Meelis Arulepp about PETER THE BEETLE

"A humanoid with antennas"

Peter the Beetle dreams of performing his art of playing violin in front of a big crowd in the zoo. He leaves home to make his dream come true. Unfortunately, Peter is too small to be seen. It should come as no surprise that Estonian animator Meelis Arulepp shows up wearing a FANTASIA 2000 sweater. In his modest short film, the simplicity of the first Disney clips is never far away.

Meelis Arulepp: Growing up in Estonia, which back then was considered a part of the Soviet Union, Walt Disney has fascinated me since a very early age. I was still in kindergarten when my mother took me to see SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS and it blew my mind. I was mesmerised. The next few days I couldn't sleep and I was daydreaming about those funny dwarves singing and dancing and about Snow White getting romantically involved with a prince. That event has marked my destiny. I've been crazy about animation ever since.

This might explain why your film makes an impression of being a classic from another era. It looks… timeless.
Arulepp: You could have said old-fashioned and I would have felt honoured. That's just my nature. I have a taste for all things classic - in music, poetry, literature, paintings... Everything for which time has proven that it was worth it to stay on the scene.

When asking animators about the most difficult animal to animate, they usually answer me: the more legs, the more difficult.
Arulepp: Peter doesn't exactly look like a beetle. It's more or less a humanoid character with antennas. Like the cricket in Disney's PINOCCHIO doesn't look at all like a cricket. For me horses are the most difficult to animate. They have four legs and run on all four of them.

What is striking about your animation is the way you work with backgrounds: always one clear colour, with the characters acting more up front.
Arulepp: With a budget as small as ours, we needed to find ways to have this film made. I'm a big fan of simplicity. It was like a kind of game for me to see how much I could take out from the background. That was the fun part. There was a constant temptation to add more, but then I asked myself: is it needed for this scene? And then I took it out again.

Knowing about your love for all things classic, the soundtrack contains some beautiful violin music, played with great virtuosity.
Arulepp: In the original story, written by the famous Estonian author Anders Kivirak, Peter is reciting poems. But reading poetry wouldn't work in a film so I choose music instead. For the animatic I used Mozart's violin concerto, and I asked my friend and musician Torne Radic to perform the music for the film, but he insisted on writing the score himself. I was sceptical, but he did it, giving us the impression this is a classic piece that has been around for ages. The rhythm of the music corresponds to the rhythm of the images and the colouring.

This old story comes with an old message...
Arulepp: Dream big. And if you don't succeed, then don't give up but search for other ways to make your dream come true. As corny as it sounds.

Does PETER THE BEETLE fit into the

Estonian animation tradition?
Arulepp: Not very well. A Film Estonia is a part of A Film Denmark, which is where I studied and gained all the traditional animation know-how. We, Estonians, often somehow walk our own path with a more commercial audience orientation. In a good sense! Which corresponds with my nature, being this big Disney fan.

This short film is part of a bigger animation project.
Arulepp: PETER THE BEETLE is part of a programme combining five short stories. The only thing they have in common is the author - they're all based on stories by Anders Kivirak, whom you can see in an overarching story in which he expresses his desire as a writer to see his characters coming to live. He is a living legend, strolling through the entire film. It is a tricky concept, as all five films were deliberately made with different animation styles and techniques, like 2D, 3D, puppet animation... But his persona brings it all together nicely.

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Gert Hermans

The full interview you can find as a part of the Zlin Film Festival podcast on Spotify.

Piotr Chmielewski about CRAB

"It's not a vegan propaganda film"

I remember how Piotr Chmielewski came to pitch an idea at the CEE Animation Forum years ago. With his big disarming eyes he captivated the audience: "I don't know anything about animation, I don't know how to make a film, but I have this idea..." Everyone believed him unconditionally (which explains his pitching award!), and rightly so... Because now there is CRAB, a story in which we look through the eyes of a mollusk that finds itself in a very special place: in the galley of a ship, ready to be cooked.

One of the myths in animation is that two of the hardest things to animate are: water and animals with many legs. You decided to make an underwater film with a multi-legged main character.
Piotr Chmielewski: For Paulina Szewczyk, our head of animation, not even eight legs were a challenge - she can do much more than that! And we found several solutions to minimise the amount of computer effects in the animation of the water. Recreating the elements is something that I really like about stop-motion; it was great fun.
Tomasz Sobczak (DoP): We also did 'fire', which is even more difficult to animate than water.

The animation looks a bit gritty, back to the basics of stop-motion.
Chmielewski: That is the main charm and magic of this technique. I want the audience to see that all this is hand-made, with the use of real, unpolished materials.

I imagine you, sitting in front of an aquarium for days.
Chmielewski: I did my research, watching crab clips on YouTube. I went to the Berlin Zoo to observe the kind of movements they make. And I tried to put myself inside a crab's head - we can only imagine how that will be, but this is my interpretation of how crabs will see and hear the world.

All film long, we stay close to the main character and watch through his eyes, which are not more than two little balls on antennas.
Sobczak: The crab's perspective was defined by the use of wide lenses. A camera lens strongly resembles the human eye. In the animal world, pred-

ators in general have a long focal lens, while prey usually have a wide focal lens.
Chmielewski: The mouth can move a little bit, and that's all. Even with a minimum of facial expression, you can still read the emotions from the crab's body language.

