

MARIE TAUZIA AND JÉRÔME SEYDOUX PRESENT

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF  
**ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL**



# THE BIG DAY

A FILM BY  
**PASCAL  
PLISSON**

LEARNING TO MAKE  
YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE

**ladybirds**  
cinéma



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# THE BIG DAY

A FILM BY **PASCAL PLISSON**

RUNNING TIME: 1 HOUR 26 MIN

**INTERNATIONAL SALES  
PATHÉ INTERNATIONAL**

2, RUE LAMENNAIS  
75008 PARIS - FRANCE  
PHONE: +33 1 71 72 33 05

6 RAMILLIES STREET  
LONDON W1F 7TY - UK  
PHONE: +44 207 462 4429

[SALES@PATHEINTERNATIONAL.COM](mailto:SALES@PATHEINTERNATIONAL.COM)

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A photograph of two young boys running on a concrete ledge overlooking a city and water. The boy on the left is wearing a white tank top and dark shorts, while the boy on the right is wearing a blue tank top and yellow shorts. In the background, there is a large body of water, a city skyline with various buildings, and a prominent tall, grey skyscraper. The sky is clear and bright.

## SYNOPSIS

Around the world, young boys and girls take up a challenge: to live their dream and their passion by undertaking and a challenge that will change their lives forever. Together, they will live a unique day, a day where anything is possible.



## THE BIRTH OF THE PROJECT

"I was on a train going to Saint-Petersburg, at the end of a film shoot. My attention was captured by the young man seated next to me. He was barely 15 years old, and had a violin carefully placed on his knees. He was reading sheet music with great concentration. The shy young man told me he came from a small village in Siberia. He was on his way to an audition at one of the largest music schools in the area. I was surprised that he was alone. He explained that his family had been saving up for months so that he could make the trip, but did not have the means for anyone to travel with him. If he were to be accepted, he would receive a scholarship and live at the school. He would be the pride and joy of his family, and a symbol of hope for his whole village. I was so touched by his story that when I returned to France, I contacted the school and learned that he had brilliantly succeeded in his audition. While I never did see this young man again, it touched something inside of me and sparked a desire to travel the world and film the stories of these passionate and determined young people. THE BIG DAY tells the story of four young people, driven by passion and innocence, whose future hinges on one single day. Whatever the outcome, that single day will change their lives forever."

Pascal Plisson

# NIDHI JHA

Once one discovers the Super 30, an Indian preparatory school, the value of solidary education becomes crystal clear. Basically, every year, two men change the lives of 30 children.

Nidhi's family history is particularly inspiring, in a country where access to education for young girls remains a major issue. Even more remarkable is Nidhi's father, who encourages education for his daughters as much as his son.

Through Nidhi's story, we gain insight into the way that young Indians view their education. They are passionate about their studies and prepare for exams like athletes for a competition. They are ready to make huge sacrifices in exchange for access to a good education.

Nidhi is 15 years old and lives in Benares, the capital of Bihar, a poor state in Northeast India. She lives with her parents, grandparents, three sisters and one brother, in an ancient temple shared with other modest families similar to her own. The temple is like an Indian version of social housing.

In the caste structure that impacts the day-to-day life of each Hindu, Nidhi and her family are Brahmins. Traditionally, the values of intelligence and knowledge are essential. Since her childhood, Nidhi's parents have made it clear to her that she must study and that her education is the key to success. But one can be learned, without being wealthy. Yet, neither her father, mother nor grandparents had the means to pay for their own schooling. Nidhi's mother must stay at home to care for the children. Her father drives a motorized taxi tricycle in Patna and earns the equivalent of 35 euros per month. When you earn just enough to feed your family, higher education for the children is a luxury few can afford.

Her parents' frustration is even greater, given their offspring's potential. Their children are curious, talented and... crazy about math. Nidhi has a real gift for numbers. She dreams of attending the very prestigious and competitive Polytechnic Institute, to become an engineer and help her family. Nobody doubts her abilities, but she needs help preparing for the arduous entrance exams. Without money, there is only one solution: the Super 30, a free preparatory class, only accessible via a competition.

Founded by two brothers, Anand and Pranav Kumar, the school undertakes the intensive training of 30 students per year. These children are housed, fed and educated, and each year's class comes out with greatly increased chances of success on the highly competitive admissions exams. The pre-selection is based on two criteria: children must be highly gifted in science and to come from a low-income family from one of India's three Northern states: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Jharkland.

