

Petr Oukropec about MARTIN AND THE MAGICAL FOREST

“Classic fairy tales contain crucial information about growing up”

This summer, city boy Martin is sent to a forest camp. Sleeping in tents, eating from a field kitchen, daily morning gymnastics... life couldn't get more terrible than this! Oh yes, it could. The forest has secrets to hide, and Martin is the first one to discover the mysterious creatures that dwell here by night: elves, squeaking branches, fighting cones all willing to leave their hiding places and pick a fight as they prepare an uprising against the mining company taking over the forest. Instead of a horror story about nature's cruel revenge, Czech producer and director Petr Oukropec made **MARTIN AND THE MAGICAL FOREST** as a playful environmental comedy about a boy who starts seeing the world through a different eye.

THE BLUE TIGER, telling a story about saving the environment, was located in the city. Your new film has a similar message, but takes us into the forest.

Petr Oukropec: Both films tell about the activism of children preserving a place of beauty. **MARTIN AND THE**

MAGICAL FOREST has a rather classic approach towards nature, that is depicted as fragile but at the same time wild and untamed. In her script, Kateřina Kačerovská used the classic fairy tale archetypes with a contemporary twist, for instance in the dynamics between boys and girls. The girls are open-minded and empathic, they are more open to magic and more determined to solve the problem.

What is your personal relationship with nature?

Oukropec: Growing up as a city boy, I've been spending every holiday in the village, where my friends took me into the forest. As an adult I returned to those places. I started working as a producer at an early age, but took a break after a few years to raise a family in a small village.

Already very early in the film you give us a clue about those forest creatures. With a classical build up it would have taken us much longer before picking up a glimpse of them.



Oukropec: From the very first moment I wanted to create a mystery through the use of tiny elements: a few leaves, a flower, a breeze blowing through the grass. It catches your attention and makes you wonder what it is exactly that might come to life.

For a pine cone hanging from a tree, all you need is two eyes to make it look alive.

Oukropec: The design of those creatures was a joint effort by the writer,

a team of animators and me. We created a versatile and organic world – a universe that looks real but created by human hands. We used several types of animation to create different layers of visual effects, combining puppets, stop-motion and classic camera effects with 2D and 3D animation. A part of the magic was visible on the set; we wanted to confront the young actors with nature's mysteries and capture their honest reactions. Whenever we brought them face to face



with a puppet, put in motion through strings or remote controls, a surprised smile appeared on their faces.

Martin is not questioning these creatures' existence.

Oukropec: Kids are accepting much more than we are. Martin is surprised for a moment, but then accepts them and starts using them to his own benefit. At first, he is the only one to see them. Only after a while he is joined by the girl named 'Little Fox' who loves reading, as books might stimulate your imagination.

Even if those creatures look kind of cute, nature can also act strong and determined.

Oukropec: Nature is responding to us; it is reacting to human behaviour. These tiny creatures are not powerful enough to change the world by themselves, but they know what they want – a flower is more than just a fragile object of beauty!

Little Fox does not only believe in fairy tales, she almost lives them.

Oukropec: It is inspiring for children to read the classic fairy tales, that will tell you about organising your life, and about obstacles you might face. I guess children nowadays do not read them anymore.

Not even in the Czech Republic?!

Oukropec: You would be surprised. Not as much as our generation did, and certainly not the classics, that contain crucial information about growing up (which was the original purpose of fairy tales). That information often got lost in the animated adaptations that kids nowadays might know. They'd better read the original stories or – even better – have them read to them by their grandma, or father or big sister. And then once you're able to do it yourself, you can read them again and grow up with them.

Do you have a favourite?

Oukropec: Oh my, I'm not prepared for this question! I find them all truly inspiring. Sometimes when working on a script, I consult them to set straight my dramaturgy, as part of the script editing process. But I'm not a fan of today's Czech TV fairy tales, with ongoing new princess variations. They have become a franchise. We're the last country on earth where this kind of storytelling is still popular, although the scripts are too obvious, and they miss out on the true mystery and the classic archetypes.

You shot the film in a typical Czech



forest.

Oukropec: The main scenes were shot in a forest near my house. There is a camping place where we stayed for three weeks.

Camping?

Oukropec: Surely! I wanted to make the situation feel real for the children and capture some authentic feelings of friendship. For three weeks we organised a parallel programme of outdoor activities, and every now and then we called the kids to the set for specific scenes in which their presence was needed. It might sound rather old-fashioned, but for this film it was the right method, and it helped us to work very focused and condensed. We had them running through the forest

all day, wearing their costumes, and they had a fantastic time. It was the last autumn before Covid came. We shot in 2019 and did the post-production while waiting for the re-opening of the cinemas.

Did life in the forest come with special surprises?

Oukropec: One foggy morning when arriving on the set, we found hundreds of salamanders everywhere around us, like I had never seen before. That was magic, a gift from nature to the film!

With a different budget would it have become a different film?

Oukropec: Not much. Maybe we could have bought ourselves a little more time. But we were able to do most of the CGI that we wanted within our budget, and Covid offered us more time for post-production. Suddenly professionals had plenty of time and nothing much else to do.

–
Gert Hermans