

# Kajsa Næss about TITINA

## "This is our vain vision on heroism"

In 1926, Italian engineer Umberto Nobile received a phone call from the famous Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen: would he be willing to build an airship and go on an expedition to the North Pole? And yes, his dog Titina can join. As good companions they start their journey, but as the expedition continues both proud men are more and more at each other's throats. Titina sits in her basket and observes... as the only one on board keeping her cool.

### **TITINA is based on historic events. How loosely could you interpret them?**

Kajsa Næss: When a good friend of mine doesn't know the answer to a question, he always says that he is "78% sure". I guess I can say that 78% of what is happening in TITINA is true. There will always be someone who's not completely satisfied with the accuracy of the facts. I never wanted to make a classic, heroic polar expedition film; I was interested in the human drama behind it. I grew fond of the small stories and anecdotes, more

than of the official truth about the expedition.

### **Can you give an example?**

Næss: The story about how Titina got her name. Apparently Nobile instantly fell in love with a small, hungry street dog in the streets of Rome. When they first met at a Roman piazza, in a nearby café the popular song at that time 'Titina' was playing. Ever since that day Titina and Nobile were always together; she joined him on his adventures around the world and at his encounters with the Japanese emperor and the American president. We even made up stories that later on turned out to be true. Like the Norwegian crew wanting to jump from the airship on skis to avoid the crash in Alaska - Norwegians in general think every problem can be solved with skis - and Amundsen indeed made jokes about keeping Titina on board as a rescue provision.

### **A true story implicates a possible use of archive material.**

Næss: Most of the archive material



from the Norge expedition was recently restored and released by the National Library in Norway, and I collected photographs from both expeditions from the Italian Air Force Museum in Vigna di Valle. Those images were used as a source of inspiration for the art direction and cinematography. I found them quite emotional, as they are adding a human touch to the animation. We see those men, excited and proud, doing what they think is right. Look at those Italians, playing in the snow and posing for the camera. It helps to get a better understanding of the relationship between Norwegians and Italians, of the era in which

the story is set, and of the enormous size of the airship. The audience is generally amazed by the material - it is definitely an added value to the film.

### **The story is told within a certain political context at the end of the 1920's, a period that would have a profound impact on our history.**

Næss: This was a time of nationalism all over Europe. Norway was a young nation, and their desire to conquer the Arctic and Antarctic was a nationalistic project, just like Italy wanting to prove itself as a strong and capable country. Both Amundsen and Nobile

were aware of this and played the role of 'national heroes' to achieve their personal goals. The responsibility to satisfy their nations was the first cause of their dispute, which affected their relationship on a personal level.

**You decided to introduce Mussolini as a kind of clownish character.**

Næss: We portray him as a dangerous lunatic: self-centred, ruthless, and unpredictable. His voice cracks all the time and he only speaks about himself. He might be small, loud and unfocused, but he is not a harmless clown. We granted him the classical symbols of power: a huge office, a marching band and a tough general doing all the dirty work. His speeches and gestures are inspired by archive material, we studied well-known caricatures like Chaplin's THE GREAT DICTATOR and the TV-series ALLO ALLO and took a closer look at contemporary leaders like Donald Trump. It is important to make fun of dangerous political characters; we should at all times look at ourselves with humour and irony to avoid becoming self-righteous.

**Nothing or no one escapes from your relativistic perspective?**

Næss: In Norway we love stories about our great heroes, especially



those who knew how to survive the harsh Arctic nature. This is our proud and even vain vision on heroism. Roald Amundsen is without doubt one of the biggest heroes in Norwegian history, and in his time he was among the most famous men on earth. I don't want to undermine his extraordinary achievements, but I used his character and reputation to tell about typical human behaviour, and about small remarks leading to big misunderstandings and dramatic events. You can admire a person for his extraordinary talents, but also for his flaws. Some might find my portrait of Amundsen disappointing or even offensive, but in animation you can get away with many things. And finally, we give him a worthy farewell.