# DEEGII BATJARGAL

Deegii's determination shows in her eyes. She is incredibly mature for her age. Determined and courageous, she never complains. Her close-knit family wants more than anything to see her achieve her dream.

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Deegii, 11 years old, lives with her parents and older brother in a small house in the outskirts of Ulan-Bator, the capital of Mongolia. Each winter, her grandmother leaves her traditional "yurt", 700 km away in the Mongolian steppes, to be with her family.

Deegii is an incredibly determined young girl. Her ultimate goal is to become a professional contortionist. It all began five years ago with a television show - the performers' supple bodies, the lights, the costumes, and the applause...it was magical. It was a revelation to Deegii. Ever since, her day-to-day scheduled has been organized around her passion for her contortionist training.

The Mongolian school system is adapted to the climate and the students only have class in the afternoon. But Deegii is up and ready to go at 5am every morning. She takes the bus by herself for 25 minutes, and is dropped off in front of a gymnasium where she meets up with her other contortionist friends. Come rain, shine or even snow, she keeps to her schedule - which is a huge commitment in Mongolia where the temperature gets to -30°C during the winter. Neither the cold nor anyone can stop Deegii from her desire to open her wings and fly... by twisting her body every which way. Faced with this relentless determination, her parents are ready to do anything to help make their daughter's dream come

true. They never miss an opportunity to cheer her on, and are incredibly proud of her. However, the costs of this unusual artistic discipline represent a real sacrifice for the whole family. Deegii's father has but a small salary as a taxi driver, so her mother has laid down the rules. Yes, the family will support Deegii's training, as long as she doesn't neglect her studies. She regularly reminds her daughter that a contortionist's career begins at a young age and ends early. A mere 20 years of activity on average for the most talented performers. Deegii can therefore only hope to be a professional until the age of 30. So she must have another career that she can switch to, when the time comes.

In the intense world of Ulan-Bator's contortionists-in-training, Deegii is not the only one to dream of performances and worldwide tours. The competition is fierce and others are simply better than she is. Deegii sees this clearly and is constantly pushing herself further. At just 11 years old, this young girl has a very unique strength of character.

Deegii began her training in a small center before being scouted by her coach, Aruna. Since then, her goal has been to take her passion to the next level, hoping to attend Singapore's prestigious circus school. Aruna just signed her up for the audition that could launch her career. Deegii will have 4 minutes to convince a very demanding jury.



# TOM SSEKABIRA

Tom's story reveals a common concern among many young Africans, one that is rarely spoken of: protecting their country's natural resources and animals. In Uganda, the Republic of Congo and Rwanda, where great apes still can be found, the younger generations are particularly involved in their preservation. This is the case for Tom, who feels personal responsibility and wants to protect this exceptional resource. Tom, whose father is a teacher, also represents an African nation betting heavily on education, regardless of the financial implications.



Tom is 19 and lives far away from his family, in the heart of the Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda. He is a student of the Uganda Wildlife Training Institute, where he is studying to be a Ranger, along with other young people from all around the country.

Only two years ago, Tom was still living with his parents and 6 brothers and sisters in the suburbs of Kampala. Ever since he was a child, Tom has been drawn to nature. He loved wildlife documentaries on television and was particularly fascinated by chimpanzees. Tom dreamed of animals and wide-open spaces.

During an elementary school outing, Tom visited the Queen Elizabeth National Park with his class and discovered the incredible fauna and luxurious flora protected by forest rangers who knew each species like the back of their hand. The Rangers have a gift for interpreting the signs of wildlife and know how to interact with nature. Tom knew this was he wanted to do when he grew up. He made up his mind and decided to give his all to making it a reality.

Tom was a naturally hard worker in school. His parents and particularly his father totally encouraged him in his studies. And it paid off. Thanks to his excellent grades, Tom received a scholarship from the Ugandan government to finance the studies of his choice. And of course, his choice was already made...He chose studies in "Wildlife and Tourist Management."

His scholarship covered the majority of his school fees, and his older sister Latifah paid for the rest. With the income from the small shop she owns with her husband, she is able to cover Tom's day-to-day expenses. This assistance has been essential in turning a childhood dream into a tangible reality.

