

Dan Pánek about BIG DREAMS

“Everybody can still tell you where they were when it happened”

Sometimes kids make things so easy for you. If you thought the most challenging task for a children's film professional is to look through the eyes of children and estimate their reactions, you just have to enter the cinema during the last 10 minutes of **BIG DREAMS** by director Dan Pánek. The wild enthusiasm during the screening at the Zlin Film Festival, with children hopping up and down with pure excitement and loudly supporting 'their' team, left little doubt about it. This film grabs them by the heart and won't let them go.

The year is 1998, in Nagano, Japan. The Czechs win the gold in Olympic ice hockey and every child in the country dreams of becoming an ice hockey legend. Like 11 year old Dom, who would love to play hockey, but his parents don't have the money and doubt his abilities. Nevertheless, Dom and his friend Honza bring together a team – the Sabres! A bunch of disparate, underestimated kids with one great challenge: to defeat the Red Wings team from the next village and

earn respect. After an initial defeat, the Sabres head for a rematch.

The original title translates as CHILDREN OF NAGANO. That's something! 'Nagano' means a big deal for the Czech nation. It was not just another ice hockey game!

Dan Pánek: In 1989, 10 years after the Velvet Revolution, the entire Czech nation was depressed because democracy didn't go as planned, the financial situation was disastrous, everybody was desperately trying to find a job. We lacked all national pride and confidence, and even our national hockey team seemed to have lost all its power. Then, in the Winter Olympics in Japan, we unexpectedly made it to the finals, defeated Russia and won Olympic gold. That victory boosted the confidence of the nation, it was a turning point, like a second velvet revolution. The impact on people of my generation was like 9/11 for the US; everyone can still tell you where they were when it happened.

Martin Beinbauer (producer): The final score was 1 - 0 and the only goal



was scored by a player named Peter Svoboda, which literally means 'liberty'. We started as complete underdogs, even with Dominik Hašek as a goalkeeper. It is like a dream that we now commemorate - 25 years later - with a movie that is exactly "98" minutes long.

Czech kids still know those idols?

Pánek: In those days every kid dreamed of becoming the next Hasek, the next Jaromír Jágr. I'm not sure if kids these days still have similar dreams - they might dream of becoming

successful YouTubers. That was one of my reasons for making this film. Ever since Covid-19, kids have become afraid to play. I want them to go out and play again, instead of staring at their phones all day long.

Actually, the kids in the film do not really play ice hockey...

Beinhauer: They play field hockey on the street. Ice hockey is very expensive and time consuming for parents. You need to be completely up to the task, buy the equipment every year again while your child grows taller,



send him to training camps and dedicate all your time to it.

There's many lessons to learn from hockey in this film. One is: Hockey is no ballet.

Pánek: It's a tough game, very physical, you must be relentless and brave. If a puck hits your head - without a helmet - you are dead. If playing without the proper equipment - like the kids in the film do - you'll have bruises, you might break a leg or get seriously injured.

Another lesson is: Nobody is bigger than the team.

Pánek: Understanding what teamwork is all about, is a lesson for life. Today parents want their children to stand out as strong individuals; all films we get to see are about kids struggling with their individual identity. Our main character Dom is an individualist, but it's his dream to be part of a team, something bigger. That is actually the main goal of every member of his team of underdogs. Team spirit is what our community lacks nowadays. This movie is about the positive energy that you can get from a team.

Within the hockey context, there's one particularly odd character: the referee. Is a drunken referee some-



thing you might only see in the Czech Republic?

Pánek: In the villages you might still meet guys that you grew up with, who are still hanging around in pubs and are willing to serve as a referee in a hockey game for a few crowns... or a few beers. For them, it's a pretty good business model.

Beinhauer: We Czechs are actually all referees. We all have our opinion about how to play, which players were good or bad... We all know better than the coach and the referee.

What we get to see is how family life was organised 25 years ago?

