

Winner of the ECFA Award 2018: UP IN THE SKY

Petter Lennstrand: “Puppets in itself are dead material”

This year's ECFA Award winner addresses the very youngest audience with a feature in which live actors and puppets playing alongside each other. In this wonderfully absurd adventure everything is possible, thanks to a brave girl with a boundless imagination. Director Petter Lennstrand came to Berlin to collect his prize: *“I'm really happy about this award. In Sweden the expectations for UP IN THE SKY were limited, but the film will still be around for a while in the festivals.”*

Like last year in the Zlin Festival, where the actors even brought along one of the puppets.

Petter Lennstrand: I've attended a few festivals. A couple of years ago, I suddenly got afraid of flying, which made every festival trip a challenge. But for UP IN THE SKY, I got over it completely. The fear is gone, and I really enjoy those festival trips. The movie has brought me to Berlin, to Tromsø, to Lubeck and every time it

was great to see it with an audience.

You picture your main character very clearly from the first second of the movie, when Pottan is the last one to come out of the school.

Giske: Lennstrand: She is a girl that isn't noticed, a feeling that everybody can relate to. I remember as a child sometimes having this feeling of total loneliness.

Like in that beautiful scene in which Pottan and Dennis share this overwhelming loneliness, while fantasizing about how life could be on another planet.

Lennstrand: Both main characters have something to offer each other, although that seems rather unlikely at first glance. They're the only two who profoundly change throughout the story. All the other characters impersonate but one clear emotion. Like Rydberg, who's driving the movie forward by his manic behaviour.



He is pretty extreme! What's going on in his mind?

Lennstrand: He considers himself a good person, and presumes everyone is exactly like him. His way of seeing the world is very different from ours. His self-confidence is unlimited, which makes him an excellent entrepreneur, who doesn't really fit into society. For a puppeteer such egocentric characters are fun to work with. That's why I love Rydberg. He is totally crazy, in a way that makes you more astonished than afraid.

When a child remains unseen, is it the parents who are to blame?

Lennstrand: Sometimes children can easily take care of themselves. When my wife and I were totally occupied, it

was no problem for our kids to act very independently. Or maybe Pottan's family is super dysfunctional - that's for the audience to decide. But that was not my motivation behind the story. This idea first came up a long time ago, when my son was eight, and I noticed how he was constantly directed by rules and regulations, mostly coming with the best intentions about safety and protection – *when cycling, always wear a helmet!* – but putting up so many boundaries. UP IN THE SKY plays around with those rules, it's my creative fantasy about a world where things are done a bit different. Three sofas can be on top of each other and there is a rocket in the garage.





When the parents disappear, something happens that I really appreciate: the puppets enter the stage, without an introduction or explanation. They're just... there!

Lennstrand: Nobody ever needed an explanation for that. It's a place where rules are different. It could be a fantasy, a dream. Here Pottan is seen, she's noticed. That's why she decides to stay.

You have a formation as a puppeteer.

Lennstrand: At the age of 14 I joined an amateur theatre group. A few years later I built my first puppet and got really hooked on it. Combining these two passions, I started performing puppet theatre when I was 17. I discovered a theatre in Stockholm, where puppets from all over the world were collected in a museum. The director invited me for a three-years

formation and with that theatre I toured the world and started developing my own projects. Like in 1995 when I acquired the rights to do a Spiderman puppet play – nowadays that wouldn't be possible anymore. I made puppets for music videos and commercials and got my own programme on TV. I started a company, me and my partner got more skilled and we experimented with new techniques. UP IN THE SKY is the ultimate combination of all these aspects: all the concepts and techniques culminated in one movie, summarising all the things I've done so far in my career and adding a few new ones.

Is it really the puppets doing all the acting?

Lennstrand: What you see is 99% what you get. All puppets are played by puppeteers. Human actors can express an emotion in a blink of an eye, but when acting with puppets you need time to transmit a feeling. The puppet in itself is dead material. To make the audience realise there is an emotion inside, you have to do it in a theatrical way, like *commedia dell'arte*. It's all about body language and rhythm, there is hardly any facial expression. The puppets design is simple, but fits with the characters. We

experimented with puppets that looked very realistic, with skin and hair, but then every single detail should be perfect. With a simple puppet in cloth, you don't notice the weak spots. I made more arty puppets on other occasions, or traditional marionettes sculpted in wood, but for comedy I find these stylized puppets very efficient.



Was all the space mumbo jumbo in the film ever scientifically checked?

Lennstrand: All was precisely calculated. We started with rocket science, then loosened our approach, but kept some realistic elements. In every Q&A kids ask: did they really go into space? Of course they know the answer, but they feel it's somehow a little bit real.

How was it for actress Mira Forsell to be on the set with the puppets?

Lennstrand: Our producer Lars Jönsson understood the importance of

finding the right person and pushed our casting agent to go the extra mile. Mira came with her grandmother to an audition, having no experience at all, but she was definitely the right one. She was only seven years old, but very responsible. She said: *"It's easier to play happy with the puppets, and it's easier to play sad with the humans."* If the film was such a positive experience, that was partly due to Mira and her entire family, who were very supportive.

When Dennis reads Pottan a bedtime story, I presume it's no coincidence that it's Astrid Lindgren's 'Emil and Ida'?

Lennstrand: That book is very famous in Sweden, and it was nice to make it our own. The audience realises how Dennis is changing the story a bit, which tells you more about his background.

–

Gert Hermans

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