This family solidarity extends to all the siblings. The parents encourage all of them to pursue their studies in order to reach their goals. For Tom, the unconditional support of his family pushes him to excel. He feels obligated to them and can't conceive of letting them down. His big day has nothing to do with recognition, financial gain or celebrity; it is about the pride of being able to support himself and no longer to be a burden to his big sister or parents.

To accomplish this, to live off his passion and start his own family one day, he has approached the final exam like an Olympic competition. More attentive than ever in class, nose to the grindstone and feet in the field, he reviews botany, biology, geology... in addition to oral expression. He must show the examination board his dynamic communication skills as well as his knowledge. This is a chance Tom absolutely does not want to miss!

# ALBERT ENSASI GONZALEZ MONTEAGUDO

Albert's story brings two essential elements of the Cuban regime to light: mandatory education and the power of athletics. Cuba's great athletes are the pride of the country. In addition, school guarantees their future, no matter what direction their future athletic career may take. Albert is a walking paradox: shy in day-to-day life, yet totally explosive in the ring. This mixture of kindness and strength makes him popular with the kids in his neighborhood. Albert suffered during his parents' separation; boxing became his way to vent his anger. In fact, his father often says that Albert has dynamite in his punch.

Albert is 11 years old and lives alone with his divorced mother in a working-class neighborhood in Havana, Cuba. He also lives part-time with his father, not far from there. His dream is to become the best boxer of his generation and represent his country in the Olympic Games. Albert's father was a decent boxer in his day, but his career was cut short by an injury. However, he did continue working for a while in the field, as a coach.

At the time, Albert was a little boy and his father brought him in his stroller to watch the boxing matches. Very quickly, he noticed his son's potential as the young boy tried to imitate the older boys' punches. Today, although Albert's father wants grades and school to be his son's utmost priority, he is secretly thrilled that his son has donned boxing gloves.

Iraida, Albert's mother, has found a solution that will make her aspiring boxer son show as much promise at school as in the ring. If Albert's grades are not good, he isn't allowed to train. This strategy has helped him catch up in class, while short circuiting any urge to play hooky.

Albert usually trains 3 to 4 times a week at the boxing club. But when his grades are bad and he isn't allowed to train, he meets his friend Roberto for a secret training session on the roof of his building. Roberto comes from a large family and lives with his mother, step-father, three sisters and brother. He is very close to his oldest sister, who watches over him. Roberto loves to have a good time, which has resulting in disciplinary problems that have gotten him expelled from both school and the

boxing club. Maybe that's why he takes Albert's training so seriously. Deep down, Roberto believes he is helping to build a future champion.

In any case, Albert's first step towards his Olympic dream would be to attend Havana's Sports Academy. There, Albert would be able to follow a traditional school curriculum and boxing training at a professional level. In Cuba, school is the priority; dropping out to pursue a full-time athletic career isn't allowed. To be accepted into this prestigious program, Albert must have an iron will, be in perfect physical shape, master boxing technique and win his matches.

To drive his determination, he lays out his dream scenario: he'll become a champion, be the pride and joy of his family, his friends and his country. But in case a hard blow throws him off track, or even in another life, he has already chosen his follow-up professional path. Albert would like to be a veterinarian. With this serious career choice, his parents are reassured about his future. For the time being, however, Albert must put all other distractions on hold, to prepare for the upcoming match that will determine his admission to the Academy. It is the match of his life.





## PASCAL PLISSON THE DIRECTOR

Pascal Plisson is a travelling filmmaker who has circled the globe for many years. He films the people he meets with a savvy blend of distance and intimacy. Both day-to-day and sociological realities are revealed through Pascal's connection to his protagonists and their destinies. He is also enamored of our planet's fascinating landscapes, and is better than most at capturing and relaying the beauty of our world, as seen in the series "Earth from Above" with Yann Arthus-Bertrand. Following MASSAI, THE RAIN WARRIORS, released in theaters in 2003, Pascal tried his hand at writing in the film SAFARI, co-authored with Olivier Baroux and Kad Merad. Next came Pascal Plisson's big French box office success, the highly acclaimed international success ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL, a documentary that explores the courage of four children from four different countries, and the challenges they face on the way to school.

