



****Official Selection – World Cinema Documentary Competition****

A HOUSE MADE OF SPLINTERS

a film by Simon Lereng Wilmont
Produced by Monica Hellstrom



Sundance Virtual World Premiere

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2022 / Denmark / Finland / Sweden / Ukrainian / 86 min

Short Synopsis/logline:

In this poignant and deeply intimate documentary three kids temporarily removed from their parents find friendship and flickers of hope inside the worn walls of a remarkable orphanage in Eastern Ukraine, as a group of dedicated social workers create moments of joy and respite from childhoods all but lost.

Long Synopsis:

In this war-worn and impoverished corner of Eastern Ukraine where addiction casts a long shadow, there sits a safe haven for children temporarily removed from their parents. *A House Made of Splinters* follows three kids awaiting their fate— will they go back or move on to a new home?— while a group of dedicated social workers create small moments of joy and respite from childhoods all but lost.

Filmmaker Simon Lereng Wilmont returns with a follow-up to his acclaimed first feature, *The Distant Barking of Dogs*, offering a unique look into how the long-term consequences of war on a society already under strain impacts the most vulnerable. His is a poignant and deeply intimate portrait of a remarkable way station filled with care, support, and trust for a group of kids who are in desperate need of more.

An Interview with director Simon Lereng Wilmont

What led you to this story?

My previous film, *The Distant Barking of Dogs*, followed a young boy and his grandmother, Alexandra, living in the same region— right on the front line. The young boy's mother had died, and his father was unable to look after him, but he was blessed to have love and security from his grandmother. During the filming, Alexandra developed heart problems and I realized how fragile that precious life they had built together was. I started to worry about him, and wanted to look into what might happen if she wasn't around to look after him anymore.

I discovered that there were many children whose parents had died in the war, or who had been removed from their parents because of neglect due to addiction and trauma. There are these temporary shelters across the region where the children go for up to nine months until the state figures out what to do with them— some go home, some are adopted, and some go to a permanent state-run orphanage. This whole tragic situation gives you a sense of the devastating impact of the long-term consequences of war. It was something I knew I needed to explore more.

How did you decide to film in this shelter specifically?

I was working with the same Assistant Director Azad Safarov as with *Distant Barking*, and during our research phase we went to a number of different shelters— many were cold, lonely, and neglected places. It was heartbreaking to see. When we found the shelter where this film takes place, it was completely different. There were drawings on the walls, teddy bears, and toys, and most importantly I could feel the human warmth from the staff. They were incredible.

How were you able to gain the trust of the social workers?

We spent a long time with the staff talking about what we wanted to do, and my previous film really helped them understand our intention. There was full transparency: I told them exactly how and when and why we filmed the scenes we did, and we would never film anything without them agreeing. Ultimately, they also needed somebody to listen to their stories, their hopes and fears. I valued spending time with the staff and being there, and I think it was mutual. I guess that's the simplest answer.

Of course, we also made sure we had all of the correct permits and permissions from the authorities, parents, and guardians to be there.

You follow three children. I was wondering about the process of identifying them?

To start with, I am really just using my gut feeling and spending as much time with the

children as possible— hanging out with them and getting to know them. I also look to see if they have a screen presence and, most importantly, if they enjoy being filmed. This is even before thinking about the story.

When I first meet potential subjects, I always do a test and film them looking into the camera in order to see how they react— it reveals a lot of personality when someone stares right into a camera, because after a while they let down their guard and reveal their personality in a more honest way. I believe that all the children I have followed have this amazing complex personality and a lot of screen presence, and so then I just knew I wanted to follow them for the entire 9 months they were at the shelter. And somehow it turned out that each of them had different destinies— all leaving the shelter either to go home, to a foster family, or to a state-run orphanage.

There are three main subjects, but many other children appear in the film. How important are the friendships that you observed?

Love is a basic human need, and when children are deprived of family love, they turn to friendships in order to survive. In these shelters, children form attachments and friendships as deep and important as family bonds. [MW10] [LH11] The children learn from each other, and the younger kids look to the older kids for guidance. They are incredibly adaptable, but this need for attachment is also a universal human drive, and many people have “chosen family” — close friends who fulfill needs that their biological families do not.

What did you do to prepare to film children?

We talked to NGOs, the social workers, the staff, and their psychologists to prepare. This is also my fourth film told from the perspective of children, and I have kids around the same age, so after the many talks with the professional and the close collaboration with the staff I felt prepared.

Then I just followed the kids in their posse, hanging out with them, getting to know them and always being honest. I went along on their terms and had a huge respect for their world, treating them with respect and listening to them. And when I kept coming back, they began to trust me.

The film rarely leaves the shelter. How did you make that decision?

