

MAUR FILM

Alena Vandasova: “Why should this movie be made in animation?”

The Czech production company MAUR Film has more than one trump card to play. With versatility as a keyword, they combine multiple assets, such as a permanent production of mainly short films, a diversity of animation styles, a strong reputation as co-production partner... And two inspiring people at the wheel: Martin Vandas and his partner in work and life Alena Vandasova. Together with her, we go over the recent production of MAUR Film in their offices in a Prague suburb.

Alena Vandasova: Martin and I come from different artistic backgrounds. I was working in a photo gallery in Prague when he introduced me to the world of cinema. After the births of our children – we have three daughters – I started working with him on film projects. Next year, MAUR Film will celebrate its 20th anniversary.

For the whole world 2021 has been a terrible year, but maybe not for animators?

Vandasova: Animation is about spend-

ing endless hours alone in a dark studio. So maybe this wasn't a big change after all. Many of us worked on projects from home. If that wasn't possible for technical reasons, animators could come here to work in perfect isolation. Lucie Sunková made her wonderful SUZIE IN THE GARDEN here during the pandemic. Every day she came and made these beautiful paintings, and nobody was looking over her shoulder. We were so happy for her to be selected for the Berlinale; she deserves it.

What about animation being a group process?

Vandasova: For creative teams it was indeed impossible to have their in-depth discussions online; you simply need a pencil and paper in your hand, instead of a keyboard and a mouse path. That is why several projects in the development phase - a crucial phase for animation - were postponed.

There is some special feeling about SUZIE IN THE GARDEN, bringing us



SUZIE IN THE GARDEN

so close to nature; seeing Suzie's hands digging into the ground, you can almost feel the dirt under your fingernails.

Vandasova: Lucie Sunková established that connection with nature in her previous film THE TREE, and now she elaborates on it with a colourful garden full of surprises. Her animation suits this kind of poetic story; she found the perfect technique for transmitting her ideas. This technique has its consequences for the character

design. Different from when using other 2D tools, you can't elaborate too much on the details when using a brush, although you can see the wind blowing through Suzie's hair.

How exactly does it work?

Vandasova: A multi-layered glass table enables you to combine several lay-outs and backgrounds, connected through the lighting. Then the oil drawings are made on the upper glass plate. For each shot you have to erase



everything and start from scratch. The final result is a combination of all layers. Lucie did everything by herself.

Every story requires its own choice in terms of technique?

Vandasova: Choosing the right technique is at the cradle of every story. Often when reading a script, you might wonder: why should this movie be made in animation? We should be asking this question all the time in our talks with creators and animators. When preparing the feature THE ELEVEN with director David Sukup we had a script, we had a director, but it took us years to point out the right technique. Now it's decided - we'll be combining stop motion sets with 3D characters – but we've walked a long path before getting there and we've spent several months on testing.

Let's test your theory with some of your recent shorts, and see whether the technique fits the story... What about MOTHER IS ALWAYS RIGHT? Paper animation is yet another challenging technique. However, all characters have a delicate facial expression, often defined by the eyebrows.

Vandasova: Marie Urbankova is very talented. She just finished her studies - this is only her second short - and she



THE PIT

has a special gift for paper animation; her art design is brilliant and what she does with paper and scissors is simply amazing. She is a skilled book illustrator, for which she has already won several awards.

Do you agree with the title?

Vandasova: I have to say I do! For Czech audiences, there is an extra layer to the story, compiling these typical sayings that sound all too familiar to us. Like our parents telling us not to drink too fast or we'd get frogs in our bellies.

DON'T BLOW IT UP is another recent production.

Vandasova: For this short student

film, Alzbeta Macakova Misejkova used a traditional 2D technique, with soft colours creating a calm atmosphere. It makes the story look much more simple than it actually is...

What about this remarkable THE PIT?

Vandasova: THE PIT tells a funny story about teeth, like a quirky small joke. Now director Marketa Smolikova Kubatova wants to make a similar film about... the stomach. The process started with 2D art designs, then we spent a lot of time modelling and finally everything was made completely in 3D. THE PIT was not only a technical pilot study, but also a test for our cooperation patterns, as we're think-

ing about more ambitious long term projects with Marketa.

