

Ralf Kukula & Matthias Bruhn about FRITZI: A REVOLUTIONARY TALE

“You can still recognise what is a Trabant, a Wartburg or a Skoda”

A beautiful summer in East Germany, 1989. Nothing foretells the socio-political revolution that is around the corner. Twelve-year-old Fritzi is occupied by more important matters, taking care of her best friend Sophie's dog Sputnik, while Sophie's family is on vacation. After the holidays, when Sophie still hasn't returned, Fritzi and Sputnik set out in search of her. A postcard from West Germany puts her on the right track. This quest unexpectedly leads Fritzi into the eye of a political storm.

By chance, Fritzi stumbles into a demonstration and even her father is getting involved. Will Fritzi be so brave to rescue a dog, a friend and a father all at once? This historically accurate animated feature describes a peaceful revolution as seen through the eyes of a child. An exciting tale of the Fall of the Wall, and of the people

who made this happen.

What a good idea to use a dog as the motor behind the story.

Matthias Bruhn: Sputnik was an idea of our scriptwriter, Beate Völcker. The movie is based on *Fritzi was there*, a children's novel by Hanna Schott, in which Fritzi is more an observer of events. Our Fritzi needed to be stronger and more active, we changed her age (12 instead of 8) and added the story of her best friend Sophie and her dog. Sputnik is the emotional motivation for all of Fritzi's actions. Sputnik is super cute, young viewers can immediately connect to both him and Fritzi.

Were you never afraid this story would only concern German children or their parents? Actually I was, until your film proved me wrong.

Ralf Kukula: This is a story about uni-



versal values. Children of all nations can understand what it means to lose your best friend, and to fight for the truth, even if the going gets tough. We were optimistic from the start that our film could work internationally, due to the feedback from our foreign co-production partners. At the world premiere in Belgium, there was a standing ovation for the scene when the border opens. These were children who probably never heard about the fact that there once was the GDR and Germany used to be a divided nation.

Still there is a socio-political background that children need to understand to fully capture the story.

Bruhn: The story is told completely

from Fritzi's point of view. At first she is quite naïve, and doesn't know about politics, she simply wants to deliver Sputnik back to her friend. But the more Fritzi gets an understanding of the situation in her country, the more she develops an opinion. Even if kids don't get all the historic details – unlike most of the parents or grandparents in the audience – we made sure they can follow Fritzi along her emotional journey.

Did you remember exactly how the city looked, back in those days? The parks, the streets, the smokestacks on the horizon, was it all still vividly in your memory?

Kukula: We paid great attention to the design of our backgrounds into

the smallest details, enabling us to recall the spirit of those days. On one hand, we trusted the memories of our East German crew members. And we got enthusiastic support from the archives. We noticed many times how parents and grandparents reacted to the high precision in our backgrounds, that sent them on a time-travel back into their memories. Many were moved to tears and would never have believed that an animated film could have such an effect.

Bruhn: We also used original footage from TV-News archives. Some of the scenes, e.g. Hans Dietrich Genscher on the balcony of the Embassy in Prague, are part of our "collective memory". For the German version, we used the original voices of Genscher or later, Schabowski.

There is this one specific detail in the city landscape: the cars! They even sound like the old models.

Kukula: Cars are always a statement of their time. All vehicles in the film are replicas of the originals. Alienated, but in such a way that you can still recognise what is a Trabant, a Wartburg, a Skoda or an Ikarus bus. The sounds were all recorded from original vehicles.



As the story evolves, the atmosphere of an uprising intensifies.

Bruhn: Even in a children's movie we didn't want to trivialize the atmosphere of fear. Fritzi's father getting arrested is a scary moment. The scene in which Fritzi convinces her mother not to be intimidated but to join the demonstration instead, has an emotional impact that you can only achieve if you allow some extremes. We tried to maintain a balance between intense, sometimes sad scenes and moments of joy and fun. After all, FRITZI is not a comedy but a drama, which is quite unusual for a children's animation.

During the uprising, we see colourful people demonstrating together:

there are hippies and punks, young progressives and retired people... All coming together with one goal.

Kukula: The first demonstrations in the GDR were strongly influenced by the churches and by activists from environmental organisations. After the big demonstrations in October 1989 the atmosphere became more relaxed, the banners became more brave and funny. Never again in my life have I experienced such a diverse mix of total strangers courageously setting out for a common goal. Only the days after the Fall of the Wall in November and December 1989 could top this.

The animation reminds me of the comic books of my youth: clear col-

ours, strong lines...

Bruhn: The *ligne claire* from comic books in the 70s and 80s has indeed been an inspiration. In terms of design, we're standing closer to Japanese anime than to Disney movies. Our team developed a unique style, a somehow nostalgic reference to the old 2D movies from the eighties, but making use of the latest digital technology. The cars are 3D objects, the crowd scenes are computer generated and in the compositing we added hundreds of digital FX to perfectly recreate the look of the late 80s. But even when using digital pencils and colours, the animation of the characters and backgrounds is 100% hand-drawn. Contrary to many perfect CGI movies, the "imperfection" of the 2D style adds an emotional warmth to our movie.

—
Gert Hermans
© Ale Kino! Festival