

Producer Daniel Ehrenberg about THE PATH

“Nature decided to give us a helping hand”

In *THE PATH* (directed by Tobias Wiemann) Rolf, his dog Adi and his father are stuck in Southern France having fled from Berlin and the Nazis. Their goal is to travel to New York, where Rolf’s mother is waiting for them. Their only road to freedom is along a steep path across the Pyrenees, guided by the young girl Nuria. When his father gets captured, Rolf and Nuria are suddenly on their own... In Zlin we meet producer Daniel Ehrenberg: *“This family adventure is set against the historical backdrop of the second World War. While setting out on a mission to escape, an unexpected friendship grows between two children.”*

During the festival opening in the Zlin Congress Centre you must have felt blown away by the audience’s enthusiasm.

Daniel Ehrenberg: It was impressive; I’ve never experienced this before. This great atmosphere is the essence of why we are in this industry. That is why the word ‘entertainment’ is included in the name of my company

Eyrie Entertainment.

On stage you stated that the relevance of this film’s topic recently has grown.



Ehrenberg: Rüdiger Bertram wrote the original novel and screenplay after reading the biography of Lisa Fittko, a

German resitant who helped many escape from Nazi-occupied France during World War II. In the aftermath of the refugee crisis in 2015 the book inspired him to tell a story about chil-

numbers will rise again. A few weeks after releasing the film Russia invaded Ukraine, with millions of Ukrainians, including many children, fleeing their country. Those numbers are not simply rising, the consequences also become more visible.

In what sense?

Ehrenberg: Travelling to the BUFF Festival in Malmo, I saw the amount of Ukrainian refugees in the Berlin train station, who later accompanied me on my journey to Sweden. They seemed so determined about their goal, but without any certainty about their destiny. How long would they be here? What would happen to their families? What future was awaiting them? I asked myself if our story wasn’t taking the subject too lightly, but then eased my mind: it is already difficult enough to get family audiences into the cinema for this film, so our duty is to treat the subject with respect and not to trivialise it.

The script makes this uncertainty very tangible.



Ehrenberg: Father and son constantly play this game called ‘good or bad’; whoever they meet, they will guess if that person is someone who can help them and be trusted, or someone who could betray them. This uncertainty is what refugees have to live with every day. How stressful could that be? The game is a playful way to describe a situation that actually isn’t funny at all. Remember the scene in the train in which you never can tell what the conductor’s intentions are. Officials in uniforms are extra tricky.

When the boy asks his father about how high they are on the list of ‘most wanted people’, father replies that “Hitler will not have sleepless nights about us”.

Ehrenberg: We didn’t want to tell another story about Jewish refugees – there have been so many already. I don’t even know a single story about the intellectuals that had to flee Germany. There was a list of German subversives who got stuck in Southern France and Lisa Fittko was one of the people helping them escape. One of the first ones she helped to cross the border was the German intellectual Walter Benjamin. Also author Erich Kästner was on that list. One of his books is interwoven throughout the film’s narrative. The original screen-



play was actually called ‘The path of books’.

Many scenes were shot in remote, bare mountain landscapes. How challenging was that?

Ehrenberg: We had all sorts of weather; rain, snow, wind... Tobias Wiemann shot MOUNTAIN MIRACLE under difficult circumstances in the Alps but we thought the Pyrenees in summer would be different. When scouting locations we were excited about the snowy mountaintops, but they told us all snow would melt by summer. Which didn’t happen – on our highest locations we still had 3 centimetres

of snow in summer. Then there was the rain... The crew had its base camp on one side of the river, the set was on the other side. On the last shooting day when the crew had a day off, we had a drone camera making top shots. That night the rain came down so heavily that the blue water turned into brown mud and the bridge got flooded – there was no way to cross the river.

And there was the wind...

Ehrenberg: From the basecamp to the actual set of the partisan camp was about half an hour with a four wheel drive over a rocky path. It was a huge

hassle to get toilets up on the hilltop, but on the actual shooting day it was so windy that all toilets were blown away; it was the famous *tramontana* blowing across the mountains. Working a whole day with the wind blowing at approximately 70km/h is exhausting; you can hardly communicate and it is physically extremely tiring. In the end it came down to our main actor Volker Bruch who said: *“Keep shooting, this pressure makes every scene much more intense”*. When looking carefully, you might notice some continuity issues... For instance the French police officers sometimes wear a hat and sometimes not, as they were constantly blown away. Our initial idea was to create a thunderstorm on the set, but it was impossible to get the rain machines up the hill so nature decided to give us a helping hand.

Another charming element in the film is a dog named Adi.

Ehrenberg: He was the most professional actor on the set. He was like a robot, you could tell him what to do and he did it very precisely, as many times as you wanted. He was treated like a star. Whenever he performed well, he got freshly prepared meat as a treat.





With people speaking French, Spanish, German, English... This film is a labyrinth of languages and a producer's nightmare!

Ehrenberg: The book describes how different nationalities gathered together, like Catalan communists who fled after the civil war, refugees from Eastern and Central Europe, German intellectuals... This region is in every way confusing: sometimes you don't know whether you're on the French or the Spanish side of the border, and the Catalan language is spoken on both sides. This proves the absurdity of borders as a concept; it doesn't work like that in reality. For reasons of authenticity we wanted all characters to speak their own language

– that is how they really would have communicated. Luckily Warner never asked us to dub, which is pretty rare for a German children's film.

What about a Spanish girl speaking German?

Ehrenberg: Nonna Cardoner (playing Nuria) speaks Catalan, Spanish and English fluently, but not a word of German. We made her a vocabulary book and coached her not only on the pronunciation but also on emotional connotations. She learned all by heart, phonetically. When she was invited for a photo shoot, Warner's representative addressed her all the time in German as she couldn't believe Nonna was faking it.

As long as Rolf's father is around, THE PATH is also a beautiful father & son story.

Ehrenberg: We thoroughly discussed if we could – in a family film – have the father disappearing from the story without telling what exactly happens to him. The author Rüdiger Bertram encouraged us to do so. But somehow he stays in the film through Rolf's imagination. Obviously there is a reference to LA VITA E BELLA, with the father covering up their journey to save his son from all of the madness and cruelty surrounding them.

THE PATH was your first young audience production?

Ehrenberg: The genesis of THE PATH starts with Lemming Film and their German affiliate Hamster Film (re-branded as Lemming Film Germany). By that time I had just started as a self-employed producer. When meeting with Leontien Petit (Lemming) in 2018 she offered me two projects; one of them being THE PATH. I worked on it, commissioned as a hired producer. Once Leontien was sure I could handle things by myself, she pulled back from the project in an atmosphere of mutual understanding. I didn't exactly plan it like this for Eyre Entertainment, but that is how things evolved.

How was it to enter the children's film market?

Ehrenberg: I have to admit it was great fun. I'd love to do it again some time. Together with co-author Jytte-Merle Boehrnsen we're thinking about a new project, but the financing is tough. It is a pity that the public TV broadcasters in Germany have decided to no longer co-produce children's films due to conflicts of interest with the streaming platforms.

–
Gert Hermans