

THE LITTLE GYPSY WITCH

- children's musical comedy / fantasy -

- PRODUCTION / PROMOTION / DISTRIBUTION -

The pre-premiere of the film will be held at 51st International Children's Festival in Šibenik, Croatia in June 2011. The world premiere of the film will be at Pula Film Festival (Croatia) in July 2011. Most interesting film openings will be held in special children's programs at International Sarajevo Film Festival (August 2011), at International Zagreb Film Festival (October 2011), and in the program Generation (for children and youth) at Berlinale International Film Festival (February 2012). The cinema distribution will start simultaneously in Croatia and other ex-Yugoslavia countries in late November or early December. At the same time cinema distribution will start in German speaking countries. Few months later starts the TV distribution of film and 3 part TV series. Main goal is communication with wide European (and other) audiences through the international film festivals and the Cinema / TV / DVD (+CD) distribution. The film will be present in the various media in all countries of distribution (magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, Internet). Also, the CD Soundtrack will be distributed in record stores in the region in order to promote the film.

- SYNOPSIS -

An urban Roma family lives in the suburbs of a big city; the father Hrast (33), the mother Aska (30), their daughter Manusha (10) and Granny Ilonka (55), Aska's mother, a well-known fortune teller. Granny Ilonka dies suddenly, Aska is dismissed from her job in the light-bulb factory, while Hrast 'loses his ear', so he is fired from the funeral band in which he was a trumpet player. The family has suddenly lost all sources of income. After their electricity and phone is cut off, Aska reluctantly takes on her mother's customers and begins fortune telling, while unsuccessfully sends applications for any kind of job. Manusha does not like going to school, because the other children refuse to accept her. They tease her and torment her, because she's different from them. Manusha misses her grandmother, because her parents, burdened by the problems of bare survival, do not have time for a little girl, and they do not notice that something strange is happening in the house. Something like a sulphur smell permeates the house, and Manusha's new class-mate and only friend in school Zdenko (9), the undertaker's son, explains that this means her deceased grandmother is angry. Things become even worse when Granny Ilonka's ghost start making things to levitate, fly, even to attack people in the house. Zdenko and Manusha start an investigation to try to find out what is agitating the deceased woman. Following the clues and 'instructions' left by Granny Ilonka's ghost, Manusha and Zdenko end up at the Roma wedding celebration by the river, where they discover Ilonka's secret: long ago she ran away from the gypsy community, because she has decided to end with nomadic way of living, so her husband Kasum 'cursed' her, banning all Roma forever to say even a word with her or her kin. Manusha finally finds her grandfather Kasum (65), and he is so touched by his spirited little granddaughter that he lifts the 'curse'. The family finally makes peace with its relatives, and Granny Ilonka's ghost can now rest in well-earned peace. Aska is hired as the secretary of the funeral home run by Zdenko's father, Hrast buries his trumpet and fulfils his old dream to start a new career as a plumber, and Manusha is finally accepted by her class-mates and becomes a good pupil. Even grandpa Kasum stops his wondering way of living and finds peace and happiness with his long lost family.

- DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT -

The Little Gypsy Witch is a children's film that portrays the everyday life of an urban Roma family living on the outskirts of a big city, as seen through the eyes of the main protagonist, a nine year-old Roma girl Manusha.

Though primarily a children's film, it is aimed at a wider, family audience because it is the story's sub-text that makes it a story for both children and adults. It touches on issues of tolerance and coexistence with the Roma, whose culture and traditions are seemingly very different from those of the surroundings they live in. This is also a story about harsh social realities: a perennial story about unemployment and every day struggle for survival; but above all it is a story that deals with basic values of family and friendship, which ultimately teaches us that all of us, especially those who are deemed to be "different", should not simply be "tolerated" but rather accepted as equals.

Manusha is witnessing her parents' everyday struggles and troubles whilst herself undergoing a painful experience of not being accepted by her peers in school. This gives us, adults the opportunity to recall our own childhood troubles, our memories, both good and bad, and compare the views and feelings we had as children with those we have today, as adults.

The enigmatic and mystical character of Manusha's grandmother, the old fortune-teller Ilonka, who "only physically" dies in the film, teaches us not to fear death because the fear of the unknown usually comes from within us, and that is why we so often resort to fortune-telling and cards in quest for answers that are already inside us.

The questions of life and death, the loss of the loved ones are the questions that not only weigh heavily on a child's mind, but also on the minds of adults. In the script these serious questions are dealt with a dose of healthy humour, which often emerges in the bleakest of situations when our protagonists are up against the wall.

