

# Sébastien Gagné about COCO FARM

## "An essential part of our collective DNA"

Entrepreneurship runs through Max's veins. When financial struggles force him and his father to move to the countryside, Max is welcomed with open arms by his somewhat unworldly cousin Charles - something he doesn't exactly find a reason to be cheerful about. Until he discovers the opportunities of small-scale farming and starts an egg farming business in the old barn, with the help of some local friends. Coco Farm becomes an immediate bestseller on the local market. But even kids cannot escape the laws of economics and industry, controlled by big enterprises.

After the death of founder Rock Demers, COCO FARM is the first new film in the Tales for All series, the legendary production line of La Fête Productions. How did it feel for director Sébastien Gagné to suddenly become part of Quebec's cinematic heritage?

Sébastien Gagné: To me, La Fête always stood for entertaining, local cinema. It's a quality label, like Pixar, and it comes with a lot of pressure, be-

cause their films have been so important to so many people, myself included! Some of those films I still watch every year with my kids; they are very dear to my heart. In a way, I was the one putting the most pressure upon myself because I didn't want to disappoint the first hour fan that I am.

**You dedicated your film to Rock Demers.**

Gagné: It's all about respect. When we rolled out the first film in the new era of the 'Tales for all' series, my producers and I felt that we had to acknowledge the legacy of what came before. We were standing on the shoulders of this giant and we wouldn't be where we are if it were not for him.

**COCO FARM tells about entrepreneurship. 'Obsessive entrepreneurship', I would even say. Still the film is not a promotion clip for neoliberal corporate business.**

Gagné: Eventually, one could see the movie through that particular lens. But to me, it's about pursuing a dream, having a goal and working



hard to make it happen. Many kids nowadays lack a purpose and spend — dare I say waste? — countless hours on devices doing nothing. COCO FARM shows kids the importance of having a project and working hard for it. Max's deeper motivation probably comes from this very primal principle that makes us want to outgrow our parents as individual personae and we don't want to repeat their mistakes.

**The film paints an idyllic picture of rural Canada.**

Gagné: Well... that IS Canada! It's where the food that we eat comes from. It's an essential part of our collective DNA. It's also a haven where you can escape the city and return to a more humane lifestyle. My Canadian fellow-countrymen would probably say their everyday life is much harder than the picture I've painted. I know that they face numerous issues such as labour shortage, but we can't address all that in the context of a short family film.



**COCO FARM has a nice balance between young and mature characters. It's not the young versus the old, or the old ones leading the youngsters. No, the initiative is always with the kids, and in crucial moments they can count on the help of adults.**

Gagné: That is all part of the "Tales for All" DNA. We simply made a 'normal' film, and it just happens to be that our protagonists are 12 year old kids... who sometimes get help from adults. But it's their story, told from their point of view.

**One mature character is struggling with a profound problem. How did you make sure not to portray alco-**

**holism as a kind of folkloristic public entertainment?**

Gagné: We talked quite a bit about this. I think the answer is in walking the thin line between showing the real consequences of that problem and showing the redemption of the character. Yes, we do make some fun of it, but through a process of change and growth, the character becomes redeemable and relatable, in a way.

**If one thing can be said about this film, it is that there's a lot of chickens out there!**

Gagné: At first the idea actually made me quite scared! We broke it down, so we actually needed no more than 300

chickens for only three days. In general, everything went pretty smoothly, and the kids loved to hold and pet the chickens. But this one night, while shooting Benoit's emotional scene in which he explains what happened to his business – which led to him losing his kids – one particular chicken just wouldn't shut up... like, the whole time! The actors, being very professional, carried through... I was afraid we would have to ADR the whole scene, but our sound people did a fantastic job in post-production and only one line needed dubbing.

**There is hardly a scene in which cousin Charles is not carrying a chicken in his arms.**

Gagné: He loves them! He would have had a chicken in his arms in EVERY scene if he had gotten his way!

**There are a few remarkable scenes in which Max is advised by a man who died centuries ago. "I shouldn't listen to you because you don't exist," he says.**

Gagné: That is Joseph Armand Bombardier, famous Quebec inventor of the snowmobile! Those scenes take place when Max feels completely lost and desperately needs advice. It is the voice of reason speaking, and it is also what gives him the strength not



to abandon his mission. Both the tone of these scenes and their place in the structure of the movie were carefully overthought; we wanted them to feel real. We played around with the idea of giving the character a soft glow – like Obi-Wan Kenobi – but then decided not to, in order to lend bigger gravitas to his words, especially to the story about the death of his son, an event that motivated him to invent the snowmobile.

**The film has an interesting ending quote that somehow seems to question the entire agricultural industry.**

Gagné: The Government of Quebec recently changed the law, so that smaller farms would be allowed to have more chickens. So, there's that! The change in regulation happened slightly before we released the film, so those issues were part of the zeitgeist, I guess.

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Gert Hermans