during those hours it was raining. Now, some ten years later, the festival can be proud of its rich and balanced programme for all age groups!

**Let's set the context first. What can people expect when visiting the Just Film Festival in Tallinn?**
Kärt Väinola: Tallinn has a kind of small-boutique-festival feel. I've been involved with the festival for a long time, I know how much it has grown, and still, it feels small and cozy. Most guests are staying at the same hotel, the cinemas are just a short walk away, the whole festival crowd is moving in the same flow, and all industry events take place on the Nordic Hotel's conference floor. If you don't meet people in Tallinn, you won't meet them anywhere. I keep on hearing those stories: I met this person one morning at breakfast in Tallinn, and now we're making a film together.

**That's an adequate description, although I'm missing a few climatological details.**
Väinola: Tallinn in November is dark and cold. PÖFF has a warm vibe, but the weather is indeed cold.

**Where are you in this story? What is your role?**
Väinola: Nowadays, I'm mainly wearing two hats. I'm Head of the Just Film Industry Days programme, together with Alasdair Satchel, and I'm responsible for Just Film's hospitality.

**More than ever before, industry people are taking Just Film seriously. How come PÖFF, as a festival, offers you such a spotlight?**
Väinola: Three years ago, we felt the moment was right to add a children's and youth film industry section to our general Industry Event. Just Film Industry Days is still young, but we have carved out our unique place within the bigger Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event. Under this strong umbrella, we're a gateway into the children's film industry for people who generally wouldn't attend a market event focused on this target group. Once they're in, they might meet potential partners that broaden their focus. And before we even realise it, they might come back to us with the world premiere of their first children's film! Isn't that a nice dream

to cherish?

**Scanning the faces in the auditorium, I noticed a perfect mix of children's film in-crowd, students, people who got lost in the Industry@Tallinn labyrinth, and many professionals with an honest interest in Just Film's profile.**
Väinola: That is no coincidence. When promoting each Just Film Industry panel, we focused on finding the right wording and timing to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. We tried to include all segments of the industry in the panels' structure, to promote young audience cinema and film education. I think it worked quite nicely!

**Several youth film festivals reside under the wings of major A-list festivals (Berlin, Locarno, Toronto...), but in none of these events, the young audience industry section claims its place as firmly as you do.**
Väinola: We feel a growing interest from the industry and festival team, including Marge Liske (Head of Industry@Tallinn & Baltic Event) and Tiina Lokk (Head of the Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival). They realise that our audience today will be tomorrow's film people. At Just Film, we are educating the next generation of filmmakers, film critics, and film lovers.


*Kärt Väinola and Alasdair Satchel*

**With this year's panels, you tried to cover the widest possible range of topics: education, distribution, press, production...**
Väinola: Film people will always be eager to talk about distribution and sales. I remember a panel with Xiaojuan Zhou (Attraction Distribution), Tania Pinto Da Cunha (Pink Parrot Media), and Nils Andersson (Smorgasbord Picture House). The room was packed, and we had to bring extra chairs. Not everyone in the audience was familiar with the children's film scene, but they all left with new insights. This year, we insisted on panels covering topics like sales and film journalism to clarify how films travel. Directors make films, but the promotion of their work is often not in their hands. We wanted to bring these mechanisms to their attention.

**One highlight was a session on horror elements and their inclusion in children's films, featuring (ECFA Board member) Marjo Kovanen and Estonian director Oskar Lehemaa. *(You'll find a summary of that session in the next ECFA Journal.)***
Väinola: That was a great session indeed, with Marjo talking from a rather academic point of view, combined with Oskar's hands-on approach. Like true team players, they both brought out the best in each other. This combination of the academic and the creative world is a recipe to be repeated in the future.

**Are enough people aware of the things happening in Tallinn?**
Väinola: After no more than three years since we started, it's still a work in progress. But if we keep hosting good sessions and screenings, our reputation will grow.

**This is a goal that you pursue through a partnership with KIDS Regio.**
Väinola: This year was the second of a three-year partnership. Last year we launched a networking event called 'The Fck Up Night', perfectly described by Anne Schultka, as *"most people will tell you about their achievements, their biggest projects, and working only with the crème de la crème, but what if we take a moment to reflect on our most brilliant mistakes, some of the fuck ups we've made?"* An event like this makes even a badass producer or industry big shot more approachable because they also make mistakes. People shared their stories on stage, and even more so, off-stage. Among the guests at the bar, many of the conversations that

night were about the mistakes they had made.

**What is the perfect profile of a Just Film festival title?**
Väinola: I'm not involved in the programming at the moment, but I've been in the past. The team is led by Mikk Granström, who's been Just Film's Programme Director for quite some time. It was already before COVID, when Mikk expressed his ambition to have, at some point, nothing but international and world premieres in our main Youth Film Competition. This year, we made that happen. Even in our Children's Competition, we had mainly international premieres. Now that this first step has been taken, that number will only grow. We even had several films in competition that were presented last year in our Work In Progress session, so they have made the full circle. Just Film can offer a potential platform for films to make a great start; a big festival can help you fly on bigger wings.

