

MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE

Stefan Westerwelle: “Being special is the luxury every child has”

MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE starts with a flashback: a bunch of people stuck at a lakeside. We have no clue how they ended up here in the middle of nowhere... until we're introduced to a family with two sons – Matti & Sami – and plenty of problems. Mum can't hold things together anymore, while dad is longing for his native country Finland. Matti decided it's about time to give luck a little push: how about a winning lottery ticket that grants you a house in Finland? But the dream ends where the lie begins... In the Schlingel Festival, MATTI AND SAMI AND THE THREE BIGGEST MISTAKES IN THE UNIVERSE won the ECFA Award. We met with German director Stefan Westerwelle at the Film'on festival in Brussels.

Your movie was able to present a

totally impossible absurdity as a credible story. How did you get your audience willing to believe?

Stefan Westerwelle: In my heart I'm still that five year old boy believing that everything can be sorted out if you wish for it hard enough. For me the situation is totally credible, otherwise the movie couldn't have worked. Finding a balance between realism and fantasy was my ultimate challenge.

There's another important balance: between optimism and pessimism.

Westerwelle: I believe every problem can be solved if you have the necessary persistence and positivity. It sounds a cliché but if you follow your heart, things will work out. I spiced the story with problematic situations that at first glance seem unsolvable.



But if a family sticks together as one, miracles can happen. In this family unfortunately it's up to a young boy to create a situation in which his parents have to start communicating and take care of their children together.

How did the family situation get so tense?

Westerwelle: This family constellation is not exceptional, it is on the contrary a rather common thing. Mum is at the edge of a burn-out, father is haunted by depression, and suddenly a 10 year old child has the idea it's his responsibility to save them, thus getting into the position of overtaking responsibilities. You see it happening

more often.

What happened to the father that he lost track? Probably he doesn't even know precisely what he's missing so much, and therefore calls it 'Finland'.

Westerwelle: Being rootless is not just about geography, it's about what home feels like to you. Dad doesn't know what happened to the love he once felt, that made him move to Germany. He and his wife must have known happy times. But things have changed. For Matti visiting Finland has become a symbol for his longing to get closer to his father.



What does Finland have that Germany doesn't have?

Westerwelle: It's one of the craziest countries I've ever seen. Both the language and the culture, especially in the North, are so very different from what we are used to. It felt like we were shooting somewhere in Montana, USA. I was always told Fins don't talk much, but the Fins I met were the most talkative people I've ever seen.

You were shooting in the North?

Westerwelle: We had six days in Kokkola, which is like the Finnish Hollywood. When arriving in Helsinki, rain was pouring down. But the very first day of the shooting, the weather got hot and it stayed like that for the full six days, up till our final take. One week later it started snowing.

Nick Holaschke, playing Sami, is remarkable.

Westerwelle: You should observe him in the scenes where he only appears as a side character: without further directives, he got drawn into those scenes and became part of them. When we were working with him, he hadn't started at school yet. He was completely natural, not yet formed by schedules and frames.



Your statement seems to be that average people are boring. These kids are definitely not boring!

Westerwelle: 'Being special' is the luxury every child has. Only when growing up, you learn to adapt, earning a living. You learn to ignore certain parts of your character that make you special, while children still can explore all their potentials and interests. I think Matti is a totally normal 10 year old boy, full of hopes and expectations. I never wanted to tell a story about 'special people'.

Nevertheless there seems to be something wrong with adults in general in this movie. They all seem a bit crazy.

Westerwelle: For making my first children's film, I had this credo: everything should be 3% over the top. It's a matter of taste, I'm sure some people won't like it, but I thought it

was the right dose. Do you think we went more than 3% over the top?

Let's say it was a 3+...

Westerwelle: On the third day of the shooting Sabine Timoteo (playing Matti's mum), who is known for her strong, tormented women's roles, said: *"Now I understand what we're doing. We're making a children's movie. I can exaggerate and be funny and I enjoy it so much."*

The film sets sparkle with colours. Your set designer was working overtime?

Westerwelle: When telling a rather dark story in a children's film, you need to lift it up and keep it light. We easily switched from one tone to another, like in my favourite scene: Sami's cooking looks funny, but the scene flips over to the other side of the spectrum as soon as the parents get involved. It's that switch from 'light' to 'heavy' that creates the tension, the emotional impact of the film.

According to the title, lying is what causes all the world's catastrophes.

Westerwelle: Telling lies is bad, but sometimes helps you solving problems. Right and wrong are always in-



tertwined. You're born as a part of a family, and it takes time to realise you have an identity outside that family, with your own thoughts and feelings. For positioning yourself as an individual, lying is a practical tool. It all goes back to that cheesy phrase: if you follow your heart, all bets are off to do the right thing.

From all staircase scenes I've seen in my life, yours was one of the most ingenious.

Westerwelle: We had a great location scout, who found us the most beautiful staircase in the entire city of Hamburg. Even if people warned me that green walls make the actors' skin look pale, I still think it looks marvellous.

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Gert Hermans