

AGAT Films & Cie

PRESENTS



LITTLE GIRL (Petite Fille)

A FILM BY **SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ**

2020 – FRANCE – DOCUMENTARY – FRENCH – 85'

SYNOPSIS

7-year-old Sasha has always known she was a little girl, even though she was born a boy. As society fails to treat her like the other children her age - in her daily life at school, dance lessons or birthday parties - her supportive family leads a constant battle to make her difference understood and accepted.

INTERVIEW WITH SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

How did you come up with the idea for a film about Sasha?

A few years ago, I made a film about Bambi, one of France's first transexuals, who was born in 1935. She told me that, as early as 3-4 years old, she sensed deep inside that she was a little girl. That gave me pause because usually, when the subject of transidentity comes up, it is assimilated with adolescence, with puberty, the moment when the body changes. Bambi's account opened my eyes to the fact that it could occur much earlier in the life of a trans person. I also realized that the identity issue was totally separate from questions of sexuality that crop up in adolescence. I felt it was essential to tell the story of a contemporary child experiencing those identity issues to get a better grasp of these questions.

How did you meet Sasha and her family?

While I was editing *Adolescence*, I pitched the idea to my producer, Muriel Meynard. Soon after, we began the search for our protagonist, half-convinced that it would take an age to find a family that would agree to be filmed. It felt like mission impossible. Where do you find a trans kid? It occurred to us to go online and post a message on forums where the parents of children with gender dysphoria share their experiences. The initial reaction from some people, who were very wary, was irate. Without knowing who we were, they accused us of being obscene or voyeuristic, as a knee-jerk reaction. We tried to explain that our approach was, on the contrary, completely respectful of the people concerned, and that the film aimed to raise awareness and acceptance of transidentity. In the end, two families replied: one in Canada and the other in France. The Canadian family told us, very warmly, *Come to see us! Here, society is totally understanding of issues of transidentity. There is a fantastic level of acceptance.* We were surprised, dumbstruck almost. And then, there was Karine, Sasha's mother, who very cautiously told us that she had a child in the situation we described, and she was wondering whether it was a good idea or not to tell that story, Sasha's story. We began by messaging each other, then Karine asked to meet us, without Sasha at first. That first meeting was overwhelming. We were both overcome by emotion. There was immediate trust and affection. At our second meeting, over milk and cookies, I met Sasha and her whole family.

You depict the family as a truly benign cocoon.

What I saw the very first time is what you see in the film. They are an extremely solid, united family. There is a bond of unconditional love between them, which you perceive without filters. Most likely, it's due to what Sasha is going through: her family has come together around her to protect her. I tried to capture this unity by showing the house as a kind of bubble in which Sasha and her loved ones are safe to live their lives. There is a greater sense of threat around it, on the outside, at school, in ballet class or just on the street. Fortunately, Karine is honed to anticipate threats, and to respond to them.

Did the family immediately agree to make the film?

I was cautious. I started by offering to film them just for one day, to give them an idea of what a film shoot entails, with a crew taking over your house. That first day is in the film, when the kids have a snowball fight in the backyard. I remember there was an immediate sense of grace, such powerful emotion that, all the way back to Paris, the crew and I wondered what had happened. The family adopted us from the get-go, and we loved them unreservedly.

How were you able to film their private life without being obtrusive?

I work with a very small crew: DP, sound recordist and production assistant. What matters is that every member of the crew is accepted and loved by the family. It's not only me who has to forge close bonds with them. In the most natural way possible, we try to become part of their lives. It's like any new relationship—you suddenly want to spend days, weeks or months together. The family adopted us from the get-go because they sensed that we were like a second protective circle around Sasha.

How did Sasha let you know that she accepted you in her world?

Sasha was fully aware of the camera. She's not at all a child who has no idea what she's doing. For example, on one of our first shooting days, I asked her if we could film her in her bedroom. She was a little hesitant because, besides her brothers and sister, nobody goes in there. It's her realm. Nobody at school knows her bedroom is a little girl's room. It's like a secret room. By allowing us in, she demonstrated a level of trust—she was letting us into her life. I told her I'd like to film her while she was playing. She looked at me, as if taken aback. We set up the camera in the bedroom, composed the shot, and then she sat down on her bed and stared at the camera. I asked her, "Aren't you going to play?" And she replied, "No. When I play, usually I'm alone." She couldn't play-act, pretending she was alone, when we were there. For her, it was senseless, or else she'd have become an actress, so she refused. I found her resistance wonderful. There was another time, too, when we were filming in her bedroom. We realized she wasn't paying any attention to us, probably thinking we were setting up the camera. She was playing on her bed, leaning over the side with her head upside down. Suddenly, she realized we were filming her and she gazed into the lens, as if to make sure we were watching, as if to say, "Yes, I'll let you film me here, in this private space." It was very powerful.

What's your conception of filming at children's eye level?

It was crucial, and I was very attentive to that throughout the shoot. Whenever possible, the film adopts Sasha's point of view. The camera is with her, as close as possible, at her eye level, and that's what allows us to create a bond of empathy and to understand what she's going through.

Your films often question gender norms. Did the fact of their being imposed on a 7-year-old enable you to expose what is most brutal and oppressive in these norms?