**Was there a specific title this year that stole your heart?**
Väinola: DEFINITELY GANGSTER (by Jeremy Lee MacKenzie, USA). This animation has a lot of heart, and plenty of work was put into it! It has this 'strange' vibe, in the best possible way. I loved it, and I hope it will travel!
**Why do you present a Children's Rights programme?**
Väinola: That programme has been with us since 'forever', and it's particularly popular among schools. It's kind of a self-explanatory, super versatile section that covers a wide range of issues, from migration to substance abuse, from bullying to being a stranger in your own land. These topics are universal. Young audiences need to know how kids live and feel their feelings around the world; they need to understand that they are not alone with their concerns. More than ever, it's important to remind people how we all deserve the right to live in a world that is not constantly at war. Nowadays, these topics just come flying in from every door and window.

**We all declared our solidarity with Ukraine sooner or later, but you're one of the few organisations that still consistently advertise how you "stand with Ukraine".**
Väinola: There's no other choice for Estonia or for whichever Estonian organisation. Our history leaves us no other option than to go on like this. We will keep doing so until, hopefully, the war will end soon.

**What's the share of Estonian films in your programme?**
Väinola: It depends. This year, we had the Estonian docu film cassette LIL TRILOGY (by Ivar Murd & Taavi Arus) and SUPER FURBALL AND THE FLYING SQUIRREL (by Joona Tena), a co-production with Finland. We would be delighted to welcome more local content in the coming years.

**Unfortunately, you can't have a LOTTE retrospective every year... How big is Lotte from Gadgetville in Estonia?**
Väinola: She is very dear to us, and probably will be to the generations to come! What I love most about the LOTTE films is how kind their world is. Problems are small, characters are quirky rather than cruel, and curiosity is treated as the most natural, beautiful way to live. Lotte's home, Gadgetville, feels like the childhood village you wish you'd had. They have cobbled-together inventions, odd neighbours, and the quiet certainty that adults will ultimately be gentle and fair. There's a consistent belief that the world is worth exploring, that differences are interesting rather than threatening, and that simple adventures can feel the most magical.

–

Gert Hermans
*Photo's by Janis Kokk*

# Tönis Pill about FRÄNK

## "You can crawl out of basically any hole"

In a small Estonian town in the early 2000s, 13-year-old Paul is forced to move in with his uncle for a few days after yet another fight with his father. Those days turn into weeks, and Paul starts hanging out with the local gang. The leader of the group is Jasper, who lives alone with his father. Outside the group's view, Paul wins the trust of Fränk, a man with a disability but an optimistic outlook on life. But is Paul worthy of that trust? Or will Fränk become a factor in Paul's downfall, which seems inevitable?

The all-consuming nihilism of these young boys casts a suffocating shadow over the film. What is frightening is not so much the number of children smoking cigarettes or sniffing glue, but the power structures they establish within their gang. It's about the usual mechanisms - leadership and obedience, proving your masculinity - yet carried out with terrifying intensity.

FRÄNK caused a minor sensation in Estonia. Following a low-key but highly effective social media campaign, the film found its way to a surprisingly young audience, and Tönis Pill's directorial debut not only became one of the most successful titles of the year but also one of the most-watched Estonian films of all time.

**The film is partly defined by its location. Can you describe that location?**
Tõnis Pill: In a country like Estonia, small towns seem ever smaller. The story is set in 2006 in a place very similar to where I grew up. There used to be a big paper factory…

**That was still operational?**
Pill: The factory never dies! People tell me: What a depressing place! But when I think about my childhood and the place I grew up, I don't remember it as being depressing. Most of my memories are nice and colourful, and I'm happy I grew up there.

**In the train station, the village has a name. Peatus?**
Pill: Yes, that's a joke. We didn't want to give it a name. Peatus in Estonian literally means 'train stop'.

**Was there a train passing through your village?**
Pill: Trains were a big part of my childhood; I've spent a lot of time hanging around near the tracks. When I went to bed in summer, with the window open, I could hear the trains in the distance. The first time you see the train in the opening shot, it looks threatening. By the end, it's quite the opposite.

**When I told one of the festival guests that I was on my way to see FRÄNK, she replied, *"Oh, the violent one?"* Isn't it remarkable how easily the film picked up that reputation? How does that make you feel?**
Pill: This was to be expected. The tone differs a bit from other films you might see in a children's film festival, but I wouldn't call it violent. In my opinion, it's a film about hope, even if people don't recognise it as such. Perhaps the violent scenes stand out, but the film has love, compassion, understanding, empathy… When I finished film school in 2017, I had an idea about the topic, but not the right angle for the story. After we got funding approved from the Cultural Endowment Fund and the Film Institute, we kept changing it. We didn't listen as much to the advice of others as we

should have, but finally, four years later, I understood what kind of movie I wanted to make. We took our time to find the essence of what we wanted to tell, and it all came together when I started focusing on hope.

**You have an economical way with words in the film…**
Pill: I often heard the opposite. Once we started working with that group of kids, I noticed one thing: it's never quiet. There's always chaos, with everyone talking at the same time. Usually, directors give detailed instructions: here, you speak, and here, you move your lips, but you don't make a sound… Not on our set! It was always: speak whenever you want. Some of those improvised lines might have gone lost in translation, but in Estonian, there's some pure gold. And a lot of swearing, heavy swearing. Estonian audiences were surprised to hear kids talking like sailors.

**It doesn't take long before the main character says a crucial sentence: Nobody wants me. I was surprised to hear him say it so explicitly.**
Pill: It sounds dramatic, but there is truth in what he says. Those sentences contain a small hopelessness, a cry for help. He feels that nobody gives a shit.

