

Peter Budinsky about JOURNEY TO YOURLAND

“Perfection in the imperfections”

The Slovak-Czech animation *JOURNEY TO YOURLAND* is ambitious in its storytelling and its visual approach. A 3D computer animation with characters looking like hand-made puppets, in whose footsteps we travel from one outrageous universe to the other. The film, directed by Peter Budinsky, had its world premiere at the Zlin Film Festival.

10 year old Riki runs away from home following a mysterious emergency signal that leads him all the way to a breath-taking parallel world called Yourland, where wonderful machines roam golden deserts, monkeys and ravens talk, and science symbiotically coexists with nature. But his journey brings Riki into the eye of a hurricane: a power struggle keeps Yourland in a strong grip, threatening – even literally – Riki’s weak heart.

With its elaborate story and visual ingenuity, the film asks a lot from its audience, but it also gives a lot in return.

Peter Budinsky: I am aware this isn’t

one of those movies you can watch while vacuuming the house, and that is how I wanted it. *YOURLAND* is dedicated to children; however the story touches several topics that aren’t easy to talk about, but the answers are all the more important. Finding the right balance was a continuous struggle with this movie that targets a wide audience without losing its in-depth approach. We overlooked the story from a distance, alternating funny and sad scenes, and colourful and grey visuals. Every time we understood that we were pushing things too far, we were ready to make a change. For example, the character of the ravens was completely redesigned, much more grotesque and silly compared to how they looked in an earlier stage.

The first 20 minutes of the film are entirely focussed on the one main character. An unusual choice.

Budinsky: One of my priorities was to serve the audience something unexpected. Of course I hear those opinions all the time that a movie should open with funny, colourful scenes,



but I choose a different approach, leading the audience in one direction and then suddenly making a drastic change. This is how I felt it should be done. I wanted to offer the two characters – mother and son – the space to act out their intimate relationship. If we would rush it too much, their magical bond will forever remain vague.

You don’t hesitate to introduce us to the unpleasant aspects of Riki’s character (“you’re the worst mum in the world”).

Budinsky: It’s important not to sug-

arcoat reality. Even when kids say unpleasant things, it is only a momentum. Deep in their hearts they do love their parents. I’m sure we all once had those moments of anger and hate towards our parents, which helps the audience to identify with Riki. Throughout all the many versions of the script, Riki was the only character that never fundamentally changed (he just got “polished” a bit). At one point all I had to do was close my eyes to teleport myself into his head.

It feels like JOURNEY TO YOUR-





LAND uses the cinematography of a contemporary action movie: fast cuts, close-ups...

Budinsky: I do enjoy long shots in live action movies, discovering about characters without a single word being said. But in animation, I like action, movement... It becomes itchy when characters are just standing and talking; I want to have them moving all the time. The framework for the narrative is created by the close-ups (showing the details that we've been working on in our set and puppet design) and wide shots (showing the complexity of the sets), that should be like a rollercoaster. I'm a fan of coming up slowly and then going down fast, giv-

ing the scenes an extra dynamic.

Which is translated in the technique you use?

Budinsky: I love mixing traditional animation techniques with new technologies. A stop motion animation design was the starting point for every phase of the production. For example, all the characters were designed as 20 cm tall puppets, though modelled with 3D software. All buttons on jackets have strange shapes, as our artists couldn't create perfectly round shapes for such small objects. The texture of the skin looks like an upgraded type of plaster. We were looking for the imperfections in the

movements and lip-sync – I always try to add a “human touch”; nothing in our lives is perfect; then why should it be in movies?

The result is a very mature type of animation.

Budinsky: The eyes and mimicry were my top priority. Once we reached a stage of “perfection”, we started creating the imperfections. Our team designed a code which was deforming the mathematically perfect movements created by a computer, to add some distortions.

In the opening scenes we see these rigid city structures (“a grey block between grey blocks”) that contrast strongly with the colourful world we'll soon be visiting.