The decision to stay mostly at the shelter came rather late in the editorial process. I had filmed a whole layer showing the reality of life outside the shelter and had followed one of the social workers visiting the homes of other kids. But it somehow didn't feel right, it felt truer to the kids to just experience their life from their perspective. But it was also important for us to show the society and to give an understanding of the situation for some of the families living in the region. We therefore asked Margo, one of the region's

long-serving social workers, to be the narrator and, in her words, tell us the situation of the society and the long-term consequences of the war in this region.

There are small pleasures everywhere inside the shelter—crushes, small gifts and sparklers on Christmas. What is the significance of pleasure in your depiction?

I wanted to show that, despite living in the shadow of war, they were also just like any other pre-teens experiencing crushes, learning dances, being excited for Christmas. Those small moments of pleasure and glimmers of joy blooming in an otherwise bleak part of their lives help you to believe that there's always a hope for a better future. But at the same time, you recognize how heartbreakingly fragile they are—sparklers can be extinguished, crushes rejected— so the most important thing was always those close friendships.

For me, the film is really about hope, and that hope is what makes this shelter so special— that the social workers do all they can to maintain this sense of hope and optimism for the kids.

Can you explain your decision to leave depictions of conflict and war in eastern Ukraine out of the film?

I wanted to draw attention to the less visible, but no less tragic, long-term consequences that war has on the many families living near the frontline. The years of strain have worn the country down, the fabric of society is frayed, and larger endemic social problems— like poverty, alcoholism, addiction, unemployment— are out of control. We don't see the fighting, but I hope that by following the kids and experiencing things with them, we can show the costs.

I also wanted to avoid the specifics of the political situation because what is happening to society in Eastern Ukraine is not unique— there are many places in the world suffering the same consequences of armed conflict.

Can you talk a little bit about your decisions for how it was shot?

I do most of my own filming—I love cinematography and I value working in the intimate space that I can create when it's just me with a simple camera setup rather than a whole crew. In my experience it makes it so much easier to establish that all-important trust, and at some point the camera blends into our shared everyday. That's when the magic usually starts happening, and it is when I am able to capture the most emotionally raw and honest scenes.

I also need to be physically close to bear witness to the moments of close human connection, to capture them beautifully as possible and to underline just how precious the hope that this connection brings is in contrast to their stark realities.

Some of the scenes are so incredibly intimate. How were you able to be a bystander during those moments?

The most difficult thing with documentaries is that when you become close to your subjects, it can be really tough to film situations that are hard for them. Some of the scenes in this film are the hardest scenes I have ever filmed. Some of the things I witnessed happened so suddenly and they were so heartbreaking that I just wanted to lay down the camera and try to be a friend. But I realized that I was completely powerless in that moment, and that the best thing I could do for them was to carry their stories out into the world. So, I decided to do my absolute best to capture those moments with as much dignity, grace, and beauty as possible. In this way at least, the scene could then stand as some kind of testament to their feelings—a recognition of their humanity.

Can you talk about the editing process and how long did the film take to complete?

I went to the shelter around 10 times and each trip was about 7 days— and this was over a year and a half. Once the edit is taken into account, the film took around three years to complete.

I worked with the editor Michael Aaglund, who also edited my previous films. It was a really difficult film to edit as we were working with around 250 hours of raw footage and multiple subjects. I felt an enormous sense of responsibility towards each of them and needed to balance each of their stories.

We wanted to show the cycles of the shelter—the kids were only allowed to stay there for a nine-month period, so there is some repetition, with kids arriving and leaving. But there's also a larger cycle— this is a chronic situation, as the kids in these shelters grow up to see their *own* kids going into the same shelters. The staff at this particular shelter are working so hard trying to break this pattern and to give the kids the belief in themselves to want more and to believe they can do better with their future.

Filming kids between homes must be incredibly difficult. How did the film take an emotional toll on you?

Making this film has been the hardest thing I have ever done, and I see it as a huge responsibility to do justice to the children and the social workers. I had a lot of internal back-and-forth about the ethics of making a film like this, and whether I should even be allowed to be in that space. I realized that there's actually two options here: Either I wouldn't make the film, and potentially nobody would hear about the kids, the staff, the shelter, or I would commit to them, amplify their voices, and help carry their stories into the world.

Leaving the shelter was hard every time— it felt like I was walking away from them. I have two kids around the same age and coming home from the trips I would just hug them continuously. I was acutely aware of how fortunate they are, and that I am.

KEY BIOS

SIMON LERENG WILMONT DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in Copenhagen, Denmark. Simon graduated as a Documentary Film Director from The National Film School of Denmark in 2009. His first feature documentary film *The Distant Barking of Dogs* (2017), premiered at IDFA (2017), and was awarded Best First Appearance. It has since then won 35+ awards worldwide, among these the McBaine Documentary Feature Award at San Francisco's SFFILM Festival, it was nominated for a European Film Award (EFA 2018), an Emmy (2020), and shortlisted for an Oscar (2019). The film also won a Peabody Award (2020).

