

## Jens Pedersen about KIDS ON THE SILK ROAD: HORSE FEVER

“People showered in success are usually quite boring”

Daniar (12) lives on a farm in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, in an endless, open landscape. One day his father gives him a wild, young stallion to tame. Overjoyed and proud, Daniar takes on the challenge but his beloved horse has a bad temper and has to be put down after a dramatic incident. Daniar loses what he loves the most... In a Q&A after the screening at the doxs! festival, Jens Pedersen addresses the audience in a very convincing German language. “After my graduation I worked a few months as a waiter in Hamburg.” But that was long before he took off on another, impressive journey, along the Silk Road.

**Even if KIDS ON THE SILK ROAD: HORSE FEVER is a moving and deeply personal film, what makes it stand out as well is the beauty of an utterly cinematographic landscape.**

Jens Pedersen: You might call that a coincidence, as I didn't consider it much. For films like this one, you only consider the character and the evolution it is going through. But I have to

admit that of the five Silk Road films we made, this one is visually by far the most beautiful. When filming in these mountains and valleys, it was so calm and quiet that it felt like we were shooting indoors instead of outdoors, even if the space was so big.

**When it's all about the character, then why was Daniar the perfect one to pick?**

Pedersen: In a documentary casting you meet many children that are – so to speak – just children, sons of their fathers, daughters of their mothers. They haven't found their own voice yet. When I first met Daniar, I didn't see much of a special character in him. Until the horse was mentioned. *“My father bought me a horse and he has great expectations! It is wild and hard to control, but I try to please it all the time.”* That's when all bells start ringing! This child is moving towards something that is not necessarily going to succeed, which makes him more interesting. People showered in success, succeeding all the time, are usu-

ally quite boring, because they never get to reflect on their defeats.

**Did you see defeat coming straight away?**

Pedersen: No, I wasn't counting on the horse to die. You never plan for defeat. I was counting on Daniar to go through some hardships before finally riding towards the sunset on the back of his horse. But it didn't turn out that way. There's another film in this series about a guy living on a beach in Bangladesh who wants to become a surfer. He signs up for a competition he is expecting to win, and when he

loses, that makes him grow a lot as a character.

**This film is part of a series named ‘Kids on the Silk Road’.**

Pedersen: So far we made five films and we're aiming to finance 10 more. In each country we had collaborators suggesting us children to meet. But out of every 20 candidates, often only one child seems suitable for a documentary.

**So you don't believe in the myth that every child has a story to tell?**

Pedersen: Maybe every child has, but





not necessarily a cinematographic story that can be expressed through actions and pictures. It's all about children that rise up to the challenges of life. In every individual story we're looking for a universal element. In this case Daniar learns about the hardships of love. He thinks love (for a horse) is about always being mild, not setting any limits. But sometimes love will incite you to be strict. Otherwise – like in Daniar's case – you might lose what you have.

### **All these stories are located along the Silk Road trail?**

Pedersen: All throughout history there was never 'one single Silk Road' – it was a maze of roads connecting countries. For us this road signifies an evolution in emotions, or in maturity. We've taken the liberty to interpret

the actual Silk Road as a trail towards the development of an individual.

### **Going to Kyrgyzstan, you must have been pretty sure to end up with a film about horses.**

Pedersen: Not necessarily. We could as well have made films about poverty, or street vendors, or about their specific interpretation of Islam. It is indeed a horse-riding country but many people's attention meanwhile has shifted from horses towards cars, believe me. Daniar has a warm heart for animals, but it's not embedded in their culture, on the contrary. Like his father tells him: don't get emotionally involved with a horse, because you might end up eating it. The scenes in which Daniar saves a dove from the hands of his classmates, are his personal resistance towards his father's

message, and we kind of juxtaposed that in the editing.

### **The boy has a particularly beautiful narrator's voice.**

Pedersen: It's like all the time he is telling you a secret. Many people in Kyrgyzstan talk like that, which makes it very pleasant to listen to them.

### **How should I imagine your conversations with the boy?**

Pedersen: We started with preliminary interviews, just sitting in the haystacks chatting around. The next step is carefully talking your way towards the film structure: What would you usually do on a day like this? Gradually you learn more about your character's daily life and you can pinpoint certain scenes and locations. At some point you have to wait for something to happen that could be the climax of your story. And afterwards you might fill in some blanks with elements that you absolutely need to fit the story together.

### **Knowing that all the questions from the audience would refer to the killing of animals, you proactively started questioning them about it in your Q&A today.**

Pedersen: These kids were so small, I was afraid the film could have been

too scary for them. But actually I suppose that a child can tell any possible sinister story to another child, as long as there is a solution in the end. Children can tell each other gruesome things, and I can show that in a film, as long as it ends with a positive reflection on what happened. That's why at the end we show Daniar's new horse.

### **What can we further expect from the Silk Road project?**

Pedersen: We have about 2/3 of the financing in place but the last bit is hard to find. As partners and stakeholders, there is our national Danish broadcaster, Arte, the Danish and Norwegian Film Institutes, and the Dutch TV channel IKON has bought some episodes. We have just started production again, together with the other directors Simon Lereng Wilmont, Kaspar Astrup Schröder and Camilla Magid. With Toolbox Film now we have a bigger production company on board. With their qualifications and enthusiasm, we can charm the birds out of the trees.

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Gert Hermans