**Is it also about people at the bottom of the ladder who still find a head beneath them to kick down?**
Pill: That is the cycle of violence, whether it is imposed by parents or by the kids seeking acknowledgement. The main thing I try to show is how to break that cycle. It was there in my youth, too, and at some point, I was a bully myself. I wanted recognition. I've done some stupid stuff, of which I'm not exactly proud, and many kids have been bullies to me. When I look at it now, most of us have turned out well. There's always a way out of this evil cycle.

**That was actually the biggest concern that stuck with me after the screening. These kids will grow up and have families, too. Do we feel secure that Jasper will ever be a stable father in his family?**
Pill: He can become one. You see that he is quite artistic, but this interest is being suppressed. He is longing for love from his mother, which isn't possible, so he seeks false happiness and acknowledgement. But if you find the right people, you can crawl out of basically any hole. I've misjudged people so many times in my life, thinking that nothing good will come of them, and so many times I've been wrong. That's a part of growing up.

**Is there a difference between city life and small-town life?**
Pill: These things happen in the city and in the villages. The setting is different, but the acts and feelings are the same.

**One of the funniest images in the film was a guy simultaneously lifting weights and smoking a cigarette.**
Pill: Fränk's brother fits into a certain stereotype. He seems really rough, ready to beat up anyone who crosses his path, but he is essentially a loving character who cares for his brother and will do whatever it takes to keep him safe, like a mother cat. He has been taking care of him basically his whole life.

**When you finally have the idea that Jasper's father will teach his son, the thing he teaches him is hunting and killing. What's wrong with fathers?**
Pill: Men of that age in Estonia, who were in their 40s in 2006, grew up in tough times. They lived their teenage years at the end of the Soviet era. Many people got damaged along the way, hustling to stay alive. Men are often insecure in expressing their emotions, which then translates into subtle violence or blunt aggression. And they pass it on to their sons. Jasper's father is unlocking a new form of vengeance by teaching him the act of killing. For his son, it's not a win. But for his father, Jasper finally becomes the son he always wanted. Nowadays, people have outgrown that toxic masculinity.

**Why did you need Fränk? It is risky to have an actor play the role of a person with a disability. It could completely change the audience's perception of the film.**
Pill: Fränk is an actual person from my childhood hometown; everybody remembers him as a positive character. He was exactly like in the movie. He loved drinking Coca-Cola, and he always had this - some would say ugly, but I say beautiful - big smile. He died in 2000; apparently, somebody pushed him onto the train tracks. When I heard about it, years later, it got me mad. My first impulse was to show how this person, who might easily be forgotten soon, made a difference. Of course, we were unsure if it would work; we didn't go on it lightly. It couldn't be goofy or cartoonish; the parts that felt like that were cut in the edit.

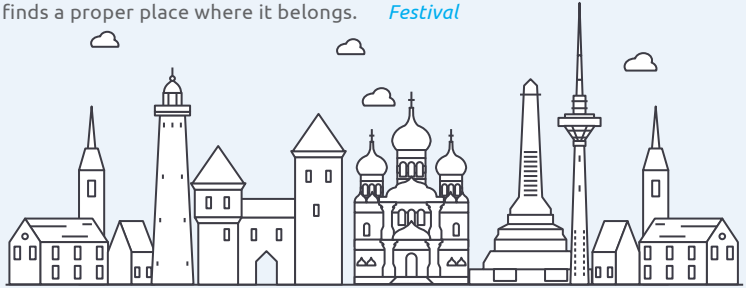
**There is a scene in which Paul finally faces his father. The choreography of their heads was beautifully done, as if they were preparing for a boxing game.**
Pill: In the movie, we heard about this dark father figure for more than an hour, like some sort of Voldemort, and then he finally appears… looking like a guy next door. But for his family, he is a monster, a demon. The actor, Märt Avandi, picked many of his lines from his own life. He lived that scene, and many people in the audience came to tell us they had similar experiences with their parents.

**Apparently, you also lived many scenes from your film.**
Pill: This explains why FRÄNK is so popular in Estonia; these topics finally needed to be addressed. We received a tremendous amount of feedback from young people, who told us: This is my life, this character is exactly like me, or like my classmate,... We don't expect this film to change the world, but we wanted to raise awareness and give hope to maybe one kid who thought that all hope was gone.

**Who are you paying tribute to with the plastic bag scene?**
Pill: The famous plastic bag question… We didn't take it from any movie. I know AMERICAN BEAUTY has a plastic bag scene, but for me, this is about loneliness, about drifting around the world with no actual purpose. But in the end, even the bag finds a proper place where it belongs.

**I would be proud if I could end this interview without asking about smoking cigarettes and sniffing glue, but…**
Pill: It felt authentic, but in our Western world, many adults might find it shocking. The young actors smoked theater cigarettes, but still, it's never a good idea to inhale any unnatural substances. They did it voluntarily, and all the parents understood. It was funny to observe them during rehearsals, when at first, they thought: This is so cool; we're doing something bad! But when shooting for seven hours, and they had to smoke again and again, they started hating it very quickly. It's not something they enjoyed doing.

–
Gert Hermans
*Tõnis Pill was a guest at the Schlingel Festival*



# Piret Sigus & Silja Saarepuu about ROBOT LEO

## "I was surprised when a visitor called it a mess"

A metal bicycle tyre that bursts when it runs over a nail... I find that irresistibly funny! The fragile appearance of the title character, the laconic soundtrack, the consistent use of metal throughout the film's design… These are the qualities that make ROBOT LEO a worthy ambassador for Estonia, where dry observations and understated reactions are the norm. The same can be said about the two directors, the deadpan sisters Silja Saarepuu and Piret Sigus, aka the Animailm Studio.