Pascal Plisson is an ambassador for the NGO Aide et Action. Through this commitment, he is able to share his experiences on the ground with many, as an observer in the field of education. Pascal would like to continue exploring childhood and education in his films, in different manners and throughout the world. The value of education is so present in his work that Unesco has been a partner on his last two films.



## INTERVIEW WITH PASCAL PLISSON – DIRECTOR

### Do you consider **THE BIG DAY** a sequel to **ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL**?

The idea for **THE BIG DAY** came to me before completing **ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL**. My projects often stem from meeting people that spark a new idea. Six years ago, on a train in Russia, I met a ten-year-old boy. He came from a small village in Serbia and was seated next to me. I remember he was wearing an old ushanka cap and sweatpants. He had a violin on his knees and he was reading sheet music. I asked him, "What on Earth are you doing here all alone?" In fact, his parents and his village had collected money so he could audition in a major music school in Saint Petersburg. I found this undertaking incredible. It turns out that he convinced the jury and his whole life changed. He got a scholarship and became the pride and joy of his village. That is where I got the idea to make a film on passionate kids who will do anything to make a specific dream come true. To do this, I had to go to all ends of the world to seek out kids with something special, something unique. A lot of people wanted a sequel to **ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL** and yet, without really being one, **THE BIG DAY** is an obvious natural progression. .

### How did you choose the countries to shoot in and the kids whose stories you would tell?

I have been lucky to travel a great deal while shooting television documentaries, and have acquired strong visual images of certain countries. I lived in Africa for 15 years. I have contacts pretty much all over the world, which were an enormous asset for my research. (+/-6 months Editor's Note).

With **THE BIG DAY**, from the start, I knew I wanted to develop a multi-disciplinary work. I chose boxing in Cuba with Albert, an Indian math competition with Nidhi, a narrative about the circus in Mongolia with Deegii and the quest for a ranger's degree in Uganda with Tom. I was interested in boxing and I knew that in countries like Cuba and Panama there were many young boys with great potential. I chose 20 boys, I watched them box, I saw their parents... and then I met Albert in a small tournament out in the middle of nowhere. He blew my mind. He had a boxer's face – half angel, half demon. He interiorizes out of the ring and exteriorizes inside it. Albert was receptive to the idea. I was fascinated by his profile. He represented exactly what I was looking for: a personality, a talent, and strong bonds of friendship (*Albert is inextricably linked to his friend Roberto. For Pascal Plisson, including his best friend, known for his behavioral problems, was a*

*non-negotiable prerequisite. Ultimately, the film enabled Roberto to refocus on his studies instead of going down the path of delinquency*)... Regarding India, I had heard about the annual "Super 30" competition, which enables underprivileged kids like Nidhi to access higher education. I found this very interesting. Mongolia was an obvious choice, because it is known for its circus. However, I did hesitate before filming the contortionist school because it is such a brutal environment. And lastly, Uganda is a country that is rebuilding itself thanks to its youth and its implication in animal protection. Like many other young Ugandans, Tom had this heartfelt desire to work with nature. That touched me.

### Can you explain your selection criteria?

I guess it is a question of feeling. I have always liked seeking out interesting personalities, although I usually have limited time to make a decision. I see a lot of children during short stays in X or Y country; I spend an average of 6 days scouting in each country. There is an obvious click when I am face to face with a certain profile. These are kids who have never seen a camera, for the most part. They have no idea how a film is made... It's definitely risky. This whole part of the selection process is based only on conversation.

**Did you ever consider casting a fifth child, just to be safe? In case the path of one of the four ended up being less exciting than expected...**

The initial idea was to have three stories, not four. I didn't want to replicate what we had done with *ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL*. It is really challenging to put together an ensemble film with four stories (Pascal Plisson was present every day during editing and followed each step of the film very closely – mix, calibration, French version, etc., Editor's note). This necessitates incredible organization. It would be unthinkable to fall prey to the easier choice of pre-defined linear format: child 1, child 2, child 3, and child 4. At one point, we even cut out the Uganda sequence. But I decided to put it back in, because it brings harmony to the overall film.

