

DORTE BENGTONSON ABOUT VITELLO

“Maybe it’s a Viking thing”

In many ways, Vitello’s life is totally fine. He gets plenty of spaghetti with butter, he lives in a nice neighbourhood surrounded by many friends, he has a fast lawn mower and a slingshot... What more can you wish for? A dad perhaps? Since mum refuses to tell him who or where his father is, Vitello sets off on a quest in search of a dad of his own.

In a scarce and somehow crooked visual style, though yet very lively and dynamic, this Danish animation has a warm heart for all things human. VITELLO observes mankind’s awkwardness with mild compassion. Dorte Bengtson’s feature animation debut is a Danish-Scottish co-production.

Why Scotland? Was it just a matter of bringing together some of the most remarkable accents on the continent, or was there more to it?

Dorte Bengtson: When Zentropa, Ja-film and I met with Scottish co-producer Bob Last, we found out Scots and Danes seem to be very much

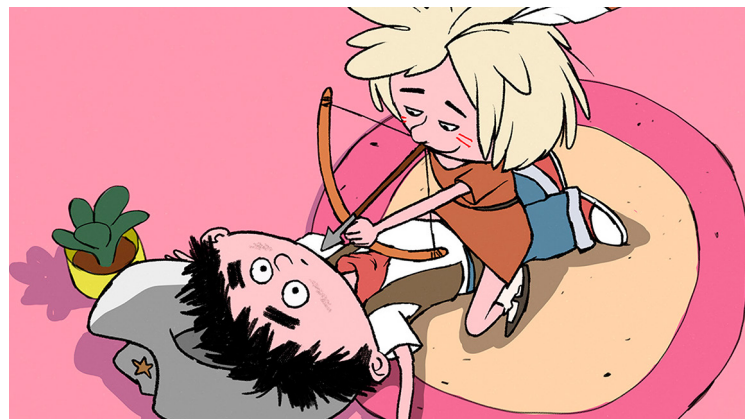
alike, with a similar sense of humour. Maybe it’s a Viking thing. What initially started as a financial construction, turned out a perfect match.

If you would have had a bigger budget, would VITELLO have become a different film?

Bengtson: From the start, I wanted this film to have a sketchy, minimalist look. But money would have allowed us a bit more time. Now the budget forced me to find solutions on how to use all tools and talents at our disposal in the best possible way. The team gave me their very best, and I had then to make the right choices. We’ve surely cut back in the details.

The film was not only defined by the budget but also by the original material it’s based on: a famous series of children’s books.

Bengtson: I really admire the original books written by Kim Fupz Aakeson, even though the looks are very basic: a main character with a big head and a few props. We decided to stick to



that minimalism, which I found very challenging. There were so many limitations, and so little elements to frame the story correctly for the audience. A child that adores the original book, shouldn’t be disappointed when seeing the film. It should feel like that very same universe is now unfolding, with a few backgrounds and surroundings and voices, but still very minimalist.

And with a very reduced colour palette.

Bengtson: The books have all these pastel colours; every page comes with a different background colour. Niels Bo Bojesen who’s drawing these

books, shared with me his palette of pastel colours – everything starts with that. I developed an emotional colour script for the film, as if the entire emotional scale is captured in certain colours. We did the same with the music. Our very talented composer could do all sorts of symphonic things, but then I asked him to try to do a piece of ‘Italian disco’. Finally all characters were represented in both colours and musical themes.

The minimalism of those backgrounds is perfectly illustrated by your version of a starlit sky, a very unpolished image that is...

Bengtson: When polishing things too



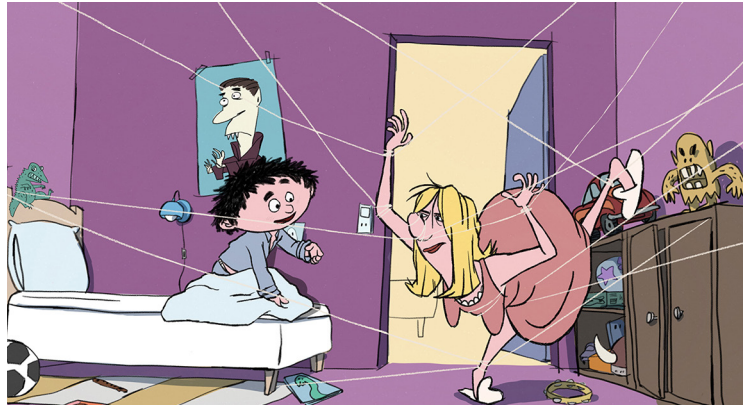
much, you don't do justice to reality. Life isn't perfect, and kids should know that. Some came to ask me honestly: 'Don't you know how to draw?' Actually that was the most difficult part of the animation process: making these very talented artists draw as if they weren't capable. The background designers made sketches and then didn't get a chance to perfect them, so that kids came to tell us afterwards: 'Maybe you should attend drawing classes.'

