

“What Kids Can Do”

by Katy Kavanaugh and Kara Knafelc

Lennart Ström, director of the Swedish children’s film festival, BUFF, said we’d never see it in America. After all, what American kid wants to watch a subtitled film like “El Bola” (“The Ball” in Spanish) about two eleven-year-old boys, their friendship, and their fathers? And what kind of parent wants their child to watch as one of these boys is brutally beaten and psychologically abused by his dad?

This kind of story clearly asks tough questions about punishment and parental responsibility. And it’s understandable why some might shy from its content, which looks at some of the more serious phenomena of childhood. But despite its controversial subject matter, *El Bola* did make the rounds at European and children’s film festivals in 2001, winning Best Picture at Spain’s Oscars, the Goyas, and at the European Film Academy. It also picked up first prize honors at children’s film festivals in Argentina, Poland, France, and Sweden. And contrary to Ström’s skepticism about the film’s ability to make the Atlantic passage, it did reach American audiences, and critics, and received excellent reviews, though not in the children’s film category. And herein lies the rub.

If this film has appealed to so many young minds and garnered such accolades, then why won’t *our* kids ever see it? Are we stymied by subtitles? Are we afraid our kids can’t hack it? Or is it that we’re committed to keeping them in the dark about their moral worlds and philosophical beliefs, and ours?

Well, there are the subtitles. Some have claimed that American kids can’t—or won’t—pick up the text at the bottom of the screen. This argument is understandable if you don’t know that kids are already doing it. In Stockholm, children, see a subtitled version of “Sesame Street” every morning. And in Germany, children aged six and up fill the 900-seat theater at the Berlin Kinderfilmfest, Europe’s most influential kids’ film festival, to watch a Belgian film with French dialogue subtitled in English and simultaneously translated into German. This may sound like a linguistic feat fit for the UN, but it’s the standard method used around the world, as well as at the few international children’s film festivals in the U.S. – and it works.

Can our kids hack it? Our kids have shown themselves awfully capable in the face of the awful events of the past two years. Talk to an eight year old about the invasion of Iraq, and she’ll ask you why we can’t just drive less or he’ll wonder why we can’t just imagine a different kind of car. Kids get it, perhaps because they have intuited what we have yet to see -- that they’re inheriting a world that demands their understanding and their ability to see how they fit into the bigger picture, the international scene.

So where do we go from here? Instead of focusing on how we can say “no” to our kids with the limits we’ve imposed through things like ratings systems and plain old parental protectionism, let’s begin to think about how we can say “yes.” Yes, it’s important to encounter (and really, to learn) other languages. Yes, you have the right to see art that represents your life and the lives of your peers in Korea, Sweden, England, Iran and Iraq. Yes, it is good to see a 10 year-old Dane examining Islam (*WALLAH BE Pia Bovin Denmark 2002*) or a story discussing a nine year-old’s karma (*DONG SUNG Joo Kyung-Jung, Korea 2002*), subjects of two films from this year’s Kinderfilmfest program, which, inspiringly, was dedicated to tolerance. Yes, we believe you can handle subtitles and complex subject matter, that you will be enriched by it, and that you may even see things we don’t, like a way out of some of the messes we’ve gotten ourselves into this last century or so. Yes, you may and you can. Yes, yes, yes.

World count: 647

Katy Kavanaugh has judged children’s film nationally and internationally. Her programming established the Mill Valley Film Festival’s Children’s FilmFest. She is the Founder and Artistic Director of the touring program of international films, Screen 360: Films for Children of the World launching in San Francisco this summer.

Kara Knafelc lives and teaches in San Francisco. She currently works at the Writing Center at the University of San Francisco.

