

Nathaniel H'Limi about MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES

“The Hall of Mirrors is never empty, but now it was”

A good story can be told in many ways, yet it always remains a good story. The story of *MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES* has already been told in a short film, a TV series, and now in a feature-length animated film. One element that the three formats have in common is director Nathaniel H'Limi, who came to present his film at the Film'On Festival.

After her parents' passing, eight-year-old Violet goes to live with her uncle Régis, whom she barely knows. He is a gruff man who works as a maintenance worker at the Palace of Versailles. After a difficult start, the two are getting to understand each other better and better. Against the backdrop of the majestic palace, with an occasional excursion to the streets of Paris, they fight for each other's future and grow ever closer as a family. A family of two!

There's a short film (2019), a TV series (2024), and a feature-length animated film (2025), all titled MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES. How are they

connected?

Nathaniel H'Limi: Nine years ago, we responded to a call for projects, launched by France Télévisions. At the time, most of their young audience's fiction featured little boys as heroes. Now they were looking for a heroine in a contemporary story. As an illustrator and graphic designer, I had never worked in animation before. Screenwriter Clémence Madeleine-Perdrillat had never directed an animated film, and our producer had no prior experience in animation. Three inexperienced people with a shared desire to work on a global story we deeply cared about. For me, drawing stories has always been a dream, and that is what I did for nine years. The result was a short film which went on to win the Jury Award at Annecy, giving the project its international exposure.

How did that help put you on the map?

H'Limi: With festival selections and a small-scale cinema release in France and Belgium. Every time during post-screening discussions, the same



question came up: What happens next? Even France Télévisions mentioned a possible sequel. Recognising the ideal format for young audiences, we suggested making that sequel into a TV series. Doing a series requires strong shoulders: it takes years, and it's super complicated to finance, even if everyone loves your project.

Were you able to maintain the same quality standard as in the short film?

H'Limi: Not entirely. My graphic style may appear simple, but it is entirely handcrafted. The short film was done

with gouache and ink on paper, with all 300 sets drawn by hand. With the money that our producer was able to piece together, we spent five years making the series, which had its life on the small screen. Which felt somewhat frustrating; we believed our story deserved its place on the big screen. We re-edited the 2h20 of footage from the series into a 1h20 feature. Moving away from the series' episodic approach was a challenge; much of the credit for that goes to Clémence. That's the genesis story of these three different formats under the same title. Or even four, if we in-



clude the book adaptation.

How much footage from the original short did you reuse?

H'Limi: All of it! The first 26 minutes of the feature are exactly the short film. Since its release six years ago, our audience has completely renewed itself. Aside from the animation in-crowd, nobody will recognise those 26 minutes as a separate short.

VERSAILLES must have taken up all your time for years!

H'Limi: For Clémence and me, this film marks the end of a nine-year-long period. This is the moment to understand that everything we did made sense. You would be surprised how deeply this story resonates inside us. It carries traces of our personal lives and of everything we went through in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015.

I hadn't realised those attacks were so present in the short film.

H'Limi: That's where the entire project began! You can sense it from the streetscape: the writing on the walls, the presence of police officers, the Place de la République covered with flowers... Those attacks have marked us all - every adult in France remembers exactly where they were



on November 13, 2015. They were so violent and unfair that people didn't know how to talk about it. That's what made us want to make this film. Today, most children don't even know what a terrorist attack is. Our core message is: things like this shouldn't happen, but they did happen, and we need to acknowledge it.

The feature film adds several layers to the story, particularly dealing with adult issues.

H'Limi: Children suffering from adult problems is a universal thing. Clémence approaches this with humour, while staying close to the painful truth. Régis, for instance, was unable to fulfil certain expectations due to physical limitations, and now finds

himself judged by his parents. It's a situation that resonates in many families. The expectations that parents and children place on one another are exactly why we all go to see psychologists.

What makes Paris feel like Paris in your film?

H'Limi: I'm a real-life drawer. I had never designed a film set before, which honestly made me panic. So I began researching obsessively. The whole film, graphically, draws from that. The grandparents' apartment is inspired by my parents-in-law's home. Régis' house comes from one of the forest rangers' houses in Versailles. For Violenette's run through the city streets, I explored the area around Place de

la République and selected a nearby school and house. I retraced her route on Google Maps and photographed everything. For my drawings, reality is like the bones and muscles that give structure to the human body.

With your attention to correctness, Versailles must have been a challenge!

H'Limi: We were lucky... Versailles is always packed. It's almost impossible to take reference photos among 15,000 visitors. But once production began, COVID-19 hit. The authorities in Versailles reached out to us: the castle is closed to the public; this might be your chance! Experiencing Versailles completely empty was extraordinary, almost unreal. The Hall of Mirrors is never empty, but then it was!

Decorations in Versailles are so overwhelming that ultimately, you simply seem to give up on clear lines.

H'Limi: When I show my drawings to students, they often go like: "Wow, that's so well done." But it's not. If you look closely, you'll see nothing but messy scribbles. Together, they look like something grand, but it's just strokes. Early on, Clémence and I agreed not to strive for perfection.





I often describe our style as ‘realistic, but poorly executed’.

There is a striking scene in which Violette and Régis sit by the fire, burning leaves. From this game of shadows and silhouettes, a new story emerges.

H’Limi: When we presented our storyboard to France Télévisions, they said: “Ah, so this is the obligatory graphic ‘delirium’.” Apparently, in every animated film, the filmmaker at one point wants a graphic delirium, which allows him to enter another universe and go all the way. But we didn’t go all wild; we stayed close to the emotional core of the text, which is very delicate. This is a pivotal moment when Violet and Régis understand what

binds them. The flames were created by hand - I asked for a computer-generated fire, and then redrew it myself to match our graphic language. Creating that scene was one of the most exciting moments of the entire film.

What makes it their perfect moment to connect?

H’Limi: They connect through a shared sense of loss. Violette understands she’s not the only one in mourning. And Régis realises that he doesn’t take care of Violette because he has to, but because he wants to.

French animation seems to be thriving at the moment, with a strong output of shorts and international co-productions.



H’Limi: I’m not a producer; I’m just a modest filmmaker, observing what’s going on around me, rather than being really part of it. From what I observe, wonderful series and films are being made by dedicated production companies, such as MIYU Productions (with whom we began this project), and Sacrebleue. Many schools have developed animation programmes with a growing number of students. The downside is that many people with training in animation cannot find a job; I see young talents struggling to enter the industry. So while the creative energy is very much alive, the economic reality is more fragile.

Is there still room today for a film like MY LIFE IN VERSAILLES?

H’Limi: We’re currently developing a new feature, an adaptation of the book ‘Jean-Chat voit dans le noir’, which I illustrated. Our producer has already warned us that, at the moment, 2D feature animation in France is not the safest investment. So many films are being made, but the financial return is not exactly impressive. Even a remarkable film like CHICKEN FOR LINDA struggled to find an audience. But I’m not an expert. My role is simply to draw stories, and I work as hard as I can to make that work. We may have to fight a bit for our position, but I’m still confident.

– **Gert Hermans**