Budinsky: These grey blocks are Petržalka, the ‘concrete jungle’ neighbourhood in Bratislava where I grew up. Petržalka had a bad reputation for drugs and crime, but yet I have plenty of memories connected to it. All the time I keep on advocating for the old neighbourhood where I was born, like a small town patriot. This grey, foggy, godforsaken area that Riki moves into with his mum, reflects his mental state. On the other hand, the world of Yourland is full of colours, superb inventions, and all things Riki ever

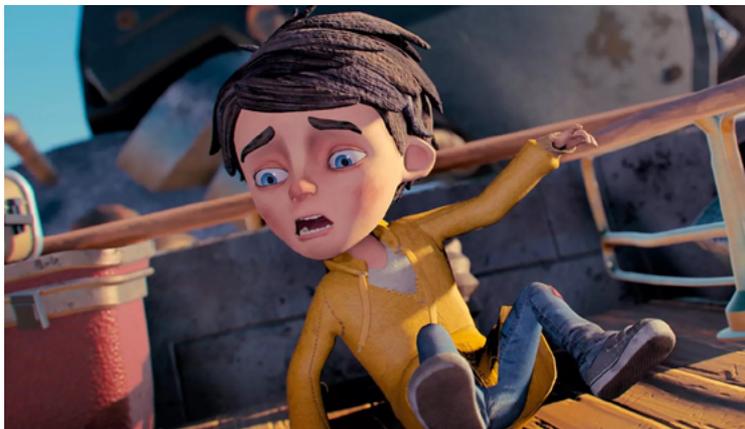


dreamed about. Due to this contrast we understand that Riki's inner world is not shaped by the exterior world. Even when living in a seemingly ugly world, we can carry a full and rich inner world inside us.

Nothing as difficult and expensive as animating water... and there's plenty of water in JOURNEY TO YOURLAND!

Budinsky: Which gave our team members many sleepless nights. You know... we were the first feature ani-





mation project to use the tool UNITY as a basis for our creation process. This tool is not developed as filmmaking software, so we came across many difficulties. But finally it came with so many benefits; it enabled us to create a huge number of shots on the water; I wasn't even forced once to adjust the script.

A great environmental concern speaks from your film.

Budinsky: Isn't that the most important topic we should be talking about today? I wish I could have given it even more space. That is why my next film will focus even more on the environmental topic. There's simply nothing

more urgent to talk about. We can have conflicts, we can have wars... but we still need a planet to live on.

That's not the only contemporary problem you're tackling. Populism is another one.

Budinsky: Many topics can make my blood boil, but in terms of populism you might know that the situation in Slovakia is running out of hand. We've "borrowed" many quotes from politicians and public figures and I should say... we never felt like running out of supply.

What about this small quote "Fathers are the same everywhere..."?

Budinsky: It's not poverty or divorce or any other issue that worries children most; it is the fact that parents do not really talk with them. Emma's father is hiding his sadness, Riki's mother is hiding the truth about dad... I'm addressing all parents around the world to make them understand how important it is to be honest with your kids.

The film is a prototype of a creative co-production construction. How was that structured?

Budinsky: For this I pass the word to my beloved co-producer and wife...

Barbora Budinska: The set-up of the co-production was based on what felt most natural for every partner. The Czech Republic has some experience in feature animation productions, our Belgian co-producer runs a post-production studio... The structure just created itself! Peter clearly understood this would be a different journey compared to his short films. He passed a lot of responsibilities to the team and allowed them to be creative with new ideas. It was never about giving orders or fighting for something, but rather about looking for solutions together. For that I'm very grateful.

How much were you held back by budgetary limitations?

Budinsky: I tried not to think about it. Our amazing team members all did much more than they were supposed to. To any budgetary topic, there was always a creative solution. Maybe it's because of my "arrogance" not to bow to limitations, but the true credit goes to the team that was working so very hard.

—
Gert Hermans