Showcomotion 2003: Children and young peoples' film festival screens more than 100 films

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22 August 2003

2Be, directed by Eleni Christopoulou, 30 minutes, UK; *Science Fiction*, directed by Danny Deprez, 93 minutes, Belgium/The Netherlands; *Does God Play Football?*, directed by Mike Walker, 10 minutes, UK

The Showcomotion film festival in Britain, now in its fifth year, was held July 4-13. The annual festival, based at the Showroom Cinema, Sheffield, presents a diverse range of films produced for young people that would not otherwise be screened in the UK. Priority is given to films representing the lives of children from around the world and addressing issues considered pertinent to younger audiences. This is the first part of a two-part review of some of the films shown.

Showcomotion was conceived as a response to the lack of culturally diverse films for young audiences in the UK, other than big-budget animation mainly from the United States. It was inspired by a touring programme of films from the Belfast Cinemagic film festival, which demonstrated that there was a regional audience for "outside the mainstream" films for young people.

The festival seeks to recognise and celebrate "cultural diversity but also universality within experiences of childhood." In previous years, films from Iran, Russia, Latvia, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and France have been shown. UK production for this youthful audience is still very limited, particularly when compared to countries such as Sweden and Denmark, or even less economically developed countries such as Iran.

This year, of the 101 films shown at the festival, 58 were either produced by young people or received a significant artistic contribution from them. The material ranged from animated shorts lasting little more than a minute to feature-length films. The pre-film trailers this year consisted of animation produced by primary-school-age children (5 to 11 years).

The Showcomotion festival also enables young people to show their films and projects in a professional film festival context, and to have their work celebrated. For many children, it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. This year, young people from the South Yorkshire towns of Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherham were represented at the festival, as well as youth from cities such as Sheffield and Leeds.

Each year, Showcomotion exhibits films made more directly with the aid of children and young people. One of this year's most serious productions was the film *2Be*. The film is a documentary on children's human rights that resulted from an independent filmmaking team working with children at Abbeydale Grange Secondary School in Sheffield. More than 100 of these young people, between the ages of 11 and 14 and from diverse origins, worked together for six months on the project to create an intimate and powerful film about their experiences.

The film is about the making of a film and takes the form of a series of segments in which the children discuss, act out and explain their thoughts, fears and hopes about the world they live in. The issues range from child abuse, prostitution, bullying, alcoholism, persecution and civil war. Much of the material has a grim reality that is all the more appalling, coming as it does from those so young. There is humour too, and scenes that remind us of the natural exuberance of childhood. Threading the fragments together is a series of songs written by the children themselves.

The first sequence opens angrily, showing newspaper cuttings depicting children in distress. These images are accompanied by the song "These Words Must Be Heard": "Malevolent benevolent princess president, King queen stately and eminent, Listen to these words, These words they must be heard... Czar shah chairman and minister, Dictator and sovereign sinister, Listen to..."

The main characters are introduced, reflecting either on the situation in the many countries from which they come, or, in the case of those from the local area, on conditions in Sheffield.

The children present many problems—parents fighting at home, teenage prostitution and child labour in a sweatshop—while proclaiming the right to be free of "fear" and "exploitation."

Many of the children in the film are from former colonial countries who have come to Britain to escape civil war and persecution. One of the film's parts tackles this issue head-on. Rather than a tale of the welcoming shores of a safe haven, it tells of an all-too-common journey from one form of fear and persecution to another.

A song called "I have travelled" can be heard:

"I have travelled over land and sea, Hoping that nobody was following me, Oh they shot my brother buried him six feet deep, Firebombed the village where we lay asleep, So me and my family we had to flee, Flee this persecution and brutality, And when we reached this land of the free, Who was there to meet us the BNP, Fascist marching down the street, Like they did in my town before, Watchful watchful ever be, They'll be kicking in your door."

The sequence ends with the images of a flying aircraft dropping bombs and a mother crouched on the floor with her child; a terrified look comes to her face as she hears a knock at the door.

There are some very memorable images from the film. One particularly striking scene has a girl from Iran walking past the waterfall of the Damflask reservoir (where the "Dam-buster" fighter pilots practised before operations over Germany in World War II).

She is silhouetted against the white spray.

The final full sequence takes place in autumn. Leaves litter the ground, it is visibly getting colder; half a year has elapsed since the beginning of the project and we sense that something is drawing to a close. The children express sadness as well as a sense of resolution. They each take the ribbons of a Maypole, and in one of the most moving parts of the whole film, they sing the song "O Black Boy"—the last line of which goes: "...Why call me black o my friend, When I call you friend."

Whilst the scenes depicting the stories are moving, the strength of the film lies in the honesty with which the experiences of the children and conclusions they draw are brought together.