The violence that Sasha endures, I felt it very strongly. It even became an issue for us in filming. The school put obstacles in our path throughout the shoot. The idea of someone making a film about Sasha and her family freaked them out. It took them an awful long time to accept her as a little girl. The film heaped more pressure on them. With regard to the hospital, even if the location seems cold and medicine attempts to rationalize everything, the child psychiatrist showed unbelievable humanity in her approach to Sasha. Her role is to help Sasha articulate what she is experiencing and what she is feeling deep inside. It cannot be rushed. If she has nothing to say, it's not a problem. It's a support structure that is put in place for years and that Sasha can call on for help when she needs to. There is no obligation. Everything can be reversed.

You show how the family must seek out and identify allies. The lack of people they can turn to is striking.

When I first met Karine, she was at the end of her rope, exhausted by years of looking for someone who could help her understand and support Sasha. Where she lives, in north-eastern

France, there is nobody she can talk to about it. The few people who might be able to guide her, such as the family doctor, have so little training on the subject that their statements tend to be blaming rather than helping, not out of mean-spiritedness but ignorance. It can make them dangerous. I was the person who told Karine there was a department for children with gender dysphoria at Robert Debré children's hospital in Paris. For her, it was a glimmer of hope. The first consultation with the child psychiatrist is a long and moving scene. It provides both an overview of everything the family has withstood for so many years and a beginning-point for the acknowledgement of Sasha's suffering. Karine asks questions that have been preying on her mind for years. "Did I do something wrong? Did wanting a girl while I was pregnant cause Sasha's gender dysphoria? Was it the right decision to let her dress as a little girl?" The child psychiatrist's answers are so liberating. In a few minutes, years of guilt and anxiety evaporate. I hope that those answers will be heard by people. The educational slant of the film is deliberate.

On another level, *Little Girl* is a very moving documentary about Sasha's mother. What struck you about her relationship with her daughter?

I truly saw Karine ready to go to any lengths to defend her child. Her battle is non-negotiable. Any opposition, any attack, any judgments regarding Sasha will always provoke a scathing reply from her. What I found admirable about Karine is that she is also aware of the collateral damage. She knows that a child like Sasha monopolizes her attention. She has, therefore, less time for her other children. She actually tries to explain to them that the fight demands sacrifices. It's hard, but that's how it is. At one point, one of her sons, Vassily, tells her that he understands, she has no choice. I found the maturity of that 10-year-old unbelievable. His understanding of the battle they are fighting is total.

What questions were raised in your mind by filming a femininity under construction?

Sasha is attached to all outward signs of femininity. Clothes are a particular focus. Toys likewise. Recently, Karine told me that once the school accepted Sasha as a little girl, she focussed less on all those outward signs of femininity. She was suddenly able to accept colors, outfits and games that were more masculine. She was less concerned with making a statement about her identity. Karine sees that as Sasha having made real progress in her need for affirmation.

Like your previous films, *Little Girl* features people fighting what they have been assigned to do or be. How is that linked to your personal story?

School can be a traumatic setting if you are unable to find affirmation, unable to find allies and friends. People made fun of me at school as a boy, for being too feminine, too sweet. Fortunately, I developed a way to deflect it: I was the schoolyard marbles champion. I was unbeatable, so they left me alone. It was a smokescreen. Beyond Sasha's transidentity, the film is about what it means to be different as a child. What does it mean to grow up and make a life for yourself outside of society's norms?

Did you tell Sasha about Bambi?

Of course. She was in awe. When Karine and I told her Bambi's story, it warmed her heart. It meant life was possible for a trans person, without it being a drama or a tragedy. She sees Bambi as a heroine.

Interview by Quentin Grosset for TROISCOULEURS, January 2020.

SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sébastien Lifshitz was born in 1968 in Paris, France. After studying art history, he began working in the world of contemporary art in 1990. He then turned to filmmaking and directed his first feature in 2000, *Come Undone*, hailed by the critics and released internationally. His first documentary feature, *The Crossing*, premiered in Cannes (Director's Fortnight 2001), followed by fiction feature *Wild Side* in Berlin 2004 (Panorama 2004 / Teddy award).

After *The Invisibles* (Cannes 2012 - Official Selection), *Bambi* (Berlin 2013 - Panorama), *The Lives of Thérèse* (Cannes 2016 - Director's Fortnight) and *Adolescentes* (Locarno 2019), he returns to the Berlinale with his new documentary *Little Girl*.

FILMOGRAPHY

2020	PETITE FILLE (LITTLE GIRL) documentary
2019	AVENUE DE LAMBALLE short
2019	ADOLESCENTES documentary
2016	LES VIES DE THÉRÈSE (THE LIVES OF THÉRÈSE) documentary
2013	BAMBI documentary
2012	LES INVISIBLES (THE INVISIBLES) documentary
2009	PLEIN SUD (GOING SOUTH) feature
2008	JOUR ET NUIT short
2006	LES TEMOINS documentary
2004	WILD SIDE feature
2001	LA TRAVERSÉE (THE CROSSING) documentary
2000	PRESQUE RIEN (COME UNDONE) feature
1999	LES TERRES FROIDES (COLD LANDS) tv movie
1998	LES CORPS OUVERTS (OPEN BODIES) medium-length feature
1995	CLAIRE DENIS LA VAGABONDE documentary
1994	IL FAUT QUE JE L'AIME short

CREW

A film by	Sébastien Lifshitz
Produced by	Muriel Meynard
Coproduced by	Monica Hellström
Director of Photography	Paul Guilhaume
Sound	Yolande Decarsin
Assistant director	Philippe Thiollier
Editing	Pauline Gaillard
Sound mixing	Kristian Selin Eidnes Andersen
Grading	Isabelle Laclau
Sound Editing	Thomas Jaeger, Jacques Pedersen

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