

Anouk Fortunier about MY DAD IS A SAUSAGE

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When dad decides to give up his steady job as a banker to become an actor, the family is perplexed and not exactly pleased. Is it a burnout? A midlife crisis? His youngest daughter Zoë is the only one who believes her dad is an aspiring star, and joins him in his quest. Even if that makes her skip school. While father and daughter are constantly out and about together, the confusion about their role and responsibilities in the family grows out of hand.

Debuting Belgian director Anouk Fortunier observes the warm scenes between father and daughter as well as the painful confrontations with the outside world, and even a maddening sausage suit doesn't keep her from delivering a subtle portrait of a family in decline.

Did you ever consider the ramifications of such a great title?

Anouk Fortunier: When the producer suggested this title, I really liked it, but I was also worried that it would be a bit over the top. It was a motivation

for me to make it a super powerful film; with a silly title like this, the content had to be extra strong.

MY DAD IS A SAUSAGE is an observation through the eyes of the youngest child in the house.

Fortunier: Her siblings are busy growing up, already conditioned in their thinking and their behaviour while Zoe is still a child. Her gaze is pure, and she is still connected with her intuition. From that position she feels that something in this family is not right.

Although she is still a child, there is a harrowing loneliness about her.

Fortunier: Zoë has a rich inner world and no way to express those thoughts than through her drawings. Just like in my short film DRÔLE D'OISEAU, there is in her a love for her father that is so big that she even protects him. As small as she is, sometimes she is more mature than him. I wondered whether such a child who takes on the caring role for her father could be justified from a pedagogical point



of view. That's why I made sure there was also something in it for her – she can skip school! She does it not only for her dad, but also for herself.

What brings them together?

Fortunier: Their creativity, their doubts and their loneliness. She doesn't feel well at school, just like he doesn't feel well at work.

Is dad's persistence brave or just pitiful?

Fortunier: I really wanted Johan

Heldenbergh for this role, because he carries that insecurity, that clumsiness inside him. That sausage was not at all to be bland! How to ensure that a man in a sausage suit doesn't look like plain slapstick? After all, for Zoë, that silly sausage costume is just as impressive as a superhero suit; it is her father's ultimate goal.

How did you make sure there was enough space for the daughter in her father's story?

Fortunier: That was an issue that we



had to elaborate in the screenplay. That's why we use those animations; they fill the gap when Zoë's voice is missing. I worked on them together with animator Pascale Petterson. Our brainstorming in her attic room while cutting endless supplies of animation eyes were a blissful process. For example, Pascale had drawn our rocket way too technically, but then we called on her children to recreate that drawing, and so we created the right universe for those animations. That artisanal character was very important; it wasn't supposed to look perfectly streamlined.

Why wasn't it burnout? At least that's what dad keeps saying.

Fortunier: Zoë's teenage brother and sister are categorical: Dad has burnout. But actually it is mainly his cry for attention: look at me, and see me as I really am! I recently read that a burnout has almost become a normalised phase of life, that is hardly questioned anymore. There are positive sides to burnout. Your head may still want to move forward, but if your body and your gut feeling are screaming 'halt', it all stops. You can't keep rationalising everything. That's why the first COVID lockdown came as a relief for some, like a mandatory, collective burnout.

Today we see new types of fathers emerging in children's films. I think your film is the ultimate example of this because of the depth you give to the interpretation of fatherhood.

Fortunier: In the original scenario, dad was a lot more clumsy, leaving behind



some collateral damage. I've toned that down because I want to keep believing in him; he's not just an idiot. For example, he does a really good audition even though he doesn't get the part. It's not about his success as an actor, it's about the development he

goes through, the process, and how it affects his daughter and family.

Did the film make you question your own father-daughter relationship?

Fortunier: Sure. I recognised the daughter who protects her father,

along with your thoughts and philosophies, but now can you just explain to me how to fill out a tax return?

You could have turned Zoe's mother into an "evil witch", and you sometimes get close to it, but in the end it doesn't happen.

Fortunier: She has her own ideas about how to lead a good life: stability, wealth, a steady job etc. The film shows where that vision comes from: it is what she learned at home from her father and now she is repeating his words; she thinks this is what will make her happy. The moment when she finds Zoë's notebook is crucial: that is the moment when she comes to an understanding.

That way you show a lot of understanding and compassion for people.

Fortunier: There's no such thing as the good guy and the bad guy. Why did the bad guy turn bad? What is his pain? Why does he do the things he does? That's how I look at the people and things around me.

In the most blissful scenes you can feel the dynamics crackling within that family.

Fortunier: Each one of them is stuck on his little island and feels the rut





within the family, but all express it in a different way. One flees into perfectionism, the other into anxiety neuroses, and Zoë has her drawings to cling on to. They all have their personal survival mechanism.

That also brings some liveliness to those cool, sleekly designed interiors.

Fortunier: I imagined the atmosphere in the house of this wealthy family and expected it to be white and cold and very structured. The scenes in the theatre were shot with a lively camera, but in the living room we always used a tripod - clean and clinical. But the more daddy follows his dreams,

the more clutter and colour enters the picture.

I suspect you to be an excellent actors' director. After ROSIE & MOUS-SA, Savannah Vandendriessche is now fully blossoming, and so are her brother and sister.

Fortunier: Even though they had little acting experience. We worked a lot, rehearsed a lot and talked a lot. Also with the adult actors, we discussed relationships and how they experience their parenthood. Moreover, I can sense whether or not someone is completely 'in' a scene. Sometimes an actor says a line but I feel that his eyes and body are not there. Then I shut-

down the scene and we try to reconnect the actors with their characters. I am very tenacious: I won't stop until I get what I want.

My favourite is Dimitri, the boy with the violin.

Fortunier: Isn't he a cutie? He was actually Zoe's sister's best friend, for real. I saw him enter the audition and immediately knew: that's the one! Johan Heldenbergh was a huge help; he is so passionate and helped the young actors to get the best out of themselves.

You had the guts to use the first 5 minutes of your film for a long monologue, very present and very verbal.

Fortunier: Thanks to screenwriter Jean-Claude Van Rijckeghem! I had my doubts about that voice-over, and we had ongoing fights about it. The movie apparently needed it, and once you get into the story, you're willing to forgive that laborious introduction.

Were those sausage scenes shot in public?

Fortunier: They were! Everyone in the street looked up astounded at a sausage suit passing by; people even started taking pictures of that cycling sausage. Zoë was really scared on the

bike. If you would zoom in on her face in that first image, you can read the sheer fear in her eyes. It makes me feel a little guilty.

Are you afraid of your own big dreams?

Fortunier: I used not to be. That's why I dared to accept a film like SAUSAGE when it was offered to me. But I was also naive; making a film is tough and sooner or later you'll get knocked around. Yet I believe that you should keep dreaming, even if it is only about small things. Achieving something that is truly yours, that was not imposed on you by others, is what I believe brings the greatest happiness.

-
Gert Hermans