

Face to face

Sofia Caessa, 30, is the co-founder of Brussels' Little Film Academy, which runs movie workshops for kids

Interview by Katy Holliday

Although I am Portuguese, I never had any real interaction with Portuguese culture until I was 14. My family moved around a lot and I went to international schools in the Netherlands, Brazil and Portugal. In Portugal, my friends were American, British or Japanese. If I did have Portuguese friends, they studied in international schools, too, and we talked in English together. We didn't know anything about Portuguese music or Portuguese literature or Portuguese anything.

When I finally attended a Portuguese school, it was a massive culture shock. I felt like an alien. I wasn't accepted because my Portuguese was atrocious and the other students couldn't understand why, because both of my parents were Portuguese. I lacked a sense of identity as it was hard for me to feel Portuguese.

Many international school children experience similar identity problems as they move around the world. That's why the Little Film Academy, which I set up here with my partner, Bernardo, aims to provide a creative space for children who live in this multicultural city and may attend international schools to come together and work together

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in English, without the concern of fitting in because they don't speak French or Dutch.

Bernardo and I moved to Brussels two years ago because the creative projects we wanted to do seemed easier to accomplish in this diverse city. In Brussels, it doesn't matter where you are from, where you live, or where your parents are from. It's OK just to be yourself.

A tolerant and accepting city is a good place to start in when you're interested in pursuing an artistic discipline. Brussels' multicultural aspect means I can work in English, too. At first, Bernardo and I started producing short films together and then we set up a cultural organisation, Violeta Lab, which focuses on short films, dance video, cultural events and screenwriting workshops for adults.

I've been interested in artistic pursuits from an early age. When I was 14, there was an acting contest on television. I went on the show and discovered that I liked the studio atmosphere. Later in New York, while studying theatre, I realised I spent a lot of time writing about characters rather

than rehearsing. It was then that I realised that writing was where my main interest lay.

Last summer, I worked for the Brussels-based educational drama company Tightrope. We organised an intensive film workshop for 40 children. It was amazing to see them work; they were so focused on the film. We wanted to show them that every role is important in the film-making industry.

There was one little boy whose job was boom operator. His concentration was so impressive: he didn't say a word and stood completely still for 40 minutes. It was a lot of fun, but then the project finished and I felt sad because we had worked for a whole week and there was nothing else. It was after this experience that my idea for setting up the Little Film Academy began to take shape.

In the autumn of 2009, I met Julie-Ann Verbeelen, the founder of Turtlewings, a creative design atelier in Ixelles for children and adults. I had read about her project in magazines and I thought, "this looks like a cool place where children are both learning and having a good time." We had a meeting and she was very receptive, open and supportive. We decided that

Turtlewings would be the right space to hold the Little Film Academy.

Now that the Academy's up and running, our goal is for participating children to learn the values of teamwork and collaboration. If you want to make a film, you must be willing to cooperate with other people. The children all have to want to write and act, as well as be interested in cinematography, music, costume and set design. Through handling expensive equipment, the children also develop a sense of responsibility.

Courses run throughout the year and are split into three terms – fall, spring and summer, just like in school. We offer courses in short film, animation and documentary. The courses are held once a week and include sessions with a photographer and a Flemish animator. At the end of term, parents can watch the finished film and the kids get to take a copy of the DVD home with them.

And that's a wrap!

www.littlefilmacademy.com
www.violetalab.com