**How did you set out to write the script for *THE BIG DAY*, given that the film is somewhere between documentary and feature film?**

It is a documentary that reproduces the daily existence of these kids, but there are also authentic unique life moments. There was an initial script used to raise money but in reality, the concept itself would have been enough to start shooting. That said, although the script was concise, it did give us a basis for thought and a certain structure... But it did change from day to day, depending on my observations and what was revealed by Nidhi, Albert, Tom and Deegii. I got to know them so well that I ended up being part of their daily lives. I spent days with them before we shot. I took them to school. I observed them for a long time, along with their habits, their fears, their dreams... I met their parents, their friends, their families... There was a lot of upfront discussion. I based things on what I saw of their lives. I went to each country several times. We shot a huge amount of footage and let the camera roll around the kids. This allowed us to catch moments of truth and spontaneity that weren't initially written or planned.

**Was adapting to the various cultures the film's real challenge?**

I learned this lesson in my previous travels. I'm interested in people, their way of life, their habits, their stories and their culture. If we don't establish between us, I won't film them. I take the time to really get to know people. Some people do clam up. They may get the impression we are looking to create a caricature, to immortalize their poverty and their simple way of living. They may wonder, "Why are they coming to see us?" I created strong bonds with all these people and remain in contact with them. I check in on them regularly. In fact, I am about to go to Cuba and see Albert. I speak to Tom often on the phone, about once a week, and we are working to help him stay on his path. The bond goes beyond a film or a documentary. In a certain way, they are "my kids". I try to find them support and sponsors... For example, the young Indian girl in the film now has a sponsor who is financing her four years of school.

**Why was Europe excluded from *THE BIG DAY*?**

Because I have spent my life travelling outside of Europe... And perhaps because I am interested by the challenges of life that transcend the ones we experience here. These children touch me deeply. They show our children, who can be spoiled and pampered, how important it is to follow their dreams.

***ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL*, your previous film, was a huge success with 1.4 million box office entries... Was it hard to go straight into another project? Was there additional pressure?**

The film was indeed a success. To give you an idea, we would have jumped for joy at 300,000 entries. We did not expect such enthusiasm over a small film anchored in a school environment. On the surface, it isn't the kind of subject that you would expect to attract or touch kids. And yet, the result was embraced by the young and old. Word of mouth was a huge factor and the film continued to be shown in theaters almost up to video release.

**In *ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL*, as with *THE BIG DAY*, school and education is sacrosanct...**

I was a scholastic failure. I left school at 15 to travel. I had odd jobs in England and the United States... I only became interested in children once I had my own. That's when I said goodbye to my adventurous life and devoted myself to my children's education. Prior to that, I was shooting animals in the Savannah. Seeing kids like those in *THE BIG DAY* and *ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL*, who will do anything just to go to school, touches me and makes me think, especially in light of the fact that I dropped out. The back-story is perhaps a criticism of scholastic failure. But I am convinced that there are talents here, everywhere, in our cities, in our suburbs... You have to seek them out, help them and make them aware of their potential. I would like to make a documentary on four or five French families from different backgrounds. I am sure there would be great surprises.

**What was your big day?**

Winning a César (the French Oscar)... And being successful with *ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL*, which changed my life. Things were hard for me; I had my own filming style, not everyone liked it. People wanted to put me in a box. "Don't film like this or that", "That's not the right idea"... The César for the Best Documentary was such a strong form of recognition that it went straight to the heart. You can have your big day at any age (*laughs*).

**Ultimately, why do you film these children?**

They teach me humility and respect... They project a powerful sense of responsibility, of pushing one's limits... They make me cry. They smile, even when they struggle. I think it is simply that I feel good around them. They are authentic, dignified, and profoundly real. I have the greatest respect for them. They have so little, and yet they give so much back and never complain. Even if life is sometimes very hard. I like to be with them and share their lives. We should all be inspired by their intelligence.



## CAST

Nidhi JHA  
Albert GONZALEZ MONTEAGUDO  
Delgermurun (Deegii) BATJARGAL  
Tom SSEKABIRA

Student from India  
Boxer from Cuba  
Contortionist from Mongolia  
Ranger in Uganda

## CREW

Director  
Written by

Pascal PLISSON  
Pascal PLISSON  
Olivier DAZAT

Producers

Marie TAUZIA  
Romain LE GRAND  
Muriel SAUZAY

Associate Producers

Hélène BADINTER  
Jonathan BLUMENTAL  
Igor LATINOVIC

Cinematographer  
Editor  
Music  
Sound

Simon WATEL  
Perrine BEKAERT  
Krishna LEVY  
Gilles ARISTIZABAL

Production  
Coproducton

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