Leo the Robot lives with his cat in a cosy, rusty cottage. One fine day, he is expecting a visit from Lilleliisu. Leo wants to make a good impression - the table needs to be set. But the more the big moment approaches, the more Leo's anxiety grows.

**Leo is a metal robot, but does he have a personality, an identity of his own?**

Silja Saarepuu: He is a bachelor, sharing his house with a cat. We have two bachelor friends who are always inventing and repairing stuff. Leo is modeled after them.

Piret Sigus: Leo's house is designed after their houses, full of stuff and loose parts, waiting to be used one day. We compressed those two characters into one Leo.

**But the first inspiration was a children's book.**

Saarepuu: ROBOT LEO'S SPECIAL DAY by author and illustrator Pusa is a lovely book for children who are learning to read. Pusa allowed us total freedom; she was happy that we brought her creation to life, with a slightly extended narrative. The book is also the reason why we have two versions of the film: with and without a narrator's voice.

**Why would you need a narrator? It's not going to get even funnier than it already is.**

Sigus: We believe that the film works better with a narrator who reads the original verses from the book in a warm, grandfatherly tone. But some festivals prefer the version without, to overcome language barriers.

**Did you work exclusively with metal? Or did you sometimes trick the audience?**

Sigus: Analogue robots are made out of metal - that's crucial! Even the cat is made of a wire spring, covered with textile, and the trees are made out of nails. We cheated a tiny bit with the backgrounds; some smaller trees are made of hot glue.

Saarepuu: We only used a green screen for one scene, and for the title and end credits. *"Handcrafted in every detail"* is Animailm's motto. In our previous productions, we used fine textile techniques, like embroidery. This time, we were crafting metal.

**How to animate such non-flexible material, and still make it look very much alive?**

Sigus: You can animate with simply everything; didn't you realise that? We work on the glass surface of a multiplane table, and I was worried the metal would scratch the glass, but we saved it with the use of velvet and paper.

Saarepuu: And with the help of Marilli Sokk, our excellent animator, who set all the different elements in motion.

**Leo's legs seem to be endless.**

Saarepuu: To make the legs flexi-

ble, we constructed little pieces, like shells, that you can stack on top of each other. We had so many loose shells that we could extend those legs endlessly. Like in the shot in which Leo grows all the way till the attic of the house, while the cat is watching down upon him. We called that our DIE HARD shot; Leo rises upward like Bruce Willis in the iconic ventilation shaft scene.

**What about his eyes? How to put an expression in that dead material?**
Saarepuu: Leo has a wire spring attached to the back of his head, which makes his eyes move simultaneously. We could even open and close them.
Sigus: When Leo is surprised, his pupils grow bigger. They are like little bowls; the more surprised he is, the bigger the bowls. We worked the same way with his mouth, which is like a little radiator.

**I was especially fascinated by the objects that, in reality, would never be made of metal: a bicycle tire, a balloon, laundry, etc.**
Sigus: We conducted numerous tests to identify the most suitable materials. The balloon was one of the most difficult searches. The outline is made of metal, but we strung balloon fabric over it. If you look closely, you can see

that it is slightly transparent.
Saarepuu: Leo is hanging the laundry out to dry as his way of cleaning the house. He wants to find his most beautiful tablecloth - I suppose he washed them first.

**That involved a great deal of welding work. Was that done by one of the bachelors Leo was based on?**
Sigus: They were too clumsy for such a meticulous task. We had to bring in a third bachelor. Saarepuu: Just before making the film, he bought himself a micro welding machine. The film was his ultimate practice to find out how the machine worked. He welded hearts on the cups in several stages, with the heart growing bigger each time.

**Leo lives in a house with the stairs on the outside**
Sigus: For the cat! Leo doesn't need stairs.
Saarepuu: It looks a lot like the houses of one of those bachelors. I also remembered an image I saw in Romania. There were two wealthy neighbours; one house had four roofs, and his next-door neighbour had five. I suspect that they were competing with each other.

**The presence of metal also affects the sound.**
Sigus: We gathered all the metal objects in our sound studio and rattled them in front of the microphone. We recorded all that clamour and picked the best results. For instance, when Leo is coming up fast, we used the sound of an old-fashioned drill machine.

**A merry *'poing poing poing'* sound lends Lilleliisu her particularly cheerful character.**
Saarepuu: In the bachelors' workshops, we found a metal string that created this festive noise. We also used a mouth harp - our composer Ramo has this ability to make music with just anything! It makes Lilleliisu look very shiny - the sounds add a bit of spice to her joyfulness, though she looks also happy in silent mode.

**How should I imagine your studio, both during and after this movie?**
Sigus: It's a place where people work; it's not like an office. It looked very normal to us, with metal pieces and scrap lying around everywhere. We still haven't found the time to clean it up.
Saarepuu: It looks a bit like Leo's house itself. I was surprised when a visitor called it a mess. It doesn't look like that to us.

**Your last film, THE TURNIP, was made in an underground studio.**
Sigus: In a small basement under my garage. My family wasn't too happy about it; they had had enough of all those people coming and going every day to work on our film. We moved the studio out to a bigger and more expensive place. The more space you have, the more mess you can throw around, but there is nobody to complain about it.

