

# Arnaud Demuyck about YUKU AND THE FLOWER OF THE HIMALAYAS

## “The most beautiful feeling when saying goodbye”

Yuku, the eldest child in a large mouse family, has to guard the food supplies. But she prefers playing her ukulele and listening to her grandmother, a master storyteller. As the end of Grandma's life approaches, Yuku embarks on a musical quest to find the luminous Flower of the Himalayas for Grandma to take on her “last journey.”

In fact it is a miracle that Belgian director Arnaud Demuyck was able to finish this musical adventure, *“I love music - especially jazz - and I love dancing, but I can't play music. Not even the ukulele. But I thought it was the right instrument for a little mouse.”*

**Besides your love for music, a great love for stories, riddles and fairy tales speaks from the film.**

Demuyck: I do indeed have a preference for ‘all things literary’. I used to play theatre and wanted to become an actor, but my parents didn't agree. In my screenplays I often play with words. Just like YUKU AND THE FLOWER OF THE HIMALAYAS, my short film THE SCENT OF CARROTS

was a musical comedy with a rich vocabulary, full of word games. Children adore riddles. A riddle always seems complicated at first, but the answer is usually simple. Such is life: it seems



complex, but for those who know the recipe for happiness, it is quite simple; peace, health, love... not much more than that. The solutions to the riddles

in the film are always right under your nose; the answers are there for the taking. Even the solution to the riddle of the Himalayan flower seems unattainable, far away but actually it is

close at hand... in your heart.

**The scene in which the little mice listen to the fairy tale is one of the**

**highlights for me.**

Demuyck: I have a passion for the oral tradition, the direct relationship between a storyteller and his audience. What brings us together are the stories we share; they form the basis of our humanity. Telling fairy tales to children and adults used to be a common thing; nowadays cinema has kind of taken over that role. Anyone who makes films or tells fairy tales seeks contact with an audience and creates togetherness.

**Is that why your film sounds so cosy?**

Demuyck: Due to the voices in the dubbing. Think of the scene in which all little mice go to sleep in the curtain. All you hear is children talking in their own typical way. In the French version, my daughter Lily, who was 11 years old at the time, did Yuku's voice. The other mice got authentic children's voices, which made the result particularly catchy.

**What kind of place is it where they live?**

Demuyck: Under the kitchen in a





castle inhabited by people whom we never get to see. Once we hear their voices, when the rabbit is under fire. Only in one song, their presence is mentioned explicitly, when all possible recipes for preparing rabbit are listed.

### **It was your choice to use so many songs?**

Demuynck: Those songs allow me to tell things that are difficult to put into a dialogue. They add poetry, humour and symbolism to the story.

### **Is that why each character has its own musical style and tonality?**

Demuynck: Every character has its problems. The rat has the blues because he is old and lonesome and afraid of death. I found rap music

more appropriate for the rebellious rabbit. For the wolf, I intuitively had a boogie woogie in mind; the result sounds fantastic. The songs are full of references. During the cat's ska song, you'll see some mice doing the Madness move from *One Step Beyond*, Yuku singing while sailing on the belly of the rat is a reference to Mowgli and Baloo in *JUNGLE BOOK*, the swing pays tribute to King Louie's song from the same film.

### **There is a substantive coherence in the songs.**

Demuynck: The central theme is the transition between Grandma and Yuku. Grandma was the great storyteller and now on her farewell, Yuku will take over her role. Therefore she has to go out into the world and ex-

perience her own adventures. This is how Yuku discovers her independence, learning from every encounter. With the rat she speaks of the finiteness of life and the choice is ours to mourn or sing. The squirrel's message is: relax! That philosophy is further explored by the fox: enjoy life, here and now... *carpe diem*. That sums up the message perfectly.

### **All those songs reduce your chance of international distribution, because they make dubbing extra expensive.**

Demuynck: For now, my artistic choice doesn't seem to harm the film's career; it was already sold to many countries.

### **The soundtrack is indeed full of**

### **ukulele music!**

Demuynck: I worked with three composers. I wrote the songs with Alexandre Brouillard. Then Yan Volsy composed the music for the animatic, so that the animators could edit to the rhythm. And David Rémy added the atmospheric passages on the ukulele, for example in the scene around the campfire. When image and sound come together organically, that's pure magic.

### **What about the little blind mole?**

Demuynck: We discussed a lot whether or not we should show that little mole on screen, because it only exists in the imagination. But a child's imagination is different from an adult's. Children know this twilight zone between 'real' and 'unreal'. Even if a



child knows that Santa doesn't exist, his presence remains tangible. A teddy bear as an object can seem to be really alive for kids. When Yuku and Grandma say farewell, the screen goes black, we hear Yuku say 'I love you' and flowers begin to bloom. Parents recognise that moment as death, but what children see is a symbolic imagination. It's the only 'fade to black' in the movie, and it's a very subtle, important moment.

#### **This bears witness to a serene vision on death.**

Demuyneck: When Grandma realises that Yuku has taken her place, she smiles. The transition was successful. The most beautiful feeling we can

have when saying goodbye, is knowing that we're leaving something behind for others.

#### **How was the design of the animation?**

Demuyneck: I'm not an animator; I'm making a musical and I can't play music, I'm making an animation film and I can't draw! The 3D animation was done with Blender open source software, which artistic director Paul Jadoul thoroughly adapted to his artistic goals. The character design took a lot of time, but once it was done, we could easily share it with the animators in Switzerland and France. This made it possible for the film to get made at a fast pace. We started

in March 2021 and the animation was finished in March 2022.

#### **The style of the animation is consistently maintained in the shapes and colours and in the cohesion between sets and characters.**

Demuyneck: We made a long animation film in a style that you would rather associate with short films. Paul Jadoul's work looks very personal, but also familiar and simple. We explored this style in *THE SCENT OF CARROTS* and have now further expanded it with the same artistic team. It felt like a real family; we had so much trust in each other.

#### **The dream in which a rock takes the shape of Grandma is a visually striking scene.**

Demuyneck: Fog and lighting create a special atmosphere. Children apparently find such a metamorphosis - in which we float between two worlds - much scarier than an angry wolf or a hungry cat.

#### **You didn't make it easy on yourself with the eyes and tails.**

Demuyneck: In Paul's geometric style, noses are just triangles moving across a face. Mouths in 3D turned out to be very difficult, so we converted them to 2D. The tails are in 3D, but they al-

ways have to be in motion, and therefore be animated.

#### **Which animal was the most difficult to animate?**

Demuyneck: The fox, because of that long nose.

#### **At the premiere you told a story to the children in the cinema...**

Demuyneck: On the beach, the eternal storyteller tells his stories to the waves of the ocean. The waves listen to his voice and break at his feet with joy. No one knows how the waves would react if the narrator disappeared one day and they start missing his stories. When I asked the children, one of them said, *"I know what the ocean would do. It would flood the world!"* Could the ocean really be so evil? *"No, not to destroy us. Out of pure grief, the ocean would go searching for the narrator and the eternal treasure of his stories."*

—  
Gert Hermans