

Europe's top animators gathered around one table

"Like a rushed, energetic, pounding heartbeat"

It must have been since the signing of the Treaty of Versailles that so many big shots were gathered around one table. A digital roundtable, where the Industry Days of the Kristiansand Int'l Children's Film Festival fired some questions at the crème de la crème of the European animation league. No wonder that moderator Frank Mosvold (who made his entrance to the feature animation stage last year with ELLA BELLA BINGO) was excited to sit together with "some of his favourite animation directors"

, being: Tomm Moore (WOLFWALKERS)

- Will Becher (SHAUN THE SHEEP – FARMAGEDDON).
- Kim Hagen Jensen (DREAMBUILDERS)
- Christian Ryltenius (PELLE NO-TAIL)
- Rasmus Sivertsen (CAPTAIN SABERTOOTH & THE MAGIC DIAMOND)

Here are some fragments of what they had to say on...

How to end up in animation

Tomm Moore: I began as a kid, making animations at home, but in the late 80's the equipment wasn't easy to find, I could only do some basic stuff on my computer. I joined the Young Irish Filmmakers, a group in my hometown Kilkenny. They had a camera and a few other things that I could use.

Kim Hagen Jensen: I started out doing comic books at home, which was my initial passion. Then I got into work practice at a Danish animation studio and later moved on to Ireland to work with Don Bluth at the Sullivan Bluth Studios.

Rasmus Sivertsen: My father was an animator of short films in the 80's. Whenever he applied for money and got granted, he took a year off from his job. Those were inspiring times for me and my brother, helping him out and constantly talking about animation.

Christian Ryltenius: I've always been fond of drawing, since I was a kid. I was lucky enough, very early on, to find out about a 2D animation studio one hour away from my hometown,



Captain Sabertooth & the Magic Diamond

where I was – believe it or not – working with Rasmus' dad. When he left, I got his job.

Will Becher: It started as a hobby in the 80's. What I made was very crude but I loved the fact that it was so instant. I started writing letters to Aardman, to see what I could learn from them. Amazingly, they wrote back and years later I found myself there with a job.

Their last feature

Moore: After THE SECRET OF KELLS and SONG OF THE SEA, co-director Ross Stewart and I thought it would be nice to complete an informal trilogy on Irish folklore. We wanted to set this one in our hometown, and re-

membered the legends about a kind of werewolves, the wolf people of Kilkenny.

Sivertsen: The Sabertooth universe was already adapted into theatre plays and a live action movie, but I felt something really animated about it, with lots of magic and adventures and possibilities to do animated humour – which is something I'm always looking for.

Handmade authenticity

Moore: I'm a huge fan of Aardman; I love the workshoppy feeling of handmade stuff. We try to keep that kind of feeling in our studio too, working with sculptures, painters, etc. Even if we're often using computers, we try

to secure that timeless, handmade feel, especially for a folklore tale like ours. I prefer to draw, I rather find a way to get paid to draw than anything else.

Hagen Jensen: As our story evolved we figured out there were a lot of atmospheric shots and details that we wanted for the lighting of the set, with characters stepping in and out of dreams. I thought 3D could work better than what was possible within our 2D budget, and I don't regret it. It suited the film well.



DREAMBUILDERS

is excited about exploring the world. We wanted her to be bright, colourful and magical.

Sivertsen: Our main character Sune has always been playing second fiddle, this is her chance to shine. Captain Sabertooth doesn't want girls on board, so we had this little Shakespearean twist where she dresses up as a boy.

Test screenings

Hagen Jensen: Throughout the process we had several test screenings with script consultants, who came with notes and remarks. But only at the premiere I learned the most about how children actually react to the film.

Moore: We show our animatic to an Irish-speaking primary school. It takes a couple of years to get the animatic

right, which means we go through different sets of 8 and 9 year olds. Their feedback is pretty honest, they don't hold back. Those are the notes I take seriously.

Ryltenius: In one test screening kids started to cry. That is when we realised we were doing some really scary, intensive stuff, and we decided to adjust one part of the story.



PELLE NO-TAIL

Becher: At Aardman we constantly – probably every four months – screen a rough cut to the company founders, which is incredibly useful.

Working with a crew

Moore: We want the crew at any stage to do more than just following technical orders. We encourage everyone to try and bring something up. Even the ink and paint artists had suggestions on how they could make scenes more interesting, playing around with smears and blurs. That is what I missed most since the pandemic. We had to finish the movie in our bedrooms and that was fine – animators were among the lucky ones – but it is not the same as everybody brain-ing together. Collaboration is such a powerful part of animation.

Female lead characters

Moore: When we wrote a first draft of the script with Robyn as a boy, it felt like we had to construct a conflict for him; in 1650 a boy wanting to become a hunter would have felt encouraged anyway. With a girl in the lead, the story got less contrived and more natural. Back then, more so even than today, women were not expected to do any of the things that Robyn dreams of. The vision of freedom that she sees in her friend Mebh becomes much more poignant.

Becher: Lula is a new character in the Aardman universe. Early on in the story she wasn't very engaging, but now she represents someone much like Shaun, she loves adventure and



SHAUN THE SHEEP - FARMAGEDDON

Working with actors

Sivertsen: We gathered all the actors playing out the movie beforehand, like a live action film. We spent a week together, recording the voices and shooting scenes with a video camera. Through the actors' improvisations, scenes were putting on extra flesh, with the writer adding all fresh ideas to the script as we were going. That worked out very well.

Moore: That is fascinating! Kemp Powers (co-director of SOUL) says that compared to live action, what we miss in animation is the spontaneity. Your method is a way for recapturing some of that.

Hagen Jensen: This was my first time working with actors. I started out sticking very much to the script until one day during a break, the actors started improvising. I thought that

was such fun material that we re-recorded many of the scenes, improvising on the original script. In that process completely new characters emerged, which made the production very complicated, but I was having so much fun. On my next movie I will have a lot more of that.

Moore: We did three recording sessions with Honor Kneafsey (Robyn)



WOLFWALKERS

and Eva Whittaker (Mebh) and I felt like capturing lighting in a bottle: surrounded by technicians and advisors, nervously staring at their script, all they did was just making friends. Some of what we captured there, is what made the movie work.

Becher: Shaun has no dialogue. The editors and I spend hours – you wouldn't believe! – picking out the right 'baaah' from 400 takes; because you have that particular one in your head and you just can't find it.

What do you enjoy most about animation?

Hagen Jensen: The storytelling! I've always been a storyteller ever since I did comic books as a child.

Moore: I enjoy the collaboration, as you get to work with more talented

people than yourself and you learn from them. What I don't like is that it requires a lot of meetings and management and human resources – I like to spend some time also drawing myself. Trying to get that balance right is the story of my life.

Your advice for young animators

Hagen Jensen: Go for it! Don't sit around, waiting for the perfect idea to come. Get it out there, show it to a producer, find someone to take a look at your work, and get some feedback on it.

Ryltenius: Apply to one of those fantastic animation schools; if you can't get in one year, maybe you can the next year.

Moore: Parents often come to tell me that 'my kid loves to spend hours alone in his room, drawing' but animation is the art of teamwork. The biggest thing to work on is your emotional intelligence and your ability to be an inspiring part of the team.

We send our massive thanks to the Kristiansand Int'l Children's Film Festival for changing a problematic situation in our favour, and raising great expectations for the future of European animated cinema.