–
Gert Hermans
*Silja Saarepuu and Piret Sigus were guests at the Filem'On Festival*

# Teresa Juksaar about BAA-BAA

## "Wait! It's coming!"

People and animals arranged in geometric constellations, prompting conversations that never take place and quasi-serious observations of comical situations. If we can consider Estonians to be people with a penchant for dry humour, then BAA–BAA by young director Teresa Juksaar is the ultimate and downright hilarious tribute to the Estonian national character.

A family that has just moved into their new flat in the city finds a goat at their door, an unexpected gift as part of a charity drive. This is the beginning of an odyssey of man and goat, travelling together through the city. In this strictly regulated environment, every animal seems an anachronism. Only the daughter of the house thinks differently…

**We wonder how dogs actually see the world; they see things differently than we do. Similarly, I wonder how you see the world because we're looking at the same things, but what you depict in your film looks completely different from what I see.**

Teresa Juksaar: My grandmother was an abstract painter; her works were highly expressive. I like to think of my films as abstract with eccentric elements. I consider myself quite a melancholic person who needs colours and humour to survive life's challenges.

**Trying to describe your film, I'd say that everything is normal, yet nothing is truly normal. Every conversation feels a bit awkward, with people standing in geometric constellations or just staring at each other.**

Juksaar: I'm inspired by what I experience in life, so in some way, I'm depicting reality. This is how I experience my world. I love people and the weird and silly things they do in their everyday lives. There's a lot of cruelty in this world, but I focus on the good and prefer to approach serious topics with a healthy sense of humour.

**Even the dogs and cats in your film are behaving weirdly. And there were a lot of them! You had cats, goats, Rottweilers and bloodhounds on set.**

Juksaar: I'd say that having animals interact with each other in an urban environment is rather strange, even though they're just behaving as they normally would. The two Rottweilers were the hardest part of the animal directing. They wanted to go after the goat. We had to use a sort of cloth so the dogs couldn't see the goats; otherwise, they would have lost control. We used green screen in that shot; it wasn't possible to have all of them together in the same frame.

**Which leads us to the true hero of the movie… The goat!**

Juksaar: We cast two male goats, one year before the shoot. But when we returned to the farm one week before the start, they had simply grown too big. So the goats had to be recast. That's when we found two female goats, Kuusi and Kola. We needed two because goats are herd animals, and we used whoever was more cooperative at that moment. They both looked very different, although nobody but me seemed to notice.

**Were your goats disciplined?**

Juksaar: With so many challenging elements, like the weather, children, a lot of extras, and several demanding locations, the goats for sure weren't the hardest part. They behaved quite well; they pooped a lot though.

**On command?**

Juksaar: No, that scene happened spontaneously; it wasn't in the script.

When I said 'cut', the DoP shouted: *"Wait! It's coming!"* Then I saw what he meant.

**The film shows a healthy interest in animal poo, regardless of all the 'no shitting' signboards, wherever you look.**
Juksaar: I created an atmosphere of a place where nothing is allowed; signboards are everywhere. In a city deprived of green spaces, the goat is bringing a sense of 'nature', until you bump into all these restrictions, including a ban on dog and goat shit.

**The entire city, with its urban architecture, breathes a strong sense of alienation.**
Juksaar: Jacques Tati was an inspiration, with all these grey, concrete buildings, and a total lack of greenery. I found a small district in Tallinn that reminded me of Tati's PLAYTIME. It's in the city center, but nobody seems to know it. So many Estonians asked me: Where did you find that place? The film evolves from grey to much greener in the end.

**Of all the intriguing minor characters that cross our path throughout the film, did you have one particular favourite?**
Juksaar: There are many. The bus driver is one of the most memorable characters. And I admired the group of Japanese tourists. It was fun to work with them; they knew exactly what to do. We made a bit of fun of Japanese tourist stereotypes - I hope they don't mind.

**Can you guess my favourite? The lady of the animal shelter! She asks for the zodiac sign of a goat, she has a pink computer, and she knows how to use the delete button!**
Juksaar: She is a colourful character. She loves animals, but doesn't really like humans; making contact with animals is much easier for her.

**Did you buy a pink computer?**
Juksaar: We painted it. It also had a pink mouse with ears, which, unfortunately, isn't visible in the frame.

**The only person acting relatively normally is a little girl. Is she the only reasonable human being?**
Juksaar: I wanted her to be loud, bluntly expressing her feelings, because all the other characters are quiet and stoic. They don't express their feelings that much.

**You mean the others are simply standard Estonians.**
Juksaar: Yeah, right. We don't say a word if it ain't needed.

**Among all these silent people, great importance is given to the sound reel. How did sound contribute to the film's alienating atmosphere?**
Juksaar: Creating the sound design was a hard task, because the film genre is undefined; it's not classical drama, nor pure comedy… It's a bit of both. Searching for the right auditory elements, we included many goat sounds. Listening back to the film, I probably noticed a few *"baa's"* too many. We experimented with the sound designer for quite a while before we found the right tone for the film.

**Would you recommend every family take in a goat?**
Juksaar: If you don't resist a goat to bring change into your life, it might lead you into new and surprising situations, and get you closer to nature. The world could become a better place if we all started giving goats as presents on different occasions, opening ourselves up to life's changes, and learning to adapt to them. Personally, I'd like to give it a try. Life shouldn't be taken too seriously, and I'm pretty sure goats would gladly contribute to that.

