

ZEF Filmowe Okno na Europę, Poland

Interview with Urszula Biel and Agnieszka Piotrowska-Prażuch, Kino Amok

by Anna Tatarska

“What are we going to watch today?” Every parent knows the anguish such question can cause. To follow blindly is the easiest way: just choose whatever film plays in your nearest multiplex, or whatever title is the “pick of the day” on the streaming platform of your choice. You can be sure somebody’s Excel chart and marketing plan just succeeded, and yes, the algorithm is happy too! But are the true needs of a young viewer satisfied? Has the screening added anything to their emotional or intellectual landscape? Has their imagination been stimulated, their potential increased? It never hurt anyone to ask for support.

ZEF Filmowe Okno na Europę (“Cinematic Window to Europe”) is a project developed by Agnieszka Piotrowska-Prażuch, Urszula Biel (both from the Polish Kino Amok) and Bolesław Drochomirecki (Kino OKO), within the framework of Collaborate to Innovate.

This is your first venture with European funds, correct?

Urszula Biel: Yes, that’s true. We’re excited to learn and a little stressed out by the formalities. But we know what we are doing functionally, due to years of experience as cinema managers, programmers, and educators, so that’s giving us the confidence and energy to move forward.

Can you tell me more about ZEF?

Biel: The Polish abbreviation ZEF stands for “Zespół Edukatorów Filmowych”, Film Educators Panel. It’s comprised of teachers, people from the cinema industry, children’s festival programmers, and film and cultural

educators—people who’ve watched the young film market in Poland grow and change for years. This experience is extremely helpful, considering adult opinions don’t often align with children’s. We’ve been working as a group for a while now, in different forms and capacities, and we know how to pair the two. Presently, we have not founded an official association. Hopefully this project will allow us to formalize.

Agnieszka Piotrowska-Prażuch: The project we launched, thanks to Collaborate to Innovate, is coordinated by Amok, an arthouse cinema founded almost 25 years ago, situated in Gliwice, a city in Upper Silesia in southern Poland. Partner cinemas are OKF Iluzja (Częstochowa),



Kino Amok, Gliwice

Kino Sokół (Nowy Sącz), and Kino Mikro (Kraków) from the Europa Cinemas network and OKO, a mobile cinema from Opole that hosts screenings in places without cinemas. The choice of collaborators was far from random: we were interested in cinemas that operate in the field of education. For example, OKO's founder, Bolesław Drochomirecki, happens to be one of the founders of ZEF.

What's the goal of ZEF Filmowe Okno na Europę?

Piotrowska-Prażuch: The hope is to grow and make our work useful to other cinemas all over Poland and beyond. ZEF Filmowe Okno na Europę is designed to support various institutions and organizations with an interest in creating quality programmes for their young audiences, as well as teachers, parents, tutors, and anyone interested in using film as an educational medium while working with youths.

Why do you feel such an initiative is needed in the first place? Isn't there enough film choice already available for younger audiences?

Piotrowska-Prażuch: Our impression is that cinema for younger audiences—something that's not marketed by the big studios—is not widely available in Poland. As someone who's been watching more artistic, independent, festival youth films for years, I know how much they have to offer, and I think it would be great if children and young audiences had a wider choice.

Biel: The main problem is that, while film festivals are open to less mainstream, more original productions, after they wrap there aren't enough distributors interested in putting those movies on the screens available for a wider young audience.

Piotrowska-Prażuch: Therefore, one of the goals of this initiative with Collaborate to Innovate is to create a well-oiled, steady mechanism that will allow us to promote

these movies with the hope of increasing the audiences', teachers', educators', and parents' interest. And, if more people buy tickets, the distributors might realize these are movies worth distributing outside of the festival circuit.

Do you think that's a realistic plan?

Biel: Over the years, Amok cinema has managed to raise a whole generation of conscious and curious viewers. We pay enormous attention to the quality of what we screen and see our work bear fruit every day. They trust us.

Enriching the selection of widely distributed films for children and adults is also important as it can affect the local production market.

Piotrowska-Prażuch: Polish production of youth movies is too scarce, compared to, say, Scandinavia. It used to be an important sector in the local market, but that's changed. Currently, there's usually around one premiere a year, and some animated features. But I can tell that when a Polish movie for kids is finally released, the audiences are enthusiastic. Recently Polish media has praised "Czarny młyn" (Black mill), a fantasy kids' movie with strong social undertones. Directed by Mariusz Palej, and based on a book by a successful novelist Marcin Szczygielski, it has attracted an audience of over 270,000 viewers since it opened in late August. One can only wonder what the numbers would be without the pandemic.

Partner cinemas:

- Kino Amok (Gliwice)
- OKF Iluzja (Czestochowa)
- Sokol (Nowy Sacz)
- Opolskie Kino Objazdowe (Opole)
- Kino Mikro (Kraków)



OKF Iluzja, Czestochowa