At MAUR Film it seems like all techniques and formats can be combined. You never thought about specialising in one aspect that would define your professional profile?

Vandasova: A specialised studio might fit a director who knows exactly what they want. But sometimes a search process is needed, discussing how to link a director's intentions to the technical options. A time-consuming, but equally exciting process. For instance, for ROSENTAAL, a feature in development, we've already made four tests on how to optimise the animation, and we're still not completely there.

But then, is there something that all MAUR titles have in common?

Vandasova: There is one thing: the continuity of people. Several animators who came here to work on FRITZI, the film we co-produced with Germany, came back to work on their own shorts. One of the animators whom we met for THE CROSSING is currently developing a film here. A profound relationship with our partners, that is the secret that connects all MAUR titles.



FRITZI – A REVOLUTIONARY TALE was a surprisingly successful feature.

Vandasova: It didn't surprise me at all. FRITZI was the re-telling of Czech history. There were so many parallels and similarities between the situation in East-Germany and Czechoslovakia. Can you believe that Czech Television said no to co-producing? They called it a German history – "It's not ours" – while this is exactly the story of so many Czech parents and grandparents. Even Czech teachers were delighted to have found a tool for teaching about the Velvet Revolution, using a source that was created in Germany. Also here the personal connection with German producer Grit Wisskirch-en was crucial.

Was THE CROSSING an equally rewarding experience?

Vandasova: In terms of people, yes. It was French producer Dora Benousilio who came to find us when searching for people mastering this 'animation on glass' technique. We worked together on THE CROSSING for many years and really got to appreciate each other. But for director Florence Miailhe it must have been so frustrating...

Because?

Vandasova: Bad timing! We finished the film in 2020 and all cinemas were empty. Moreover, with THE FLEA, MY SUNNY MAAD and THE CROSSING there were suddenly three animated movies dealing with a similar topic. This proves even more that we should offer our films a life outside the festival circuit. VOD is going strong, which is great for the animation scene; even short films gain extra visibility through different VOD formats.

Years ago in the CEE Animation Forum in Trebon, there was a project being pitched called OF UNWANTED THINGS AND PEOPLE...

Vandasova: ... And now we're making progress! This episode film with four co-production partners tells a poetic story in the line of MY LIFE AS A ZUCCHINI, based on a book by Arnost Goldflam. The art design and puppets look marvellous. The Czech part is finished, the Slovenian part (ZVVIKS) is currently in production, our Slovak partner (Artichoke) is finishing the animatic, while the French (Vivement Lundi) are working on the art design. The project took shape during the CEE meetings.



THE CROSSING

What is the importance of an organisation like CEE?

Vandasova: CEE is like a miracle! Nowadays companies from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, etc. can co-produce with Germany and France, simply because we joined forces in this association. When granting FRITZI, Eurimage seemed very pleased with the way a diverse group of co-producers was brought together. What I appreciate about CEE is how they keep going, with events organised year round. Even under pandemic circumstances, they continued their mission.

For many years, every time when speaking with Czech filmmakers, there was a big nostalgia for the heydays of Czech animation.

Vandasova: We worked with Bretislav Pojar on FIMFARUM, his last work,

which was at the same time the start of a new era. We were not clinging onto the wonderful works of Hermína Týrlova, Jiri Trnka and Vlasta Pospilova, but decided to find our own way. There wasn't yet much of an industry, but we felt like rediscovering the language of animation. The Czech Republic is such a small market; not big enough to produce four features per year, and financial sources are limited. But over the last 10 years a generation of young producers stood up, launching a new tradition.

Are there any other players that might have stimulated this transition?

Vandasova: I'd like to mention two festival events, Anifest and the Zlin Film Festival! The town of Zlin is far away and people don't seem to be willing to make that long ride, but their programme always looks fantastic and the staff are super qualified. They do a wonderful job advocating for children's cinema and animation in the Czech Republic.

– Gert Hermans

Find the [showreel](#) on the [MAUR Film website](#)