–
Gert Hermans
*Teresa Juksaar was a guest at the Filem'On Festival*

# Impressions from the YCN Conference in Trollhättan


lIn November 2025, members of the Youth Cinema Network (YCN) gathered in Trollhättan, Sweden. Hosted with generosity by Novemberfestivalen, the conference offered a space to reconnect and to look ahead at how our network can continue to support young filmmakers in the best possible way.

One focus was on the future of the annual YCN Award, recognising excellence in films made by young people. Established in 2016, it is given to outstanding films in three age groups. In 2021, an additional category for 'Workshop Films' was introduced, for films created in short-term workshops.

We explored how to refine the award structure while staying true to the values that define YCN: flexibility, trust, and a belief in young people's creative agency. One key decision was to skip the Workshop category. Each age category will include, from now on, the possibility of a Special award, recognising unique artistic approaches, collective processes, or innovative storytelling, without locking creativity into a predefined category. This change reflects our wish to safeguard the diversity within youth filmmaking within the YCN Awards. We also agreed on a new annual timeline for nominations and voting.

Another highlight was 'YCN Presents: From Us to You(th)', a panel for young filmmakers with voices from across the network, sharing personal stories.

- Eivind from Amandusfestivalen (Norway) offered a rare insight behind the scenes of film festivals; how films are selected, what programmers look for, and what young filmmakers can expect when navigating the festival world.
- Yanna from Cinemathesis (Greece) presented 'Youth Gaze' and 'Adventure of Cinema' as examples of how creative formats can be adapted in schools, museums, and other cultural spaces, and how young filmmakers themselves can take up active roles in educating their peers.
- Sara and Andrei (Romania) shared their inspiring journey of launching the Cinema Paradiso Festival at the age of just 24, with a €1,000 budget, a small team of friends, and a strong vision.

Youth Cinema Network

Discussions also touched on the structure of the network itself. While the formalisation of YCN remains a topic of interest, members agreed that the current flexible, trust-based form enables the network to function across different cultures, resources, and festival models.

Warm thanks to everyone who contributed to another rich and memorable conference, and to our Swedish hosts who made Trollhättan a place of both productive dialogue and genuine camaraderie. YCN members will meet again in Limerick, Ireland, in March 2026, hosted by Fresh Film Festival.

–
Marija Ratkovic Vidakovic, YCN coordinator

**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**

# Thinking Ahead on Film Institutions – Spotlight on Young Audiences

## *European Film Funds join forces to strengthen support for young viewers*

For the second time, the Young Horizons Industry Forum in Warsaw invited international experts to a Think Tank. The title of this year's meeting was "Thinking Ahead on Film Institutions – Spotlight on Young Audiences". With the support of the Polish Film Institute, representatives from 14 European film funding institutions and agencies gathered to explore innovative ways to support content for children and young people.

*"The Think Tank continues to prove its value as a catalyst for fresh ideas and shared expertise, from broadcasters last year to Film Funders this year, all united in improving how we support high-quality children's films,"* said Viola Gabrielli, Head of Programme at Young Horizons Industry.

The discussions focused on how to make meaningful, relevant content for young audiences more visible and accessible, and how to coordinate resources more effectively among film institutions. *"We want to ensure that young audiences see themselves represented on screen, through stories based in their own culture they can relate to, stories that challenge, inspire and connect them"*, said one participant. *"It's not always about funding more films; it's about shaping a shared European mindset towards young viewers. Some actions don't necessarily need more money; we need to better coordinate and allocate the resources we have."*

To contribute concrete insights, KIDS Regio presented the Cine Regio Young Audience Report 2025, a mapping of regional film fund initiatives across Europe in areas such as development, production and film literacy.

**Main findings**

Throughout the discussion, two central challenges were identified:

- Reaching the **8–15 age group**, which has become increasingly disconnected from cinema.
- Improving **distribution and collaboration**, as children's content often fails to travel between European markets.

Other concerns included a lack of audience insight, fragmented coordination and obstacles to replicating successful models (like the Danish model) in smaller markets.

**Proposed solutions**

- Build **cross-sector working groups**, onnecting film funds, broadcasters, producers and educators.
- Use **existing structures**, such as the European Writers or Producers Club, to strengthen support for youth content.
- Improve **coordination of public funding** through quotas or benchmarks.
- Include **young consultants** in creative development and research.
- **Educate staff** within film institutions to prioritise children's cinema.
- Bring European stories to new platforms while keeping the cinema experience alive.

**Three feasible opportunities identified**


1. **Leverage Existing Structures** – Activate existing structures and film markets to foster a stronger mindset for youth cinema.
2. **Collaborate Across the Value Chain** – Unite stakeholders from production to distribution in a European working group.
3. **Include Young Audiences** – Involve young people in creative processes to ensure relevance and engagement.

**Shared European vision**

Participants agreed that supporting young audiences is not just about more funding; it is about better coordination, smarter allocation, and a change of mindset.
Through collaboration, cultural awareness, and inclusion, European film institutions can ensure that young audiences see themselves represented on screen in stories that reflect their culture, challenge their thinking and inspire their imagination.

The Think Tank hosted representatives from the Austrian Film Institute, Bulgarian National Film Center, Cine Regio, Croatian Audiovisual Center, Estonian Film Institute, Film London, Golden Sparrow, National Film Institute Hungary, National Film Centre of Latvia, KIDS Regio, Krakow Film Commission, Lithuanian Film Centre, Polish Film Institute, Pictanovo, Screen Brussels and Slovak Audiovisual Fund.

