

Johanne Helgeland about THE CROSSING

“Night falls quickly here in wintertime”

THE CROSSING is set in 1942 during Germany’s occupation of Norway. One day, after their parents have been arrested, ten year old Gerda and her brother Otto discover two Jewish children whom they are supposed to help to escape. Their destination: Sweden. Together they embark on an adventurous journey through snowy forests, heading to the border. We spoke with debut director Johanne Helgeland on the occasion of the Zlin Film Festival, where the film later would win the Best Film Award of the International Experts Jury.

Why is the war movie genre still appealing to children nowadays?

Johanne Helgeland: World War II is still a part of our recent history. Stories about the five years of occupation are running in many Norwegian families, and I think they’re worth being passed on. One of our ambitions was to make a classic thriller story with a serious tone that would engage the

whole family, from kids to grandparents, or even great grandparents. We encourage the young audience to ask questions about their own family’s wartime experiences, when nations and people were forced to choose sides in a scenario so evil it is almost impossible to comprehend, and at such an enormous cost of human lives. This needs to be remembered.

To fully understand the film, we might need a little background information about Norway’s position in the great war.

Helgeland: Norway was occupied without any warning on April 9th 1940 in history’s first coordinated attack by sea, air and land. The Norwegian government refused to give in and managed, together with King Haakon, to escape to England, from where acts of resistance were set up. In October 1942 the new Nazi government began to arrest and deport Norwegian Jews. Meanwhile Sweden kept a neutral po-



sition. For many, escape was the only possible option.

Being a war movie, there is still a certain fairytale-like atmosphere to the story, with “Three Musketeers” references and a sequence that seems to refer to Hansel and Gretel.

Helgeland: This story is told from the perspective of a child, who sees the world in a particular way. The author Maja Lunde created Gerda (Anna Sofie Skarholt) as a character seeing the world as an adventure. Impulsive as she is, she imagines herself as a brave musketeer. Her brother Otto (Bo Lindquist-Eriksen) is more of a brooding type and finds himself racked by doubt about the thin line between

good and evil. Otto feels attracted by the ways of his friend, whose father is cooperating with the occupying forces.

How explicit were you about good and evil?

Helgeland: Even when being very precise about it, we added a degree of nuance, to show different aspects of reality. A more brutal form of realism would probably scare off our young audience, but I didn’t want to water down the subject either. We needed to find a balance. Like for instance through the young German soldier, who hesitates to obey orders. I was inspired by other films tackling similar themes. I saw LITTLE IDA (Laila



Mikkelsen, 1981) at a very young age, a dramatic film for an adult audience, exploring the topic of war and prejudices. I was a fan of serious movies focusing on big emotions, like E.T. or EMPIRE OF THE SUN by Steven Spielberg. Talking to children about important subjects shouldn't be underestimated.

THE CROSSING pays tribute to the mindset of children, who can find an element of play in even the most harsh situations.

Helgeland: I found this aspect both touching and powerful, because it contrasts the cold and cruel world we inflict on our children. Not since WWII have there been more children fleeing from hostile regimes, war and poverty as today. Towards these children we have a huge responsibility to open our borders.

From the claustrophobic indoor opening scenes we quickly wander into the great outdoors.

Helgeland: We want to show how children are affected by war in different ways. Even though "home" should feel like a safe place, now it is more like a waiting room for bigger things to happen. I wanted to suggest a sense of family around these children,



a soft and golden atmosphere at the beginning, but when insecurity and doubt set in and the world becomes a cold, hard place, the colour palette changes. They start their journey by the break of day when the world looks dark and bewildering. The forest has many faces, it can be a shelter, but it can also be a cold, harsh place where you can get lost easily. It was important to uphold this diversity in every scene and to reflect how children would perceive each situation.

Many exterior scenes were shot in the snow.

Helgeland: We didn't film in any studios, nor were there any purpose built sets. We shot towards the end of 2018, over a thirty-day period, give or take. We were hoping for snowfall on

the first day of shooting, but weather conditions turned out differently. Luckily we managed to get snow on the most crucial moments. For the actors there was a lot of running involved, in the depth of the forest over hilly terrain and slippery ground. I was impressed by their courage and determination. To stay as close as possible to the actors, DoP John-Erling Holmenes Fredriksen used a gimbal rig, a camera stabilizing system that made filming much easier. Then soldiers arrived with tracker dogs. We had the perfect dog whisperer on set, everything ran smoothly. Except that night falls quickly here in wintertime. Since I didn't want to use any artificial lighting, all the time I was working very intensely towards the end of the day so as to squeeze the most out of

the final minutes of daylight.

Even being so young, these children take a great responsibility towards each other and their families.

Helgeland: The young actors and I asked ourselves if we would have acted just as brave and responsible. Maybe not, but it is a good thing to believe we would.

For a feature film debut, THE CROSSING looks quite ambitious.

Helgeland: I loved working on this project. The budget was very modest, which stimulated our creativity and encouraged us to make the best possible use of available resources. I was surrounded by a very experienced crew and producer, Cornelia Boysen on behalf of Maipo Film. My biggest concern was to treat the seriousness of the theme not too light-heartedly. It had to be handled properly and sincerely, I felt a big responsibility to do it the right way.

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Gert Hermans
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