

# Kids to the Rescue: Film Festival Shines a Light on Activism

The New York International Children's Film Festival returns with dozens of works from more than 30 countries.

By **Laurel Graeber**

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Over the next four weekends children will help save endangered species, prevent a jetliner from crashing, rescue girls from forced marriages and even marshal a revolt against a sitting president (but not the one in the White House).

All these deeds will take place onscreen as the New York International Children's Film Festival brings works from more than 30 countries — including a new program of Spanish-language short films — to theaters in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. But even though some of the cinematic actions are fictional, the 18 feature presentations and 93 shorts add up to an overwhelming celebration of young people taking charge.

“We are always looking for films that show kids who are empowered to make change,” said Nina Guralnick, executive director of the 23-year-old festival. But along with the recent global rise in youthful activism, she added, “we were seeing movies that reflected that trend.”



José Adolfo Quisocala Condori in “Forward: Tomorrow Belongs to Us,” a documentary film directed by Gilles de Maistre. Charades, via New York International Children's Film Festival

One of the most striking is the French documentary “Forward: Tomorrow Belongs to Us,” which has its first of three festival screenings on Saturday. Its director, Gilles de Maistre, profiles seven young activists, including Aissatou, 12, who in the course of the film (and with police assistance) actually interrupts a marriage procession in Guinea to inform the 14-year-old bride-to-be of her rights. The movie also includes Hunter, 11, who helps rehabilitate rhinos in South Africa, and José Adolfo, who at 13 won the 2018 Children's Climate Prize for a bank he founded in Peru: Young people establish accounts by being paid for the recyclables they collect. (He will lead a post-screening Q. and A.)

Young moviegoers can find fictional characters who are just as forward-thinking in titles like “Fritzi: A Revolutionary Tale” and “Rocca Changes the World.” The animated “Fritzi,” from the German filmmakers Ralf Kukula and Matthias Bruhn, follows an East German 12-year-old girl who is caught up in the fall of the Berlin Wall. “Rocca” concerns the breaking of different kinds of barriers as it focuses on an intrepid 11-year-old whose father is an astronaut. Directed by Katja Benrath, who will visit the festival on March 7 for a Q. and A., this German feature begins as the aeronautically savvy Rocca (Luna Marie Maxeiner) calmly lands a plane whose crew has food poisoning, and then skateboards away. But that is not the end of her resourcefulness. She also combats bullying and homelessness.

“It’s like a modern Pippi Longstocking story,” Benrath said in a telephone conversation from Hamburg. She noted that the film’s message was simple: “It’s easy to change the world. Everybody can. Just start with themselves.”



The fall of the Berlin Wall is the backdrop for “Fritzi: A Revolutionary Tale,” by the German filmmakers Ralf Kukula and Matthias Bruhn. Global Screen, via New York International Children’s Film Festival

The annual festival, which begins on Friday night with “Children of the Sea,” the Japanese director Ayumu Watanabe’s manga-inspired animated feature about three adolescents with a mystical connection to ocean life, has always been a pioneer, too. It consistently offers titles for teenagers as well as for younger audiences. It is also one of the few children’s film festivals that is Oscar-qualifying: The shorts that win prizes from its adult jury can compete for Academy Awards. (That jury’s longstanding members include the filmmakers Sofia Coppola and Taika Waititi, who just won a screenwriting Oscar for “JoJo Rabbit.”)

And while diversity still seems to be a challenge for Hollywood, this festival cultivates it. In 2020, women directed 53 percent of its shorts. This is also the first time the events will include an industry forum, Towards an Inclusive Future, at which gender and ethnic representation in children’s media will be discussed.



Ayumu Watanabe’s “Children of the Sea” is a manga-inspired feature about three adolescents with a mystical connection to ocean life. Gkids, via New York International Children’s Film Festival

“We’re really trying to complete a circle, and go from our audiences and what they need and what they’ve been asking for, to our filmmakers and what they need,” said Maria-Christina Villaseñor, the festival’s programming director.

Some of those filmmakers have created works that might initially seem disturbing for young audiences. But the festival does not shy away from subjects like death and divorce.

“If you’re not shaken up a little, you shouldn’t be doing it,” Villaseñor said about her role as programmer. “That’s what art should do, and it doesn’t matter how old you are.”

One film she at first found unsettling — starting with its title — was “The Club of Ugly Children,” a Dutch feature adapted from Koos Meinderts’s 1987 book. Set in a rigidly ordered dystopia whose motto is “Keep It Clean,” the movie concerns an autocratic president who decides to intern all children he finds unattractive. After a boy escapes, a youth-led underground rebellion starts.

The film is “like a celebration of diversity,” said Jonathan Elbers, the director, speaking by phone from Amsterdam. “There is not a stand on what is pretty or what is not. The kids are just kids.” That approach, said Elbers, who will take part in a festival Q. and A. on March 7, puts the focus on “Who are you to decide I don’t belong in this society?”



A scene from Jonathan Elbers’s “The Club of Ugly Children,” a Dutch feature adapted from Koos Meinderts’s book. umami.media, via New York International Children’s Film Festival

The festival also addresses revolutions that are less political than personal. The shorts programs “Girls’ POV” and “Boys Beyond Boundaries” explore and expand gender roles. Géraldine Charpentier’s “Self Story,” an animated Belgian short, is screening in both programs because its subject, Lou, is nonbinary. An American film in the “Boys” slate, “Grab My Hand: A Letter to My Dad,” by Camrus Johnson and Pedro Piccinini, delves deeply into grief. Johnson conceived the film after the unexpected death of his father’s best friend. Memorializing the older men’s bond, it urges male viewers not to leave love unspoken.

“Express what you feel,” Johnson said, “because sometimes you can make someone’s day — or someone’s life.”

The festival, however, is not all weighty themes. Aardman Animations’ latest Shaun the Sheep comedy, “Farmageddon,” and “NYCIFF Rocks,” a new all-ages shorts program that celebrates music, are among the lighter fare. Teenage rockers can also expect humor — and plenty of beats — in Kenji Iwaisawa’s “On-Gaku: Our Sound,” about Japanese high school musicians, and Simon Bird’s “Days of the Bagnold Summer,” a British movie with Earl Cave (son of Nick) and an original score by the indie band Belle and Sebastian. Villaseñor expects that title to continue a festival tradition of engaging grown-ups as much as their offspring.

“I’ve had conversations with people who have adult children now, and they talk wistfully about the festival,” she said. “And they tell me, almost as a little secret, that they want to come back this year.”

#### The New York International Children’s Film Festival

Through March 15 at various locations; 212-349-0330, [nyciff.org](http://nyciff.org).

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