

Maria Blom and Frida Hallgren about MONKY

“Don’t keep your sadness all for yourself”

One day when scriptwriter Jonathan Sjöberg walked into a school, he saw a drawing on the wall showing a tree, a family, a monkey and a quote saying: “When I die, I want to become a monkey.” Back home he immediately wrote the first draft of a script.

When eleven-year-old Frank finds a monkey in the garden, he calls him ... Monky. Despite all the mischief and laughter, the animal re-awakes a silent sorrow that was not yet put to sleep: the lack of Frank’s deceased sister Saga. It doesn’t take long for Frank to realise that Monky did not accidentally end up in their garden.

Meeting Swedish director Maria Blom and actress Frida Hallgren (playing the role of Frank’s mother) at the JEF Festival, we want to figure out: What is it that animals do with people, bringing out these strong emotional reactions. What can animals achieve that expensive therapists can’t?

Maria Blom: Animals offer you their unconditional love. You can project all

possible thoughts and emotions upon them. They don’t argue, they just stare back at you. In my teenage years our dog was an attentive listener to all my tormented love stories.

Frida Hallgren: I had a bird that could say my name and nibble my ears. His name was John Lennon. Animals offer you the comfort of their company, and sometimes the tangible sensation of their soft fur.

But you didn’t chose a dog or a bird. How many times did you regret having picked a monkey?

Blom: The main objection against a monkey was always the budget. It turned out so expensive that first we putted the script ‘to sleep’. When picking it up again two years later, technical facilities had developed so much that suddenly it was possible to do it in CGI.

Was there, not even for one second, a real monkey on the set?

Blom: Never, except in this one scene in the zoo. That’s the only real monkey you’ll get to see. It made us very



cautious: if we show them a real monkey, maybe the audience will notice that ours is fake. But in the end the quality of our monkey was so good that it stood the test next to a living specimen.

Hallgren: Ours looked more real than the real one! Especially the fur was fascinating. Every single hair was modelled individually. You can see the wind blowing through it.

How exactly did you do those monkey scenes?

Hallgren: The monkey is completely done in CGI. We worked in different stages. First we had Nina, a mime actress playing all the monkey scenes on the set. Then there was a mon-

key-shaped puppet to illustrate all the action. “Now the monkey is going up there, and then jumping down...” Gibbons are extremely fast, we were never fast enough to keep up with its pace. And then we shot the scene just with the actors.

Blom: After every scene a machine made a 360° scan of the set, uploading all details into a computer that calculated all graphic variables from every possible angle. A very advanced technique. Then the scenes were once more recorded in a studio in motion capture, for the correct CGI insert.

What about those monkey sounds?

Blom: That was my seven-year-old daughter. We took her into the stu-



dio to make those funny sounds over and over again, collecting an archive of monkey sounds for different emotions: happy monkey, angry monkey, scared monkey... It took the sound designer two weeks to sort out every sound for the right moment. Poor guy!

MONKY tells about a mourning process, about a child standing in the shadow of his sister who's no longer there.

Blom: Our scriptwriter Jonathan lost a sister too as a child. In this script he recalled how he felt back then, when so many people had but one advice for him: "Life must go on."

Which in the film is translated as "let's have another cup of chocolate".

Blom: In Frank's presence, his parents try to act normal. Only when he's not around, they're falling apart. People don't know how to mourn, they just want things to be like before. While Frank is longing so much to talk about what happened.

Mourning is something you do together?

Hallgren: My advice is: share your grief with others. Often people prefer a certain isolation: "Leave me alone

with my memories, I want my sadness all for myself." But talking about it is important.

Blom: Compared to our contemporary society, other cultures have better ways to deal with death, speaking about it openly. When MONKY was released in Sweden, we received positive reactions from people who came to watch the film with the whole family after they themselves had lived a tragedy. But there were others who asked their money back, because "nobody told us this film would be about death!" In the cinemas often parents were anxious to confront their children with the theme, trying to protect them from the film's emotional impact, while children didn't have a problem with it.

You introduce Saga in the first 10 minutes of the film, and then you can never show her again. In those first minutes she had to make a lasting impression.

Blom: Therefore we needed the right actress. In our search for the right girl, we had one particularly important criteria: she needed to have blue-green eyes, like a monkey's eyes. All the girls in the casting had brown eyes. One morning when walking into my office, a little girl was playing in the hallway, her hair a bit messy. When she turned



her face towards me, I looked straight into a pair of blue-green eyes. I told her I was making a movie about a monkey, a boy and his sister. "Can I be that sister?" That's how Matilda Forss Lindström entered the project. With her special energy, she makes an immediate impression that lasts throughout the entire film.

The house where the film was shot looks like a remarkable location.

Blom: The place was unique. The owner wanted to renovate and sell it, he was waiting eagerly for the premiere. Meanwhile for a whole summer long, we didn't let him mow the lawn, as we didn't want the grass to look too clean. Our DoP was very precise about the length of the grass! We were literally brushing it to give it a wilder look.

Unfortunately the view is spoiled by some rather silly looking neighbours.

Blom: They can afford to look special as they own the place. Our costume designer bought a whole series of velour tracksuits in every possible colour. For every scene we picked for them the most appropriate colour.

You took a risk with the title... You must have known hundreds of people would come to tell you: do you know there is a spelling mistake?

Blom: That's exactly what happened. But it's Saga who picked that name. Monky is not an ape, it's a name.

—
Gert Hermans