**The relationship between Amundsen & Nobile starts as a nice fellowship but then evolves in other directions.**

Næss: Amundsen and Nobile start out like each other's equals, both being experts in their field. They are ambitious and want to achieve great things, but both are getting a bit older and in a way outdated. There isn't so much left to discover in the arctic, and Nobile's airship, plump and slow, is about to be surpassed by aeroplanes. Even the perception of heroism is about to change, from tormented loners fighting their battles towards dictators leading the masses. We made Nobile younger, more eager and flattered by Amundsen's request, while Amundsen is older, almost tired of expeditions

and more cunning. They do respect and kind of like each other, but pride and suspicion made them irreconcilable. When coming closer to victory, they don't feel like sharing the honour and end up destroying each other.

**Amundsen offers Nobile a helping hand... even if that becomes his destiny.**

Næss: How Amundsen went out to look for Nobile on the ice has always remained a mystery for Norwegians. He left in a plane that didn't suit the conditions, without the detailed planning that had always been the backbone of his successes. That was nothing like him. In reality Amundsen never got even close to Nobile's camp. Only when meeting Nobile again as an old man, we understand what he has lived with all his life. It helps us to forgive him for his pride and petty feelings.

**Titina is mainly an observer. How did you secure her a good place in the story?**

Næss: Titina is the most normal and sane character in the film. Food, warmth and comfort, that is all she wants. Norwegians would never take a small dog on a trip to the arctic; her presence is like a contradiction to us. She reminds me of Jacques Tati's character Mr. Hulot, who is portrayed



as a bizarre person, but his presence mainly makes the other so-called “normal” characters act funny and strange. Titina is always there, sometimes as an observer, sometimes as a catalyst, and sometimes as the star of the show. She got her own narrative within the story, and is the only character that really lives ‘in the moment’.

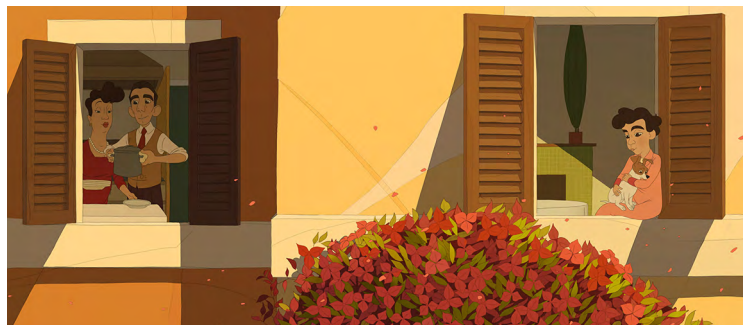
**Titina makes a real “doggish” impression. Her body language is proof of profound dog-observation.**

Næss: She is like a real dog; not a smart super hero solving all the situations, nor a human-like creature. I really like dogs! Again I was inspired by Tati [who described dogs as marvellous actors](#). We looked at plenty of dog clips on YouTube – the amount of available material is endless. Animation director Marie-Laure Guisset

casted the perfect animators, who all did a wonderful job, making Titina a lively and carefree character. Through small gestures, like the movement of her ears, we could reveal a lot of her character.

**When animating the backgrounds and landscapes, it must have been a challenge to avoid the uniformity of endless white landscapes.**

Næss: When thinking of the arctic landscape, we tend to imagine that it is all white. But actually the ice comes in plenty of colours, under a light that changes every moment of the day, according to the position of the sun. Art director Emma McCann immediately understood what I was talking about when I mentioned the arctic light, which enabled us to play with colours according to every dramatic situation



or tone we wanted to convey.

**This landscape lends itself perfectly to the picture of extreme loneliness or isolation.**

Næss: The loneliness fits the story and is something we might fear, but also should embrace. This kind of landscape will always be magical and mysterious. TITINA tells about small feelings in waste landscapes. In the days of the Norge expedition, the North Pole was the last blind spot on the map, a place no one had ever seen. And now we don’t know how long it will take before this white spot will turn completely into water.

**For the soundtrack you stayed true to the music of that era.**

Næss: That was a blessing. I was very happy when I found out about the

song Titina - a big hit in the 1920s - and immediately wanted to use it. I’m especially delighted about the dream sequence in which Amundsen sings the song to Titina. Nobile has a classic Italian theme, while Amundsen’s theme sounds more Norwegian, and when both characters meet each other, the composer mixes both themes, as a part of the narrative. I have been blessed with amazing artists in all departments of the production, including the music, and I am extremely grateful for all who offered their time and talent to tell this story.

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Gert Hermans