Julio Bárcenas S. about EMMA

Funny, not dogmatic

Ever since Emma was hit in the face by a ball on the day of her communion, she has been convinced she is to become a 'saint'. Or maybe a football player. The nuns at school are surprised about Emma's ambition, and at home she is facing even more misunderstanding. Maybe she needs indeed to adjust her dream, just a tiny little bit.

The Schlingel Festival was the first occasion for Mexican director Julio Bárcenas S. to screen his film on the European continent. The original title was EMMA, DIOS Y EL FÚTBOL, and it would be impossible to summarise the story in an even better way.

Football is a popular theme for children's films, unlike religion. You found a way to combine both.
Julio Bárcenas S.: For Mexican people, football and religion are very similar. We are very passionate about both of them, and they are often entwined with each other. Studying in a catholic school, all the way through my childhood a healthy spirit and a healthy body were intrinsically linked. You'll find traces of religion in every aspect of the Mexican society. The way we included them in the film opens a door for different interpretations.

How would you describe your interpretation?
Bárcenas S.: Religion and faith are not the same. Faith is a mystic thing, like a blind belief in miracles. But how can I put my trust in God when I don't understand him? I grew up in two opposite worlds. My mother came from a traditional Catholic family, my father was a freemason. In the run up to my First Communion, a very important day in Mexico, my dad kept on asking: why do you want to do this? Making this film, all the time I heard him talking through one ear and my mother's family through the other.

That was the context for developing this story?
Bárcenas S.: I waited for years to find investors willing to support my project. That things finally did work out adds to the message of this movie: If you work from the heart, everything is possible. Even if you have faith, you need to work hard to make your dreams come true.

Many religious symbols appear in the film.
Bárcenas S.: Playing around with these symbols was a tricky thing to do. In the vision that Emma has after being hit by a ball, she doesn't see God or Jesus, but it's a lamb that speaks to her. An animal that represents God, but also resembles a goat, which is the animal of the devil. Such symbols are easily understood by Latin-American people, but I wondered how they would be digested by a European audience. My story is funny, not dogmatic.

Football can be even more dogmatic than religion!
Bárcenas S.: Monarcas is not even my favourite team. The university is my 'alma mater' so my heart is with Los Pumas (Club Universidad Nacional). But in Morelia, where I come from, it's all about Monarcas.

Emma is a nice sweet girl, living in a nice sweet family.
Bárcenas S.: This movie was constructed step by step, and with every new step I asked myself how to surprise the audience. Emma is causing small changes in the lives of everyone she meets. And all those changes make

them happier people, living happier lives.

How are the dynamics within Emma's family?
Bárcenas S.: Emma's mother is facing a typical Mexican situation: she has to stay home to raise the children. Family is a priority for which she had to put aside her dreams and ambitions. That's why she tells her daughter not to give up on her dreams. Emma is portrayed at the moment when two babies will join the family. She is feeling lost. *"Mummy, daddy, look at me!"* When my own daughter once struggled with similar feelings, I understood that all she needed was lots of attention. That is only one of the many aspects I copied from my personal life. Jorge Lan, playing the father, said: *"It feels like I am your alter ego."* Maybe he was right.

Those babies look very sweet!
Bárcenas S.: Working with babies, you need to understand their behaviour. The crew has to adapt to the babies, not the other way around. But they add some sensation to the film, seeing little babies is always somehow sensational.

You chose your main actress Cassandra Iturralde because of her eyes?
Bárcenas S.: Seeing Cassandra's picture, I instantly liked it. I can't explain why – it was an almost instinctive decision. What finally convinced me was how she got along with the rest of the team, and how she could solve a situation just by using her eyes. Even if you have a great story to tell, it doesn't work if the character doesn't have the right eyes. My friend Maria Novara, who was my teacher in film school, told me: it is the heart that speaks through the eyes.

How did you shoot the football scenes in the big stadium?
Bárcenas S.: We tried to create little situations with the public and filmed their reactions. You can feel the sensation when we entered the stadium with the camera. It's an overwhelming force and I love it! The most complicated thing was to insert those earthly, realistic pictures in a fictional fairytale story.

There is a lot of football scenes in which girls and boys are playing together.
Bárcenas S.: The girls in the cast didn't play football, but they needed to learn. For five months, they practiced together with the boys. We hired a former football professional to train them. In Mexico, girls playing football is something new, the result of a mind-shift over the last few years. Only recently women's football started to become big business, right at the moment when we were making a film about it. Gathering seven kids also includes seven fathers and mothers to deal with. That was our biggest challenge. All the time we treated the kids with maximum respect.

Being a producer, you decided to direct a film for children.
Bárcenas S.: Maria Novara, my partner in the Axolote Cine production company, presented a children's film at the Berlinale 2017. Afterwards TESOROS successfully travelled to festivals around the globe. She motivated me to make my directorial debut with EMMA, my "opera prima".

That brought you all the way to Chemnitz for the Schlingel festival.
Bárcenas S.: Today this festival plants a seed and tomorrow we'll be facing a unique audience with a clear idea about the concept of cinema and the many topics that films are dealing with. Educating an audience is extremely important, for the city, for the region and the country, for Europe and the world.

–
Gert Hermans