Pánek: When you had a friend, you went over to his house, asked his par-

ents if he could come out and play, and that was the start of another adventurous day. Nowadays kids don't feel the urge anymore to go out and meet each other; they feel comfortable in their virtual world where you have so many applications that you no longer have to face real people. In the auditions I asked kids if they could ride a bicycle. Can you imagine there's kids who don't know how to ride a bike anymore, or how to swim? Kids love how our film offers them an appealing fantasy, while in our youth, this was reality.

In one scene that I found particularly significant for life in 1998, the family is sitting together while fa-

ther watches television in his chair having a beer, mother and son sit quietly behind him.

Pánek: That is how I remember my family, and it was very similar in other families. Father was the strong figure deciding about everything, while mother was running the family, silently pulling strings behind the scenes, justifying dad's decisions to the children. No one would even consider sitting in his chair. It's strange that I made this movie at the age of 35 - it feels more like a nostalgic story to tell when you're 70. But it is important to address these topics now that I see many children going through similar situations, with many families falling apart, single mothers managing on their own... That dilemma of a mother who dreams of a happy family and desperately hopes for her son to get along with his stepfather - *"he is not my father!"* - is exactly how I remember my childhood.

Another thing you had in common with Dom is the position of an outsider, moving in from the city.

Pánek: I was born in Prague and at the age of 8 moved to a small town, where everyone looked down upon city-dwellers. I was shocked; what was wrong with Prague? It was the first time that I felt a complete outsider;

I had no friends, my parents had split up, I hated my stepfather, I no longer trusted my mother. Very much like Dom.

One charming thing about BIG DREAMS though is to see a 1998 village coming to life: the gardens, garages, pubs and streets.

Pánek: We didn't have to recreate it, we just found it exactly like this in today's Czech villages where time has stood still. Near the city of Kutná Hora, we found villages where seemingly nothing had changed since the seventies, except maybe TV sets have grown bigger. Everything you see in the movie was right there.

Beinhauer: I immediately recognised the kitchen. We had the same one, and so did all my friends. It came in three colours: orange, green or blue. Under communism, factories only produced one type of kitchen. There was this old woman who apologised for not having cleaned up her garage - *"No, please don't touch anything. It is perfect as it is!"*

One thing that luckily has changed, is the pedagogic system in schools. What is this 'desk for dunces'?

Pánek: That is where I sat a lot, especially during maths and science classes. Our old teachers were raised in

the communist tradition. When they thought that you didn't pay attention they would tell you to go sit on the desk for dunces, while the whole class chanted: you are a donkey, you are a donkey! But the teacher's words felt worse: "You are good for nothing; nothing will become of your life, consider yourself lucky if you'll ever finish this school."

How many lives have been ruined by people like that?

Pánek: They could do two things to you: mess you up for the rest of your life, or make you stronger so that you wouldn't take no for an answer. Which is hopefully what happened to me. Around the age of 14, I started to write film scenes. From that moment on they found me even more bizarre - the way they addressed me made me feel weaker than everyone else. Now when I meet those teachers somewhere, they tell me: we always knew you were special. But what they told me back then was: you will be poor and miserable.

Beinhauer: Every day when school started, we had to stand up straight for the national anthem. Then afterwards the Russian hymn was played, for which I refused to stand up. That's how you grew a reputation of being a problem child. They didn't want you



to behave differently, to stand out. You should grow up to be a regular guy.

We know that something is going on at Katja's home, but you don't say much about it, even if you clearly suggest that she gets abused physically by her father.

Pánek: I wanted to make a family film for children, with a light tone. If I would have told Katja's backstory, it would have become an entirely different movie, with a different dynamic and impact. I expect the audience to read between the lines, as. I don't

think everything should be served on a silver platter. Katja's case is only one of the many storylines in the movie that are not closed - life will continue and things will change, so we leave that narrative open; it must live on after the movie has ended.

—
Gert Hermans