It's not only about the eyes but also about the ears.
Piotr Kubiak (Sound): Piotr found it important to use original sounds that we created ourselves, instead of finding them in a sound library. And he forbade the use of dead animals, not even for foley purposes. For a fish slapping its tail in the frying pan, we couldn't use a dead fish, so we used a banana instead. Bananas were allowed!

What did you use for the sound of bubbling water?
Kubiak: Bubbles! The problem was with the synchronisation. After we recorded the bubbles, I uploaded those sounds in my sampler and then onto a keyboard. Whenever we needed bubbles, I recreated them through the keys of the piano. At first we thought that was funny, but we needed so many of them that after a while I got totally grumpy with Piotr.

There is one particular sound that sent shivers down my spine. The film starts vaguely with a crab crawling around, and then suddenly... the striking of a match. That's when you know we're in a horror movie.
Chmielewski: We create tension, but there isn't much brutality to be seen in CRAB. It's not a vegan propaganda film. It's all about taking the perspective of the crab, not about making people feel guilty about eating it. Being inside the crab's head for eight minutes creates a certain empathy - you imagine how it would feel to be a different kind of being.

We met on an earlier occasion when the project in an early stage was pitched at the Visegrad animation forum, nowadays called CEE animation forum.
Kubiak: Piotr's pitch made a deep impression; the crowd seemed to totally believe in his project and everyone wanted to get him on board. As an award I offered him five work days in my Polish sound studio and my producer Wojciech Leszczynski offered him to produce the animation. CEE has been a crucial element in the creation of this film.

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Gert Hermans

Elvira Dulskaia about ICE BREAK

"It's impossible to find properly fitting hockey wear"

Alex is the only girl in a boys ice-hockey team, coached by her dad. He treats Alex like one of the boys, both on the ice and at home. With her short haircut and a body shaped through years of hockey training, Alex is a tough player, and that is how the world is treating her. But now that she falls in love with one of her teammates, this perception starts to bother her.

With the ice hockey arena as a battleground, I was surprised to find tenderness in a place where I mainly expected machismo.
Elvira Dulskaia: Alex pretends to be tough, but she is actually a tender girl. Even when acting like one of the boys, cracking jokes, she feels different inside. That creates an inner conflict. What if you're doing everything to fit in, but still feel like an outsider? That is what ICE BREAK is all about.

Is an ice hockey locker room just the same as any other sports locker rooms?
Dulskaia: Ice hockey is all about teamwork; relationships within the team are of an utter importance. These relations are deepened after the game, inside the locker room. As strict as the discipline is on the ice, there players can unleash their stress. At the same time it is a very competitive, conflictual environment.

Especially when you have your father as a coach. Fathers and children in the same sports arena is seldom a good idea.
Dulskaia: The main reason why Alex can be in the boys' team is because of her father; she is not treated like all the others, but neither is she treated like his daughter on the ice. For Alex this is very confusing. We had a stunt double on set who was in the same situation; I learned a lot from her.

The physical distance between father and daughter on the screen reflects their emotional distance.
Dulskaia: At first they're not used to having physical contact, not more like a friendly tap on the shoulder, just like with the boys in the team. But later on there is a motion, a gesture with her head to which he answers. That's a big achievement, and things can only get better from then on.

There is this scene of a girl looking in the mirror, and something changes inside her…
Dulskaia: That's my favourite scene! She is preparing for the game, but besides being a player she is also a girl, the pretty girl that she sees in the mirror. For Alex it is a big achievement to simply see herself like that. Ice hockey is a tough masculine high-contact sport. In the Czech Republic, there aren't enough female junior teams, so girls often play with boys. Speaking with female players, I was fascinated by the inner conflict they faced by being accepted as one of them, but not as a "proper" female. Every girl playing ice hockey will at least once go through a phase of frustration, when she realises it's impossible to find properly fitting hockey wear.

Are teenage years just about surviving endless loneliness, or is there more than that?
Dulskaia: Since no one understands you, it is indeed a time of loneliness, but sports can help you, like it helped me too. As a slalom snowboarder, I was the only girl among boys performing a tough sport, and many problematic situations that I encountered helped me to grow up.

Your producer Julietta Sichel also produced THE PACK, a feature film about hockey. Did you benefit from her earlier experience?
Dulskaia: We met when I was consulting her about her contacts and experiences, but then she liked the script and took us on board. We also consulted THE PACK's director Tomas Polensky and the DoP, which for our inexperienced students team was a great help.

How challenging was that technical part?
Dulskaia: The extras were hockey players from the Brno team and we had body doubles for some scenes that required more hockey skills. But there were other difficulties: the film was shot in the middle of the COVID pandemic so every day we worried about crew members falling ill. And we only had limited time on the ice; those were tough negotiations!

From now on you have bigger plans to focus on…
Dulskaia: ICE BREAK was my graduation film, now I'll start preparing my first feature. Short films often elaborate on one specific situation, you have to dedicate yourself to micro-elements. The feature format allows me to play with time, which is something I really like to do.

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Gert Hermans

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