In my view, the combination of all the above mentioned elements is exactly what will make The Little Gypsy Witch accessible to and able to communicate with wider audiences.

***"It will make you laugh, it will make you cry,
it will make you sing, and it will make you think."***

- DIRECTOR'S MOTIVATION -

Few years ago, while working on the documentary Black Pearls (name of the local Roma football team), dealing with Roma children and youth in the city of Zagreb (Croatia), I had the opportunity to become familiar with the Roma's ghettoized lifestyle.

During the filming of this documentary, I became friend with many among them, and learnt a great deal about their culture and customs. I was particularly fascinated by Roma people who struggle for their children's continuous education, in hope that it will be a token of their brighter and happier future as adults living in a present day Europe. I see The Little Gypsy Witch as a comedy with serious subtext, about one such Roma family and their interaction with their Croatian neighbours.

The story deals with an universal theme echoing very similar situations everywhere in the today's world, because every country has its own "Roma" community – a minority community that is "different from the rest of us".

- MAIN CHARACTERS -

Manusha (10) - intelligent, lively and courageous Roma girl . She unwillingly goes to school, because other children don't accept her. They tease and torment her because she is different from them. Manusha is missing her grandmother who unexpectedly died, her parents are occupied with their existence problems and have no time for the girl and they don't see that some strange things are happening in their home. The girl is aware of the appearance of the

deceased granny's ghost and she is trying to rescue her family from the curse that she thinks was cast on them and that because of the curse they constantly experience bad things.

Zdenko (10) - Manusha's only and best friend. Undertaker's son, whose family moved to the settlement where Manusha lives and becomes her class-mate. Exceptionally intelligent and well read for his years, over-curious to be afraid to confront anything, even if it's a strange phenomena. As he says, every day he sees dead bodies (in his fathers company that is located in the same house where they live), so he has no fear. Zdenko doesn't understand why is everyone so unfriendly to Manusha, he likes her from the first day they met at school, exchanging greetings by hitting each other in the knee under the school desk. Zdenko becomes Manusha's ally in exploring the curse that was cast on her family and courageously confronts any situation in order to help her.

Granny Ilonka (55) - Aska's mother. A mystical fortune –teller that doesn't cheat on people, she has a natural gift to predict future. Children from Manusha's school are convinced that Granny Ilonka is a witch. Ilonka found Aska's husband as a child left next to a tree (that' why he was named Hrast – "oak tree"), she adopted him and raised together with Aska. She mostly likes her granddaughter Manusha, so when Granny unexpectedly dies, her ghost stays in the house to help Manusha with her power to overcome all the trouble that her family has.

Aska (30) - Manusha's mother. She is an agile Roma woman, leader at home whose decisions are never questioned. She doesn't live like a Roma in order to look more like the majority of the society and to blend easily with them, to get a job with less trouble and to be accepted by the others. She thinks that is not only an easier way, but the only one for solving problems, that the voluntary assimilation into the society majority is the necessity to keep her family and to live a normal life like everyone else. She refuses any connection with other Roma and she is ashamed of anything that comes from them. Although she loves Manusha, she doesn't dedicate enough time and attention to her, due to existence problems and other worries caused by job loss (she is the only one employed).

Hrast (33) - Manusha's father. Good natured and a bit naive Roma who always tries to solve problems in a reconciliatory way. Adores Manusha and with his love compensates her mother's permanent lack of thoughtfulness and her anxiety. He is a trumpet player in a Roma orchestra for weddings and funerals, although playing music is not his forte. Actually, he wants to quit playing trumpet and to achieve what he always was attracted to – to become a plumber. He secretly fixes plumbing to his neighbors, because his wife is worrying that he may injure his fingers and loose his only, periodical job in the orchestra. He doesn't dare to confront his wife, so the others think he is weak. Actually he loves his wife very much and understands her anxiety and that's why he successfully turns the problems to the funny side, being very witty.

Grandfather Kasum (70) - Aska's father. Old man who travels from one city to another, working as horse-whisperer and horse-healer at racecourses. Long ago, he has 'cursed' Ilonka when she has decided to end with nomadic way of living, banning all Roma forever to say even a word with her or her kin. When he meets Manusha, he is so touched by his spirited little granddaughter that he lifts the 'curse'.

- DIRECTOR -

Tomislav Zaja

1967 – Born in Zagreb, Croatia.

1993 – Masters degree in film directing at the film academy FAMU in Prague, Czech Republic.

1987-2010 - Wrote and directed over thirty documentary films and two Tv dramas (adaptations of theatre plays). Also worked as producer on numerous documentaries, several shorts and two feature films. Winner of many domestic and international awards for his films.