The full report of the Think Tank – Thinking Ahead on Film Institutions – Spotlight on Young Audiences can be consulted at industry.younghorizons.pl.

The Warsaw-based Young Horizons Industry is an international co-production forum, focused on films and series aimed at kids and youth, and a meeting hub for film professionals, passionate about making audiovisual content for young audiences.
The goal of the forum is simple: to help creators connect with potential partners. By bringing together projects and industry players, we are creating a space where you can exchange ideas and form partnerships.

*Young Horizon's call for projects for pitching will open in the first quarter of 2026.*

–
Magda Wylężałek
*Photos by Piotr Kruszak*

# Annette Saugestad Helland about THE RUMBLE-BUMBLE RALLY

## "Eating the cake and the dough!"

Did you know that the living room can actually be a race track? Daddy asks Mathilde to tidy up her toy cars. For Mathilda and her two imaginary friends, this is the signal to start a tidy-up race. Cars speed through the room and under the sofa until it becomes clear that father and daughter have different views on tidying up... and therefore also on life.

THE RUMBLE-BUMBLE RALLY has a charming small-scale vibe, but technically, it accomplishes a remarkable feat by blending animation and live action smoothly. Secretly, the Norwegian Mikrofilm hopes to bring the Rumble-Bumble universe to the big screen someday, with the help of both directors, Annette Saugestad Helland and Johan Kaos, one of whom presented her work at the Filem'On Festival in Brussels.

**My first question is a personal one... Do you agree that the dough is better than the cake?**
Annette Saugestad Helland: Yes! I totally agree with our main character. As a kid, you're sort of not allowed to eat the dough because some say it can cause a stomachache. But not being allowed is part of the pleasure.

**You consequently use a child's point of view. At several moments in the film, I clearly realised: this is how a child would see things.**
Saugestad Helland: Indeed, both in the story and in its visualisation. We asked ourselves all the time how children would view certain situations and tried to come up with visual solutions on how they would use their imagination. That playful approach came with technical consequences; it's a challenge to blend live-action and animation into one credible universe, but this visual mixture of reality and fantasy is quite close to how I imagine children play.

**These differing perspectives also form the basis of this story.**
Saugestad Helland: From the father's perspective, the house should be clean and tidy to welcome guests. But the kids don't care if it's messy; they just think about the fun they could have with all those toys. This causes a clash of perspectives. Both co-director Johan Kaos and I are familiar with the pressure on young parents to strive for perfection at all times. We wanted to oppose that. However, I sympathise with the father in the film. It is not easy to impose things on a child, but he tries his best in a friendly tone.

**Matilda says: Being the first one is not important. Then what is?**
Saugestad Helland: Eating the cake and the dough! To children, it is more important that parents take the time to sit and play with them, and to feel accepted and have fun together.

**Was safety in traffic ever an issue?**
Saugestad Helland: On the contrary! In this make-believe world, it was fun to indulge in irresponsible driving with toy cars. We recorded the live-action part over one week; the 15 crew members all seemed to be into cars. Nothing excited them more than making them crash; the little boy inside them blossomed! They all stood around filming with their mobile phones.

**You didn't make it easy on yourself, combining all those different techniques: Stop motion, cut-out, drawing, live-action etc.**
Saugestad Helland: When blending a drawn world and a real world, that

sparks the imagination. But it's also like making two separate movies and then mixing them.

**Making two movies is double the work!**
Saugestad Helland: I was in charge of the animation part, while Johan was mainly working on the live-action. With the actors, everything had to be done on a small budget, as fast as possible. Whereas for the animation, the work ethics were quite the opposite. You could use a whole day to animate the whiskers of a little rabbit. Merging those two methods into one film caused a maximum amount of complications, but it was worth it.

**In the animated drawing, the landscape changes in an instant, as cars pass by. All of a sudden, flowers and trees are popping up. What was the logic behind that?**
Saugestad Helland: No logic! It's just playing, in an attempt to visualise a child's imagination, which is somehow an impossible thing to do. As a starting point, I had a few ideas of what could spark a child's imagination. We chose an idea where we fantasised about what it looks like under the sofa in a house where children live, which can be relatable for parents too.

**Did you research that?**
Saugestad Helland: Unavoidably. I have one small child (and two older ones), Johan has two, but the chaos is similar. When it came to the practical side, we didn't have enough space for the camera under a real sofa, so we had to recreate that environment in a studio, which felt a bit surreal. We collected potato chips, crumbs, and objects that seemed a bit scary at first glance, to create this imaginary world. We got help from a model-maker, who constructed the car models, and made a model for a piece of old bread, with an extra layer of green on top for the mould.

**The character design is indeterminate and genderless. I think one is a rabbit, but I'm not even sure.**
Saugestad Helland: I often work with children in animation workshops, where they design imaginary creatures by combining different animals. That is where these characters originated. They are Mathilde´s imaginary friends, and therefore, have to look a bit quirky.

**What you did with the lighting was amazing. Despite the darkness under the sofa, you combine real light, studio lighting, and animated light. Your lighting schedule must have looked incredibly complex.**
Saugestad Helland: We used a significant amount of Christmas lights, which created the perfect atmosphere on camera. We had an excellent photographer, and there was Konrad Hjemli, who had the task of composing the animated and studio lights, sitting for long hours on this precision work. He was our hero. People were constantly lugging Christmas lights around the set, and then he skillfully had to erase their hands from the picture.

