

The Boy on the Bicycle: “Showing children what their new friends in class have been through”

A CONVERSATION WITH RACHEL DRUMMOND-HAY AND KEZ MARGRIE*

How did you come up with the idea for The Boy on the Bicycle?

Drummond-Hay: We were approached by UNICEF who wanted to talk about programme ideas for children. They had seen some of our previous work and liked our approach. We had a long discussion about all kinds of issues but felt that a programme about life in a refugee camp told from the point of view of a child would be most timely and would give a very different perspective to the news stories that were so current at the time.

We chose Zaatari refugee camp as the place to film as it was one of the largest camps for Syrian refugees – and also relatively stable being in Jordan and managed by international aid agencies.

Margrie: I commissioned this because we know that this is the issue of the time for children, they are finding themselves sat next to a new kid in class who they maybe can't even understand. We wanted to show children in the UK what their new friends have been through.

What was especially important for you?

Drummond-Hay: It was very important for us to give an authentic and honest account of life from the viewpoint of children. To look at both the similarities of children living here in the UK and in the refugee camp (and indeed the world over) – the joy of play, importance of friends and family, going to school – and then introducing the differences. We did not want the film

to feel like a news piece or patronising in any way at all.

How did you find the characters and why is it not just one character?

Drummond-Hay: We had a very short time to find characters. We wanted a key character who could speak English, Ahmed (Ill. 1, 2 and 7), and we also wanted to have both boys and girls, as well as a contrast in the types of children living in the camp. So we had the young boy Mohamed who worked in the bakery (Ill. 3) as well as Ali who ran his own English classes (Ill. 4) – and of course Ola who was football mad (Ill. 5).

What were the most challenging things in the production process? Were you allowed to film everywhere and whatever you wanted?

Drummond-Hay: Logistics of filming in the camp ... Our director was hugely restricted in terms of days allowed in the camp to find characters (3 days) and then to film (4 days). She could only travel to the camp in daylight hours so filming was from around 9 am to 3 pm. She had to be accompanied by security at all times. Furthermore, the language difference meant a lot of talking through translators which – given the limited filming time – added significant pressure to the shoot.

You have some scenes where Ahmed got his own camera to film whatever he liked. How did you select what you wanted to show from this self-filmed material?

Drummond-Hay: He was given the camera to film with his family overnight one night. He didn't film loads but did some nice moments when he was dancing and also clearing up the following morning after his home was flooded.

Did you get any feedback about the programme from the target audience?

Drummond-Hay: Yes, we have had lots of feedback from children who have seen the programme in different settings – at home, in school etc. Generally children love the characters and love to see such a different way of life. But they also feel a connection as they see them jumping in puddles, doing the moon walk etc.

How does the whole programme fit into the current discussion and current topics?

Drummond-Hay: There are no specific connections to Brexit, but as Syrian refugees continue to come to this country, and Syria remains on the news, the programme feels as relevant now as when it went out on TV in December 2015. We have made a new programme, *New Boys in Town*, which features some Syrian refugees who are now living in the UK. It is about friendship and settling into a new life in a new country.

“

Kerida McDonald

Senior Advisor, Communication for Development, UNICEF:

The Boy on the Bicycle provides a window into the serious impact of war, displacement and forced migration through the voice, eyes and mind of a child. [...] The story artfully embeds subtle messages on child labour, gender equity and ethnic tolerance.”

(Extract from the jury decision at PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2016)

”



* Rachel Drummond-Hay is co-owner of Drummer TV, an independent production company based in Bristol, UK. Kez Margrie is Executive Producer CBBC Independents, UK.

MY LIFE: THE BOY ON THE BICYCLE (CBBC, UK)

In *The Boy on the Bicycle*, 16-year-old Ahmed from Syria takes the audience on a tour through one of the world's biggest refugee camps, Zaatari in Jordan. Ahmed is like any other boy his age, except he has had to leave everything behind, including his toys and technology, to move to the refugee camp.

When the Syrian civil war began in 2012 his family had to abandon their affluent lives and flee across the border to Zaatari camp for safety. He now lives in a storage container along with 80,000 other refugees, none of whom can leave the camp without permission. The camp has everything they need, from shops to a hospital, school and football pitches, but life is very different to how it was before. Ahmed doesn't let this affect his positivity though, and he finds new ways to have fun with his friends – even if it is in a desert sandstorm (Ill. 6) followed by flooding. As Ahmed cycles around the 5 mile square camp he introduces the audience to some of the other inspirational children who live there and presents the reality of life in a refugee camp from a child's point of view. *The Boy on the Bicycle* has won several awards, among others Children's BAFTA 2016: Factual, Broadcast Awards 2017: Best Children's Programme, PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL 2016: Categories 7-10 Non Fiction, Heart Award and UNICEF Special Award, and Japan Prize 2016.