As a director, his films also include *Dormitory Master* (2009), *Above Ground, Beneath the Sky* (2008), *Chikara - The Sumo Wrestler's Son* (2013) and *The Fencing Champion* (2014).

MONICA HELLSTRÖM PRODUCER

Monica Hellström is a member of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and was selected for Producer on the Move, Cannes 2020. She has been a producer at Final Cut for Real since 2010. She previously worked at Upfront Films and The Danish Film Institute's Film Workshop. She graduated from EAVE Producer Workshop in 2010, holds an MA in film from the University of Copenhagen (DK) and a BA in film from the University of Bedfordshire (UK).

Recent productions include:

FLEE – Jonas Poher Rasmussen (2021) – Lead producer. Winner of Sundance World documentary award 2021, selected for Cannes 2020, winner of Best Nordic Dox at Gothenburg 2021 and the audience award at Vision Du Reel. Winner of The Gra Foundation & The Cristal Prize at Annecy 2021, Grand Prix Millennium Award, Best Film on Psychology & The Lower Silesia Grand Prix at Against Gravity, Poland. Nominated for 3 EFA awards. *HE'S MY BROTHER* – Cille Hannibal (2021), awarded a special mention at CPH:DOX 2021 and Dox:München 2021. *FORGET ME NOT* – Sun Hee Engelstoft (2019). *THE*

DISTANT BARKING OF DOGS – Simon Lereng Wilmont (2017), Oscar shortlisted, awarded best doc at first appearance IDFA, Best Nordic Dox at Gothenburg and San Francisco Film Festival. Nominated for best doc at the European Film Academy. Winner of a Peabody award. THE DVOR MASSACRE – Georg Larsen & K. Vedsmand (2016). THE FENCING CHAMPION – Simon Lereng Wilmont (2014). CHIKARA - THE SUMO WRESTLER'S SON – Simon Lereng Wilmont (2013). MOONRIDER – by Daniel Dencik (2012)

As Co-Producer (selected)

LITTLE GIRL – Sebastien Lifshitz (AGAT Films, France, 2020). GOOD FAVOUR - Rebecca Daly (Savage Productions, Ireland, 2017). THE NILE HILTON INCIDENT - Tarik Salah (ATMO, Sweden 2017) Winner of best world cinema award at Sundance Film Festival 2017. VARICELLA - Victor Kossakovsky (Sant & Usant, Norway 2015) CONCERNING VIOLENCE - Göran Olson (STORY, Sweden, 2014) selected for Sundance Film festival and Berlin Film Festival.

CREDITS

A special thank you to the participants

Eva
Sasha
Polina
Kolya

Marharyta Burlutska
Olga Tronova
Anjelika Stolyarova

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Mix Facilities	Mainstream ApS
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Choir Score preparation	Joaquin Garcia

Choir recorded in Symphonica Studio Prague

Violin	Daniel Migdal
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Olha Babaieva

Music

“Emotional & Slow”
from the TV-series 22 July
Music by Uno Helmersson
Permission from NRK

“Grustnyi dens”
Performed by Artik&Asti feat. Artem Kacher
Written by Dmitrii Loren, Artem Umrikhin
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"Grechka-Martini"
Performed by T-killah
Written by Tarasov Alexandr Ivanovych
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“Bayu Bayushki Bayu” (Song Lullaby)
Performed by Sofia Baibakova
Recording - Anton Baibakov

"Oskolki"
Performed by Maksim
Written by Marina Maksimova and Alsu Ishmetova
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"Shchedryk"
(Traditional, Leontovych)
Performed by National Chamber Choir “Madrigal-Marin Constantin”
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Clips and music screened from

"Devil eyes"

Written and performed by Kevin Saurer, Jeffrey Saurer, Hippie Sabotage
Album Providence by iHip hop Distribution & The Orchard

Pegga Pig, Season 4, episode 50 "Grampy Rabbit in Space".

Written by Neville Astley, Mark Baker, Phillip Hall

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The film was pitched at Nordic Panorama, Doc Barcelona & IDFA Forum

Produced by Monica Hellström,
Final Cut for Real

Produced in Co-Production with Sami Jahnukainen, Donkey Hotel
Tobias Janson, STORY
Darya Bassel and Vika Khomenko,
Moon Man

MITTELDEUTSCHER RUNDFUNK in collaboration with ARTE

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RUV - Hera Olafsdotti
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Donkey Hotel
STORY
Moon Man
DFI
SFI
SES - Finnish film institue
AVEK
NFTF
USFA - Ukraine
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Yle
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To take action please visit
<https://www.finalcutforreal.dk/a-house-made-of-splinters>