

Katrin Milhahn about NIGHT FOREST

“We did some crazy stuff”

On the first day of the summer vacation, best buddies Paul and Max sneak out of their homes and venture into the wilderness. They are on a mission to find a legendary cave hidden somewhere in the mountains. The boys follow the traces of Paul's missing father, who is seen as a madman by everyone in the village. To find the path to the cave, the boys must decrypt his notes about a local legend. As they blaze their trails through the deep forest and steep mountains, both boys experience a newfound sense of freedom and light heartedness.

At the Zlin Festival we met scriptwriter and co-director Katrin Milhahn, who made the film together with her partner André Hörmann, whom we know as the director of several interesting young audience documentaries. But NIGHT FOREST brings a different dish to the table: a classic treasure hunt, with an extra layer to it. *“We were aiming for the big adventure, larger than life. Within the Outstanding Children's Film programme, NIGHT FOREST was supposed to stand out because of*

its exciting, adventurous feel...”

... Created by light falling through the trees in vast, dark forests!

Katrin Milhahn: We discovered this exciting landscape still exists in Germany. Due to the Covid lockdown we had to give up on our initial plan to film in a state forest. Two weeks before the shooting, we still had none of the locations right. Then we found this huge forest area that belonged to the old company of river captains, who once transported timber wood from the forest over the river, a location unspoiled by human interference - this was truly wild forest! The only restriction was that we had to end the shoot five days earlier, because the hunting season was about to start.

I suppose this location brought about a few practical challenges?

Milhahn: We often had to walk for an hour, carrying gear onto another set. One day I was attacked by wasps after stepping into a nest. And there was the waterfall... that was really steep. We did some crazy stuff and I'm sur-



prised that the producers agreed to it.

To make the film more than just a classic treasure hunt, you needed a hint of social realism.

Milhahn: There are so many elements to the story. There is this huge legacy of old German sagas and fairy-tales. Still nowadays, caves are being discovered in the German Swabian Alps, where André grew up; such stories belong to his childhood memories. We took some elements from the original Ursulenberg saga, like a secret convent and a “zombie nun”. The treasure hunt was our common thread,

but in the end, the story is all about Paul doing justice to the memory of his father, who was diagnosed with a bipolar disorder. Paul fears he might suffer from the same conditions as his dad. Even though the film leaves that question unanswered, Paul finds peace with it, as dad told him there is great beauty to find in a lively imagination. Finally we talked a lot about the films that we loved as kids - like STAR WARS, INDIANA JONES, THE GOONIES, STAND BY ME - and tried to catch some of the spirit of those movies.



In general there is a big fascination in you for all things shit, fart and vomit... The question that concerns us most is: was it real cow shit they were throwing?

Milhahn: No, it wasn't. It was actually a very complicated recipe, containing -among other secret ingredients- cacao powder and straw. From my earlier experience in scriptwriting (like FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE) I understood kids simply adore things like that.

Were your actors prepared for the adventure?

Milhahn: This was the summer of Covid! We had many things planned with the actors for them to get to know each other, and then the virus came... But when Levi Eisenblätter (Paul) and Jonas Oeßel (Max) finally met one day before the shooting, they bonded immediately. A few weeks earlier Jonas broke his foot; he arrived on set in a wheelchair. That is why we added a scene in which he hurts his foot, to cover up the real pain that you could sometimes read on his face.

There is a striking physical nearness between the two boys, as if the border between friendship and love could be crossed at any moment.

Milhahn: This is a film about uncondi-

tional friendship, the kind that makes you love one another, without boundaries. This physical bond – touching each other, putting a hand on each other's knee – was scripted and transmitted onto the screen, and is even intensified by the fact that they will soon move onto different paths. Class



Katrin Milhahn

background will make them go separate ways, and like in STAND BY ME, they are aware of that, but they've sworn not to let go of each other.

Their treasure hunt codebook looks amazing, full of gloomy drawings

and intriguing details.

Milhahn: We found this young artist who kind of locked herself in with the script and the saga and started painting. What came out was this fantastic work of art. If you could get your hands on such a book, it would feel perfectly plausible to forget about everything and just set off on a treasure hunt. Also the walls in father's study are covered with her paintings.

Were you in any way helped by André's experience as a documentary filmmaker?

Milhahn: Definitely. André often worked with boys of that age; he knows how to connect with them. Working in a wild forest, you constantly need to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. It made a great difference that both our DoP and director were used to working fast with a small crew.

The directors' team was also running smoothly, with you and André being partners in real life?

Milhahn: André and I met in film school. We have been together for 20 years now, and all we made together was one crappy student film. I guess finally we were ready for it, and we might do it again. But first André is planning a feature follow-up to

CROWLEY - EVERY COWBOY NEEDS HIS HORSE, the short documentary he made in 2015 about a young American boy embracing the cowboy lifestyle. Meanwhile the boy has finished school and has a job as a steelworker. Through him we get an insight into the lives of the average white right-wing American.

Are we all made of stardust?

Milhahn: I believe so. Even if NIGHT FOREST had a few Star Wars quotes (for which our legal advisor had to make sure we could use them) this one came from us.

The film tells us not to give up on our dreams. How much do you believe in that?

Milhahn: Every day I tell our child that everything is possible. There will always be people telling you to stop dreaming, because there are rules and restrictions, but you can prove them wrong. That is what NIGHT FOREST encourages you to do.

–
Gert Hermans
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