

Joya Thome about LAURA'S STAR

"It was pure brain jogging"

Up-and-coming director Joya Thome, who scored a festival hit in 2017 with the award-winning *QUEEN OF NIEN-DORF* has been entrusted the remake of Klaus Baumgart's classic children's book *LAURA'S STAR* for Warner Bros. Translating the animation by Maya Gräfin Rothkirch & Thilo Graf Rothkirch (2005) into a live-action film (that premiered in December 2021) was not only quite a contrast with her feature debut, but also a challenge that the young filmmaker mastered surprisingly well.

Joya Thome: The framework was clear and fixed; that couldn't be touched. The animated film was the basis of it all, and should still be recognisable in terms of its design and visuals. I went along with that, but furthermore I worked with a surprising creative freedom. Whatever I was pushing for, the producers tried to make it possible within the budgetary limitations; they trusted me completely. For instance, I was allowed to delete quite a substantial part of the dialogue from the original screenplay, that I tried to

translate into images and emotions recalling the plot of the animated film.

LAURA'S STAR tells about a little girl, missing her old home after her family had moved. One night when she sees a star falling from the sky, she goes searching for it and finds it in the city park. The star has lost a branch in its fall and Laura nurses it lovingly. Without further ado, she takes it home and finds in him a friend with whom she can have the most amazing adventures. When the star decides to return to her spot in outer space, Laura bids farewell with a heavy heart.

What did you like about the story and what turned out to be the hardest part of it?

Thome: People might think that smaller children are way too young to understand an inner conflict such as letting go of something so dear, but that is simply not true. Which is depicted beautifully in this story. The biggest challenge was certainly working on the visual effects, a challenge that I



took on with great pleasure.

For example?

Thome: When capturing "outer space" all we actually had on set were the kids in a blue studio and nothing more. They were hanging on ropes from various devices, and we had the flying mobile there, which had to move through the room but actually couldn't move at all... Everything needed to be calculated in advance on a spatial level – who would fly where in which shot and how can we visualise it optimally? You always needed to preview how stars and objects would move later on. The camera needed to travel extensively on a crane over the children. And all these things

needed to be communicated with the children, like in which direction they should look and what would be added to the picture later. Sometimes at least five people were moving around the room with sticks and lights, and then there were planets coming out of the screen... All of us had to know our stakes; it was pure brain jogging! Looking back upon it, I wonder how I actually managed to do it.

How did you communicate everything to the kids?

Thome: We tried to keep things as playful as possible. For example, when 5 year old Michel (playing Tommy) wakes up at night, hearing the star raging in Laura's room, not know-



ing what these sounds could be, the set designer in the next room moved around various objects and asked Michael to guess which one he had moved. Meanwhile the camera was capturing Michael's concentrated face. Until a sudden loud noise frightened him. At that age you can read almost every emotion on a child's face! Of course, this doesn't work for dialogue scenes, for which you have to practice, practice, practice! We had an entire week for rehearsals, so that on the set we could concentrate on the acting and not on the dialogues. At the age of 8, Emilia (playing Laura) was so matured, super concentrated and motivated. She had these bright ideas; when it came to playing with the star, she simply imagined it was her newborn sister.

You also had a voice in the casting.

Thome: I love casting children in general, and I guess I might have an eye for talented kids. I have always admired this set atmosphere, this cohesion, ever since I was in front of the camera as a child actress in the films made by my father Rudolf Thome. Ever since I was in the Children's Jury at the Berlinale in 2003, where I saw all those great films and was subsequently invited to the Children's Jury in Giffoni, I wanted to become a director. At the



age of 19 I made several short films and did internships. Looking for more structure, I started studying pedagogical and social sciences. After my bachelor's degree, I shot QUEEN OF NIENDORF, which – contrary to the expectations – became a festival success. Then producer Christian Becker brought me in for LAURA'S STAR, even though QUEEN OF NIENDORF had only been just a finger exercise, by no means perfect. I'm incredibly grateful to him. Afterwards I got offered other projects so now I know that I can make a living from being a director. I found it extremely important to prove that filmmaking to me is more than just a dream or a hobby.

So you must have new plans already...

Thome: I just finished a documentary on which I've been working for 4 years with the crew from NIENDORF. ONE IN A MILLION is a coming of age story about an American YouTuber and one of her biggest fans, a girl from Neumünster in Germany. Now I'm in a phase of upheaval in my life again, not knowing exactly what will come next. I have a new idea for a film but don't want to start shooting right away. In January I started training as a volunteer at the Helpline for Kids, which is super exciting. Someday I would like to work as a children and youth psychotherapist, but I first need to finish my master's thesis. I cherish

those other passions and interests, as they make me feel inspired to write new stories. But right now I'm mainly looking forward to LAURA'S STAR's festival tour – due to the pandemic we didn't even have a proper cinema premiere. Children's film festivals are such fun; they're really special. And so are the conversations afterwards, with kids asking me smart and interesting questions. The things they notice, it's often crazy. And I appreciate the way cinema is celebrated there as a true event.

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Uta Beth