

Anu Aun about PHANTOM OWL FOREST

"An outrageous but not so comfortable dress code"

Since Eia's parents have little time for her, the 10 year old girl is forced to spend the Christmas holiday with her grandfather on a remote farm, in the middle of the snow covered Estonian forest. There she discovers the beauty of nature and wildlife, threatened by a businessman who has a plan to destroy the primeval forest, inhabited by mysterious owls. While fighting for the protection of Phantom Owl Forest, Eia unwraps a well-kept family secret.

One year ago at the Berlinale, PHANTOM OWL FOREST was one of the flagships of the 'Estonian 100 years anniversary', a cultural support programme celebrating the anniversary of the Baltic states and meanwhile boosting the national film industries. Afterwards the film travelled the festivals intensively with a story about intergenerational friendship and ecology. We met director Anu Aun at the Film'on Festival in Brussels.

PHANTOM OWL FOREST embraces

a particular style: sweet, beautiful, a bit old-fashioned, and that recipe seems to work perfectly.

Anu Aun: We were walking on thin ice, trying to make the film look more beautiful than reality. A Christmas story should feel warm and cosy, something you'd want to watch over and over again, like children do. We added little elements of magic that enchant both grown-ups and children.

That magic is to be found in nature, not in any sort of hocus pocus.

Anu: The magical return of the owl at the moment when it is most needed, is based on a true story. I read an article about people spotting for the first time in 100 years a particular type of owl in Estonia. Our story was in need of a rare endangered species to save the forest, so we added a bit of truth to this magic fairy tale.

I have to make a confession. When meeting you and producer Maie Rosmann-Lill years ago in the Cinekid Co-production Market, I thought:



such a nice project, what a shame it will never see the light of day.

Aun: I appreciate your honesty, but we were more confident than you expected! We had applied for the 'Estonian 100 years anniversary', in which a lot of money was involved. The moment we got that grant, things went very fast. After five years of preparation, we had every detail worked out. For the first time in my life I could work with a normal budget, without thinking all the time where to cut and squeeze. This budget enabled us to work fast, as we didn't have to hire one person for nine different jobs, we simply hired each person to do his own job.

How Baltic is this film? Could it have been made anywhere else than in Estonia?

Aun: It could have been made in many places, like for instance in Scandinavia. There is definitely something Nordic about this film. I don't know much about the Baltic culture and industry, I feel closer connected to Scandinavian countries.

How difficult was it to shoot in winter?

Aun: Very difficult! It was extremely cold. I was dressed for the occasion with two pairs of short underwear, three pairs of long underwear, and a warm ski costume. All exterior scenes



were shot outside, in real snow. Only one interior was built in the studio. When spending the whole day out in nature, the fresh air gives me plenty of energy. In a studio I tend to feel sleepy at some point, but in the forest we were running around energetic in our outrageous, but not very comfortable dress code.

Everyone in the film looks nice, healthy and blushing, like a promotion spot for living outdoors. Weren't you facing any practical problems?

Aun: Many. In the woods roads were covered with snow so we had to hire tractors. Sometimes we had to make a long walk before arriving on the set, where we had only a small caravan and a heated tent waiting for us. Electricity sometimes was problematic. But considering we were there with at least 30 people, mostly in the snow, almost none of us fell sick. The whole shooting was like a winter wonderland in another universe.

Did you already return to planet earth?

Aun: Hardly! We had such a positive vibe on the set. We picked our team very carefully, and that paid off well. The entire crew is looking back upon



this period with great nostalgia.

Was there a lot of wildlife on the set?

Aun: We had a specialised crew working on the wildlife footage. Our DoP for nature photography assembled his own team of experts. Most animals were filmed in different forests all over Estonia, and we found a lynx and deer in a wildlife park. A trained owl was brought into the studio from a Lithuanian owl park, that was the only animal not being shot in its natural habitat.

Your film deals with high moral values, like family togetherness, living honestly, ecology...

Aun: When we started writing the story, ecology wasn't as trending in Esto-

nia as it is nowadays, but it was always in the core of our film. In terms of family values, I was probably reflecting on my own situation. Every summer and Christmas holidays I was sent to my grandparents and I totally loved it. I felt a strong bond with them, for which I'm still grateful. But I see so many families around me where children are kept separated from one of their parents or grandparents. They can't meet them because their quarrelling parents are having a bad relationship. Looking through the eyes of a child, this is such a tragic situation to happen, and it is seldom brought to the attention.

How did the Estonian release go?

Aun: We premiered as the opening film of the Just Film Festival in Tallinn

in 2018 and then released PHANTOM OWL FOREST in December. For the promotion we worked close together with the 'Estonia 100' team. It was a huge success. With almost 150.000 admissions, no film in Estonia did better, not even BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY which ended second place.

I presume this is going to be the type of film that from now on will be screened on Estonian TV every year during the Christmas holidays, like a new SOUND OF MUSIC, a national treasure.

Aun: I would love that – the idea makes me really happy. On an international scale we were proud to be picked up by Attraction Distribution. We had several agents interested in PHANTOM OWL FOREST but we really liked Attraction's catalogue. Some of those titles made an international career – some even made it to Estonian cinemas – so now they might do the same for PHANTOM OWL FOREST.

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