

Jan Bubeníček & Denisa Grimmova about EVEN MICE BELONG IN HEAVEN

Fun with a frog

After a sudden accident, the short-tempered young mouse Wizzy and the shy fox Whitebelly end up together in animal heaven. As naturally mortal enemies, they have to gain control over their instincts and work together to meet the challenges of this new environment. There's plenty of magic to this story, but there's even more magic in the way it is made: In top-notch stop-motion with hand-made puppets, delicate textures and a warm lighting design.

What's so special about Wizzy's nose? What do animals fear most in a haunted house? What are woodworms doing on a film set? Czech directors Denisa Grimmova & Jan Bubeníček brought the answers to the JEF festival in Antwerp, where EVEN MICE BELONG IN HEAVEN was screened as the opening film. But first we asked them an even more crucial question...

Is it really so important to wash our ears?

Jan Bubeníček: It's not the most important thing in the world, although

our mothers always told us so. More importantly it is not to be scared of water, or even not to be scared at all.

There are certain aspects we might not appreciate too much about Wizzy's character.

Bubeníček: She is annoying! Even the tone of her voice is.

Denisa Grimmova: She has her reasons to fight. Her anger comes from sadness; she is sad because this evil world took her father away from her, the father whom she loved so much and who told her in his last moment to *"be brave"*. Compared to her dad's epic story, Wizzy's life looks rather shallow, which is frustrating. She is a little girl, not yet able to handle such big emotions.

That ambiguity, was it a conscious decision?

Grimmova: What is good for mice isn't necessarily good for foxes and vice versa. We break with the paradigm that the world is divided into innocent prey and evil predators.

Bubeníček: We all carry the best and



the worst within ourselves. It is important to decide which part of your personality you decide to foster.

Since the film was made in stop-motion, all locations must have been built, like the forest in the opening scene.

Bubeníček: The abandoned forest playground was one of the largest sets, scaled 50% of the real size. It was eight metres long, constructed on separate segments, with little holes for the camera to peek through.

The only sets fully constructed in CGI are the ocean and the underground railroad.

The Indiana Jones tribute?

Grimmova: Based on the estimated speed of the cart, we would have needed a 30 metre long railway, so we decided to do it in CGI.

The "heavenly fairground" is another ambitious set.

Bubeníček: That was fun! We both studied traditional animation. While



I started working as a digital effects supervisor, Denisa kept on using real materials and textures. We didn't want to re-model nature, we wanted the real thing! All the stones and tree-trunks are real, and we bought tons of artificial flowers.

Grimmova: The "Forest of Forests" was made from grapevines; we collected the cut-off branches. Actually the set got invaded by bugs. Every day we found piles of sawdust, and little pieces of the trunks had disappeared. Whatever we were building on the upside, they were destroying on the inside.

You even succeed in making an amusement park look particularly

inviting.

Bubeníček: Because we contrasted a warm light in the foreground with darkness in the background, and had classical music on the score. We kept our visual concept deliberately conservative or traditional.

There are charming details, like Wizzy's school bag being made from a matchbox, or the interiors of a mouse hole. How much passion was invested in these details?

Grimmova: Constructing the mouse hole was like a childhood dream coming true. I've always been fantasising about it and even tried to think from a mouse's perspective. We uploaded a drawn concept in a computer to calcu-

late scales and proportions. Then puppets, sets and props were built. That is when I came in to do the set-dressing. I love collecting and sorting objects - our house is full of them. I added all the details, planted every flower and invited pupils from our kids' school to the studio to help me design the wrapped candy for the fair.

Animators in general invest their energy in the eyes and fur of the characters. You invested in noses! I never knew they were so important.

Bubeníček: They are for rodents. Being so small, rodents are rather limited in their mimics; Wizzy was only 14 centimetres tall. While the foxes' faces contained 20 mobile elements, the mice had only six: jaws, nose, eyes, and eyebrows.

The number of animal specimens in heaven is almost unlimited.

Bubeníček: There were around 105 puppets, representing 85 different species.

Which one was the most challenging or the most fun?

Bubeníček: The birds! The parrot and the raven have real feathers; 18 per wing. Instead of animating them feather by feather, we started with a CGI design, which was then replaced

by real feathers. With every movement, all feathers folding and unfolding correspond to the bones.

Grimmova: I had fun with the frog, which was made of silicon, a material that resembles the human flesh and skin, which adds extra liveliness to the character.

Do kids still know what heaven is?

Grimmova: If there would be some kind of heaven, I hope it will be different for every individual, according to our needs and desires. We can't tell what heaven looks like; this is simply our version. In our story heaven is not only about fun; it is a place where you have to work on who you are.

Still... even in heaven you need to pay for a cinema ticket!

Bubeníček: Indeed, but you pay with your own experiences, based on the way you overcome your fears, anger and worries.

Although we were in heaven, God never was in the movie.

Grimmova: The concept of God is too big for us. I can't tell whether that God should be christian, jewish, muslim or anything else.

Bubeníček: Children's films often mislead their audience by refusing the answers to the questions they might





raise among children. We want to give children a fair answer to all their possible questions. Some of those answers come from the crayfish, who advise us to *“follow our nose and not our tail”*. Always move forward, something is awaiting you there, and the choices we make will have their consequences on our lives.

That scene explains about the circle of life and the mysteries of life and death.

Bubeníček: The crayfish is a sensei; he has the wisdom to tell about the rhythm of the universe, and about eternity.

Still the biggest threat for animals

is the human being. Do we meet them in the film?

Grimmova: Somehow, while hunting in the forest or driving a car. When humans enter a haunted house, they are frightened by gruesome animal creatures. But the animals visiting the haunted house in the amusement park are mainly frightened by human figures.

How was it to make a film with two directors?

Grimmova: It helped the film a lot. As man and wife we are complementary in our filmmaking, me being the illustrator working with the art department and Jan being focussed on

technical aspects (animatic, storyboarding). With Wizzy being a girl and Whitebelly being a boy, the gender balance was always there throughout the script writing and directing process. We were working half days together in the studio, the rest of the day we took turns taking care of the kids. Script author Syd Field once wrote that you should never make a film together with your significant other, but with a huge project like this, it was our only option. Otherwise the film would have crushed our relationship.

The film explains how every ending marks a new beginning. Now that the project is finished, does this mark a new beginning for you?

Bubeníček: A new beginning for Czech animation! After the political and economic changes in the nineties, the situation got extremely difficult and the Czech animation industry almost went bankrupt. For most of us, animation became a hobby and no longer an occupation. Student films did very well, as film schools were the only animation producers left. After more than 20 years, finally a new generation of producers, that don't care much about what once was, stood up. They revitalised the market for Czech feature animations. Denisa is current-



Denisa Grimmova & Jan Bubeníček

ly working on a short film, I'm working on a TV-series, and together we're preparing our next feature.

–
Gert Hermans