The film contains a lot of 'playing'. The kids are playing all the time in their world of imagination.

Bengtson: Kids don't play anymore

these days, that's how it seems to me. Both the writer Kim Fupz Aakesson and me, in our childhood years, we just played. We ran out into the field looking for something to do and always something happened. VITELLO doesn't have a big narrative arch. There is a storyline about a kid longing for a father, and while following him, always something happens, although none of it seems to be planned. That's what being a child is all about.

While playing, an entire gender discussion unfolds. Boys and girls playing the same game, from very different angles.



Bengtson: We broadly discussed if we would dare to make Vitello's friend Kamma a real girl. In terms of political correctness, these days their roles should be reversed. We made her a girl, but not a princess. She wears a dress, but she also loves cars. Just like I always did. It's not about boyfriends and girlfriends, it's about being good friends. She can tell him things that the other boys still don't understand. Like, she knows that it's not okay to have three dads.

What's your connection with horror? You're serving us some crazy zombie scenes there!

Bengtson: I've only seen the old horror classics, I'm not good at watching scary movies. Every child in the audience recognises this feeling of going to bed, being left alone with your dreams. I remember those fears: when my foot is bungling out of the bed, maybe snakes will come and bite it. Such little stories are connected to children's everyday lives in an almost documentary way.

Now that you mention documentaries... What is this thing that is always on when they watch television, there is the same film on about crocodiles eating zebras?!

Bengtson: That's a comment on Danish children's television. Since in Denmark the funding for children's TV was cut down, they're broadcasting the same stuff again and again. In VITELLO this is represented by this horrifying film about life in the savannah, with crocodiles in a water pool lurking for zebras. Why would you show that to a small child? What a lack of respect for your young audience. "It's about animals, so children can see it." The voice actress doing that TV host is a Danish comedian and I asked her to sound as bored as possible.

The voice acting is remarkable. With an ordinary kid doing Vitello's voice, instead of an experienced actor putting on a childish voice.

Bengtson: I hate that! We casted about 100 ordinary boys to play Vitello and among them we found one perfect. I didn't want him to read the script, so we worked together on every dialogue. Vitello is the only character with a normal voice. He's supposed to be a real boy, despite his big head. He is in the centre of the story and kids should connect with him, so no overacting was allowed. His best friend William sounds rather normal too and Max and Hasse, who are a bit annoying, sound that way.



From there on we move in concentric circles, with every grown-up sounding weirder and weirder, because that's how Vitello sees them. The further we move away from his childhood world, the crazier the character. You might not notice it when watching the film, but you'll definitely feel it.

Causing the most extreme reactions in today's screening at the Film'on festival were the kissing scenes. Apparently normal people shouldn't kiss in animated movies, except maybe princes and princesses.

Bengtson: Since the audience is with Vitello, they indeed feel like him. He finds that kissing repulsive. Fair

enough. In Sweden VITELLO can't be screened because of the swearing, while in Norway the audience seemed to like the film a lot. Apparently there are very different opinions, even among the Nordic countries, about how to connect with children.

You picture the life of a single mum rather unglamorous, I'm afraid.

Bengtson: Vitello's mum is deeply human, and a loving mother, even if it takes time to realise that. There is a lot of singles in Denmark pretending to look perfectly fit, but that's a myth. Vitello's mum is much more real. She's absent, sometimes lazy and not in shape, she likes red wine (although



you never see her drinking) and prefers her couch over going to the gym. But she's pure and she's there when Vitello needs her, raising a child all by herself.

Now VITELLO is going to be a TV-series.

Bengtson: After a few shorts, VITELLO is my first feature. In Denmark we topped 35,000 admissions, which is fantastic for a 3-6-years-old audience. Since the books are full of amazing stories, we have worked on a series of 13 episodes, each of them telling a separate story. That was already included in the financial plan of the feature film, and now we'll try to make

the next 13 episodes happen.

–
Gert Hermans