

John Sheedy about H IS FOR HAPPINESS

“Oh she is annoying!”

H IS FOR HAPPINESS, a feel good film for all ages, tells the story of two young outsiders... and a miniature horse. The film watches the world through the eyes of a quirky girl, in a joyous celebration of all things slightly odd. After the international premiere at the Berlinale 2020, the Kplus children’s jury (who gave the film a Special Mention) described H IS FOR HAPPINESS as “a motivating film from start to finish... humorous and at the same time profound.”

I have been involved with the arts since I was a child,” says John Sheedy, “acting in stage productions and TV spots. After my studies and my post grad in directing, I ran a theatre company that created works for young people and family audiences.” Thus it is no surprise that in Sheedy’s feature film debut young people are taking the lead. In H IS FOR HAPPINESS, Candice Phee is determined to spark happiness in the lives of others, and becomes a peacemaker in her quarrelsome, grief ridden family. Her new schoolmate, Douglas Benson turns out to be an

unexpected ally.

In Candice’s opinion the secret of happiness seems to be in solving other people’s problems.

John Sheedy: I think happiness needs to be found within ourselves first and once we have found it we can pass it onto others which ultimately will make you even more happy because they’re happy.

Enthusiasm can be tiring. Would you define Candice’s enthusiasm as contagious or annoying?

Sheedy: Oh she is annoying! Charmingly annoying! But we forgive her because it always comes from such a good place and her vulnerability is never too far away.

Why did you consider this the right story for your feature debut?

Sheedy: I have always enjoyed authors like Cormac McCarthy, Will Self, Virginia Wolf and anything Shaun Tan does. In cinema I admire the works of directors like John Hughes, Pedro Almodovar and Wes Anderson that



hold a fine balance of humour and pathos. Save for Baz Luhrmann, we don’t really do romance on Australian screens. Nor do we have many films with a sharp and witty 12 year old female lead. There’s something wonderful about dipping into the world of children and their perspective. As for them everything is slightly heightened and exaggerated, you are allowed to have more fun and the imagination can go wild.

Was it you who found the story, or did the story find you?

Sheedy: The script was already written by the time I came on board. Lisa

Hoppe had done a wonderful job of adapting it from the novel by Barry Jonsberg. With producer Julie Ryan at the helm of an all female producing team, I knew the project was in exceptional hands. We then assembled the cast, including our outstanding lead protagonist Daisy Axon and Wesley Pattern as Douglas Benson From Another Dimension. These two young actors both had a different approach to their performances, Daisy always leads with her head and thinks things through methodically, while Wesley leads straight from gut instinct, he is a natural clown.



Candice's face is like an open book. Was that in Daisy Axon's acting, or in the camera work, or maybe just in me getting carried away by this wonderful creature?

Sheedy: I think you're definitely you getting carried away. But I have to say it is all down to Daisy Axon's insight into the character. Daisy is Candice Phee!

What is it exactly that Douglas sets in motion when entering Candice's life?

Sheedy: She certainly wasn't expecting love to enter her world, but how can you not fall in love with Douglas Benson from *Another Dimension*? He is super charming. Adding a whole new set of complications for Candice, he is definitely the catalyst for the unfolding events throughout the film. Yankee Doodle, our miniature horse, might also have something to do with it.

Between the two of them, their gestures seem strictly choreographed, like a strange ballet scene.

Sheedy: This is something I was very conscious of bringing into the world. The dialogue is so particular and deliberate that I wanted the physicality of the characters to compliment it.

The actors worked on their physicality's quite a bit in rehearsals and on set. You will find the same physical quirks in Rich Uncle Brian and all of the extras throughout the film. It's a deliberate inclusion to make the world a little cooky and awkward as it is all told through Candice's eyes.



Not to forget Miriam Margolyes, known as Professor Sprout from the Harry Potter films, and the outstanding Richard Roxburgh as Candice's father.

Sheedy: Richard and I studied at the same drama school. He is one of the best actors we have in this country. I knew that he would bring a certain

sensitivity, heartbreak and comedy to the role. Myriam was always Miss Bamford for me, right from the beginning, that was a no brainer.

How did you create Miss Bamford's exceptionally busy lazy eye?

Sheedy: Myriam was quite nervous

The basis for this film is the perfect balance you found between grief and fun.

Sheedy: When dealing with a younger audience in particular it is important not to water down the tougher themes and trust that young people will be able to emotionally navigate their way through. Equally important is to allow them to step out of the darker moments and laugh at the mess we sometimes make as humans. It is a fine balancing act but ultimately you need to put trust in the young audience!

What enabled you to tell a story, combining so many difficult emotional moments in the lives of children?

Sheedy: As artists we always end up applying personal moments in our lives into our work. I unfortunately lost my younger sister a few years ago so I could certainly apply my experience of grief to that of the Phee family.

You know how to use colours to create that slightly aberrant universe. Walking through town with Candice is like entering another world.

Sheedy: We created three worlds across the film all through the per-



spective of Candice. There is her home which is a house of grief and silence. Then there is her school, a heightened world of colourful characters and strange assignments. And then there is the town which is full of quirky eccentric locals that all have something special about them. Creating theatre for families. I have always enjoyed the challenge of how to tackle tough issues in the storytelling, how to make it accessible to a young audience whilst also making them feel safe and allowing them to laugh... A lot. I drew on this experience in sensing how to grant the audience the space to sit-in on the more heart-breaking moments while navigating Candice's emotional ups and downs; to be able to laugh and be entertained by entering a world that is so visually appealing.

That is why you went to the picture postcard seaside town of Albany.

Sheedy: This town was the perfect hit, projecting a sense of old world charm in its architecture and landscape, the beautiful bay, the quirky hills and boulders. Albany has such a cinematic feel to it and no matter where I pointed the camera, I knew I was going to be able to frame the moment beautifully. I didn't want it to be geographically specific because it had to



be a setting that could be anywhere in the world. A world where children and adults alike would both feel an instant familiarity to, as though it were a seaside town not too far from home.

Did it bring back personal memories for you?

Sheedy: Not in that sense. But I did put a little of my German heritage into the film. My mother comes from Fulda, my grandmother from Bad Neuenahr. After WWII the whole family moved to Australia, started a new life and became florists. So as a little nod to them I popped a little florists shop in the film called 'Schatzis'. I also created the character of Mr. Wiegard

who is always watering his garden, and named him after my grandfather. Naturally I had to play his voice. I consider Germany my second home and love returning there to visit relatives. The colour palette throughout the film reminds me of my origins: the green takes me to the beautiful forests of Europe, and the warmer red tones feed into the emotional landscape of our characters. When combining these two colours, it takes me to Christmas in Germany! Needless to say I was very honoured to have the film premiere at the Berlinale.

All this takes the film to the 'edge of magic'. How much magic did you

allow?

Sheedy: Not much, I wanted to keep the themes of the film grounded, especially as we are dealing with such things as grief. The visual world around them is heightened enough so if there is any hint of magic, it would be in the forest with a miniature horse and its disappearing acts.

The story is equally 'placeless' as timeless.

Sheedy: Whilst there are specific references to contemporary technology and in the vocabulary of the younger characters, it still needed to have a timeless feel to it. All this required some extra efforts from the costume department and set designers. They went above and beyond to create this colourful and quirky world. Like the best of Disney, I never want H IS FOR HAPPINESS to have an 'expiry date.' I hope that the children who watch it now will engage in a story that doesn't feel dated and then be able to relive that memory again sometime in the future with their own children.

—
Uta Beth