Students from the Middle East explain what happened to their families after the terror attacks of September 11, which saw an increase in physical attacks on Muslim families. Yasmin, a Somali girl who lived in Abu Dhabi, speaks about her family being discriminated against because they were from Africa. Muna saw her father killed in Somalia and thought at one point she might never walk again due to injuries in the civil war. Others express their desire to see a world free from exploitation and with equality for all.

After the first public showing of the film, many older children and adults drew a parallel between it and the phenomenal wave of protests that swept across the world, including many British schools, before the US-led invasion of Iraq.

In showing the process of making the film, one sees how the children mature over the six-month period in their views, understanding and talents. Director Eleni Christopoulou has accomplished a remarkable feat in engaging children from a range of backgrounds, particularly those living in distressing circumstances.

Abbeydale Grange School is a unique mix of different ethnic and social backgrounds, receiving as it does an large intake of child refugees and those finding it difficult to cope with the national education curriculum due to social and emotional problems. Presently, 55 different languages are spoken there.

The film *2Be* is a much-needed look at the world of children and their concerns. It is a tribute to the children involved that a story arising from such terrible experiences results ultimately in a life-affirming message. It is a credit to the school and the filmmakers that the work was made.

Science Fiction (from Belgium/The Netherlands) begins with a new boy, Andreas Decker, arriving in town. He tries to fit in at his new school, which is not easy. Andreas's difficulties increase when it turns out that his parents are international scientists and that he has lived in places as diverse as Moscow, Salt Lake City, Rio de Janeiro and Bombay. This does not endear him to his classmates, who are suspicious (or jealous) of such a clearly different background.

Soon, three kids, led by a girl called Vero, latch onto Andreas. They proceed to make his life even more miserable—especially Vero, who in one memorably nasty scene climbs over the school canteen table and spits her food at him. After Vero steals Andreas's computer game console, and the latter attempts to retrieve it, the four children become friends. But the curiosity of the three about Andreas's parents only increases—set off by their obsessive secrecy, their strange habit of wearing dark sunglasses whenever outside and their continual use of mobile phones. The children conclude that Andreas's parents are...aliens! At first Andreas protests. But then the children are drawn into an often dangerous set of circumstances as they try to prove their theory.

In a pre-festival review project, older children were asked to give their views on the film. The verdict was split pretty much down the middle. Those who liked the film thought it was clever, unpredictable and likely to "switch on" even cynical "anti-sci-fi" types. Those more unfavourable described it as unrealistic and emotionless, and complained of the wooden acting of the adult leads.

There is much to be said for the inventive story line and the different ploys the children use to spy on Andreas's parents. The device of keeping the audience guessing between the possible paranoia of the children and a real alien conspiracy is well maintained. And all the child actors are convincing in often outlandish scenarios.

These factors contributed to the film being awarded the 2003 People's Choice at the Montreal International Children's Film Festival. But more critical reviewers identified a significant flaw in the film. Although tapping into a rich seam within children's literature—the contradiction between a strange, shadowy, often confusing world inhabited by adults and the more limited and direct reasoning and behaviour of children—*Science Fiction* does little to develop on this theme.

The characterisation of the adults is a case in point. The film's portrayal of Andreas's parents as *X-Files*-type caricatures is more ridiculous than sinister. Those children who were critical of the film described it as "patronising" towards its audience. And the final twist, when it comes, is even more disappointing, throwing into sharp relief the promise of the film's opening.

Another film with a twist is the short *Does God Play Football?*, which premiered at the festival. It tells the brief tale of a seven-year-old boy, Tommy, growing up in rural England in the mid-1960s alone with his mother.

Growing up without a father or husband, with all the attendant prejudices of the time, Tommy and his mother don't exactly fit into ordinary village life. This influences them in different ways, wonderfully illustrated in one of the opening scenes. As his mother waits with him in the queue at the grocery store, Tommy's voice-over informs us that when he asked his mother where his father was she told him that he was "with Jesus." Since Jesus was "with God," he reasons, that must mean that he is the son of God! Tommy closes his eyes and stretches out his arms crucifixion-style. The other housewives in the store glare in horror at the strange boy. Angry and embarrassed, Tommy's mother hauls him out of the store.

Tommy is obsessed with playing football. We see him enthusiastically getting stuck in a game, with boys much bigger than himself. But at night, he secretly prays for a father. He befriends the new local priest, in whom he begins to confide on their strolls across the open countryside. Tommy eventually introduces the priest to his mother and watches them through a window, hoping that at last he may be about to get a real father.

Writer and director Mike Walker, who fielded questions from the audience after its first screening, said of the film; "It's about how he [Tommy] fills in the emotional gaps in his life... God is dad for him. But football is like an alternative religion."

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