

About HOW I LEARNED TO FLY

“This is how we spent our summers”

There is one thing that all representatives of HOW I LEARNED TO FLY seem to have in common when we meet: director Radivoje (“Rasha”) Andric, producer Maja Popovic (Sense Production) and actress Klara Hrvanovic have mischievous lights of excitement twinkling in their eyes. Perhaps because they are proud about a Serbian children’s film that is embraced so unanimously. Or perhaps because they are happy with the excellent box office figures that this Central European co-production (Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia, Bulgaria) scores in Serbian cinemas. Or perhaps because they are simply happy to be here. Klara: *“It looks like a carnival on the street.”* – *“That is not a carnival; that’s simply the Zlin Film Festival.”* – *“Really? How heart-warming.”*

Sofia (12) is forced to spend her vacation with her overbearing grandmother on an island in Croatia. Not the perfect summer experience she had in mind! But feeling embraced by this big family circle, she makes new friends and together they celebrate

everything a summer on an island can offer: sparkling sun, seawater, lots of ice cream and perhaps even a first kiss. This carefree time abruptly comes to an end when Sofia is confronted with a painful family secret. Old wounds don’t heal easily, but finally overcoming the family traumas would save much more than just Sofia’s summer.

On the screen you can smell summer in its purest essence. Was it always summer on the set?

Andric: Not at all! I don’t believe in God but thinking back at this shooting, maybe I should have gone burning some candles in a few Belgrade churches. We had a super tight schedule and desperately needed the sun to keep up with it, but filming in the beginning of September, the early autumn rain was ruining several scenes. Maja Popovic: We even had a little flood, with trucks getting stuck in the mud. But considering the pandemic situation and limited budget, there was this “we shoot it, now or never” feeling.



Up to what extent did the locations influence the atmosphere on set?

Andric: Filming in these places felt very natural to me. My grandpa built a house on the seaside where I’ve spent a great deal of my childhood. This film depicts island life like we lived it during the time of the year when you had no homework and you could see your friends again.

Popovic: That is in general how we spent our summers: climbing trees, eating watermelons, hanging out by the seaside. All of us are familiar with this nostalgic summer vibe.

Using the word ‘nostalgia’ for a chil-

dren’s film is tricky. Often you might read between the lines how “things were so much better in the past”. But I didn’t have that feeling with your film.

Andric: With this film I want to represent contemporary times; nothing much has changed compared to the old days: just put your cell phone aside for a moment and go out. When watching the kids in my family, they’re still spending their summers exactly like this. Soon they’ll be old enough to go on the water in small boats.

Popovic: Values haven’t changed, it’s just that kids nowadays have to navigate through different influences and





challenges from outside.

How did generations mix on the set?

Andric: We had a lot of rehearsals before shooting started; they bonded like friends already before arriving on the set. The rehearsals went much further than sitting around the table reading dialogues; we took them to the park and the pool, we went for ice cream and McDonalds... We made it a fun process.

Being familiar with different chil-

dren's film traditions, we all recognise the Scandinavian style, the Dutch, Spanish, French style... But if I have to define the Balkan style (that we still need to discover), I find this joyful energy, this lust for life rather typical.

Andric: More than in Croatia – where people often hold back a bit more than we do – in Serbian culture you feel the Mediterranean influences. We do have this typical nonchalance that might ooze also into our film catalogue. Unfortunately we can't call it a tradition yet; over the last 20 years probably not more than five young audience films have been produced in Serbia. I would be very happy if my film could help convince other filmmakers.

Popovic: The Serbian Film Centre has made a separate call for children & youth films now, which is an important first step forward.

Meanwhile the box office proves that it can actually work. HOW I LEARNED TO FLY did great in Serbian cinemas.

Popovic: This is our most remarkable achievement. For many children this was their first domestic film experience. We were touched by how many kids went to see the film even five or six times, promoting it among friends

and family members.

Andric: Then we should be happy that it is such a good film! Imagine they would go to the cinema and afterwards conclude: "These Serbian films aren't that good, we'll never watch another one again."

Even if your film is not primarily about the Balkan civil war, still the subject is - somewhere underneath – gently interwoven in one of the storylines.

Andric: I hope that this film can be a step forward towards reconnection. We mention the suffering on both sides – when you see people on the other side suffering the same way like you did, would you still be able to hate them? How many Serbs ever went to the cinema and found themselves crying over a Croatian soldier who died, or over a Croatian family in need? We didn't expect it to be such a cathartic experience. We observed the audience laughing and crying at the same time, even hugging one another, not knowing how to handle these emotions.

Popovic: When we showed the film to a young test audience, the general remark was: "These people are fighting for no reason and they need to get back together; they need to make up".

Similar feelings were reflected among the crew members?

Popovic: Our first Assistant Director was Croatian, the second one was Serbian, and he called the other one "his first Croatian friend ever". He had never even set foot on Croatian ground before. After the last shooting day in Belgrade, he invited his Croatian friend at home, introducing him to his family. Instead of staying two days in Belgrade – as initially planned – they've spent 11 days together.

And what about the young actors?

Popovic: We shot in 2020 and in 2021 they all met up and spent summer together again. They are still in contact every day. Emma, the youngest kid on set, was only 8 years old – she was full of energy and everyone fell in love with her. In the interview for the 'making of', we asked her what was the hardest thing about shooting a film, and she answered: "The days off."

–
Gert Hermans