**Those car wheels spinning uselessly on the edge of the couch look super realistic.**
Saugestad Helland: We used an extra set of wheels that we retrofitted in the editing process to create some extra spin. It seemed as if we were making a car chase movie for children. Co-director Johan Kaos was in charge of moving the cars. He had the best week of his life; he was so much into it.

**Do you have a favourite car chase movie?**
Saugestad Helland: That would be THE PINCHCLIFFE GRAND PRIX, a Norwegian children's classic from 1975 by Ivo Caprino. I just love that film!

–
Gert Hermans
*Annette Saugestad Helland was a guest at the Filem'On Festival*

# Paul Galli about PEOPLE UNDER WATER

## “Being with sisters was the essence of growing up”

Claustrophobia in the open air, is that a contradiction? Not in the short film PEOPLE UNDER WATER, by German director Paul Galli, in which two sisters get stuck on a wooden platform in a lake with a confident classmate. The location leaves them no room to escape. Long-suppressed conversations must finally be had, making them realise how far apart they have grown. It all starts with a time capsule that the youngest sister, Lila, has put together for a school assignment.

**What would be in your time capsule?**
Paul Galli: Those time capsules are not really a thing in German schools; I’ve only seen them in the movies. I would put in a gift from my sister. She had this little golden figurine of a pig. As a child, she never let me have it. When I went to South Korea for one year as an au pair, she gave it to me when I left. That was so generous!

**What’s so special about sisters?**
Galli: I have two sisters; we’re a triplet. Being with sisters, for me, was the essence of growing up. We argued a lot as children, and we still have our quarrels now and then, but looking back on our relationship and how it has evolved, it’s so special to have had their presence throughout my entire life. My film is dedicated to them.

**As the one brother in this three-person constellation, did you feel like the outsider?**
Galli: I never did. It was never about sisters intentionally plotting against their brother. In fact, the sisterly bond in the film grew out of the relationship between actresses Joana and Sophia Taskiran. I worked with Joana before, and when she told me she had a younger sister who was also interested in acting, we wrote the script for them together.

**With so many themes tackled, like sisterly love, depression, gender issues... what would be for you the overarching theme that is keeping all elements together?**
Galli: The importance of talking to each other and not burying issues deep inside yourself.

**Is that why the film is called PEOPLE UNDER WATER, while all meaningful conversations take place above water?**
Galli: They never discuss what truly matters; everything stays bottled up and closed off until it all surfaces during the course of the film.

**Which explains the intense silences in your film. I recognised different types: the silence of a lazy summer’s day, silence caused by alienation, by feeling embarrassed, or afraid, or angry. And a silence because you ran out of words to say to each other.**
Galli: Together with the scriptwriter, we combined all those types of silence. In the editing, we wanted to let the silence tell its own story, but perhaps I went a bit too far, especially for young people, who might not have the longest attention span. Honestly, I’m not sure if I made the film for young audiences in the first place.

**Your story concentrates a lot of intensity in a very small space. How**

**was it, being crammed onto that small platform?**
Galli: What we in Germany would call a **Kammerspiel**, a chamber play. The platform wasn't probably any bigger than three meters by three, surrounded by the vast water. When they were not in the shot, cast and crew were often swimming. We had paddle boards to go ashore, and two small, unstable boats for the crew to work from. They were connected to the platform, and we had to move them around to keep them out of the picture. Working with a small crew makes things more condensed; after every shot, we took no more than five minutes to prepare the next one. It helped that I had already worked with Joana Taskiran; she knew I was to be trusted, and the sisters were comfortable with one another.

**That was no unnecessary luxury. On the platform were three girls, wearing little more than bathing suits.**
Galli: We talked a lot with the actresses about comfort and safety, especially with Sophia. Having her sister with her was a great help. A big part of the team was women; a camerawoman might see and capture those scenes differently from a cameraman.

**In such a confined space, every movement becomes meaningful. Because you have so little room to manoeuvre, the few elements you do have take on great importance.**
Galli: I give a lot of importance to preparation. I want most technical and cinematographic decisions to be made in advance so I can focus solely on the actors. With my core team - I like working with the same people - we lock the entire script before shooting begins, so that there are no more ambiguities. Every step is carefully planned and rehearsed in advance, not to restrict the actresses, but to create a stable framework they can rely on. This preparation allows them to let go on set, knowing the structure works, and to respond freely and intuitively in the moment.

**Why this strong need to keep control?**
Galli: Our tight schedule was very much dependent on the weather. Actually, the film was supposed to be shot the previous summer. Then it started raining, and it never stopped, so we shot a completely different movie indoors. We met again this summer, with a year's delay, and shot PEOPLE UNDER WATER. I'm happy we could finally make it!

**The lighting is fantastic. You can feel the languor of a summer's day, with lazy people lying underneath the sun.**
Galli: We only used natural light. That was partly a financial choice, but the sun also brings a different quality of light, which was perfect for the movie's atmosphere. After last year's experience, the weather made me extremely wary. We only had five days, and at the slightest disruption, we would have to call off the plan again. Every cloud in the sky made my tension rise.

–
Gert Hermans
*Paul Galli was a guest at the Filem'On Festival*

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ECFA's goal is to support cinema for children and youth in its cultural, economical, aesthetic, social, political and educational aspects. Since 1988 ECFA brings together a wide range of European film professionals and associations, producers, directors, distributors. ECFA aims to set up a working structure in every European country for films for children and young people, a structure adapted to Europe's multicultural interests.

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