

Winfried Oelsner about MAX AND THE SENIOR SQUAD

“A sentence that seemed to come out of nowhere”

Just as Lisa-Marie Dickreiter and Winfried Oelsner had published the third volume of their children's book series MAX AND THE SENIOR SQUAD in 2016, film producer Martin Richter got in touch because he saw the potential for a family film that could connect generations. His son's enthusiasm had drawn him towards the adventures of Max and his gang of senior citizens, who live in a retirement home at Burg Geroldseck. Ever since the film was successfully released in 2020, it has been screened constantly on German television.

Why did it take four years for the sequel (MAX UND DIE WILDE 7 – DIE GEISTER-OMA) to be released?

Winfried Oelsner: Due to the COVID pandemic, the financing got much more complicated. That's why unfortunately we had to replace our child actors, who had become too old for our story. We didn't want advanced primary school children - in the vein of THE FIVE FRIENDS - to fall in love like Harry Potter did at some point. With Lucas Herzog, Klara Nölle and

Giuseppe Bonvissuto, we found some great new actors. Luckily our wonderful trio from Table 7 in the senior residence are still on board: Uschi Glas as former film diva Vera, Thomas Thieme as ex-football coach Horst and Günther Maria Halmer as the old-fashioned and grumpy Alexander von Humboldt offspring Kilian, as well as Nina Petri as the somewhat out-of-time governess-like sister Cordula.

How did you recruit these actors?

Oelsner: First of all, we cautiously asked Uschi Glas, who is still incredibly popular in Germany; through Vera's role we would play around with the clichés of an old film diva, i.e. pulling her film biography through the cocoa a little. It turned out that she has a great sense of humour and self-irony. In general, she is a warm, unpretentious, and courteous person who allowed us to refer to her own films and use her original film posters and awards. All the actors realised that this childlike comedy-with-a-hint-of-slapstick also tells the drama behind a situation, lending all the characters a



certain three-dimensionality.

The generation gap didn't complicate the project?

Oelsner: I told them beforehand: "You're all over 70 and you're grandmasters in your field, but this film is all about the children and with Max we have a boy who has almost 30 days of shooting and is in front of the camera every day. This means that I have to align the shooting schedule with the children first." As they are all (grand)parents, they understood. A family atmosphere grew among the team, even more so on these wonderful castle locations; it almost created

a certain campus feeling.

Where is your Geroldseck film castle located?

Oelsner: There are in fact two castles, one for the interior shots and one for the exteriors. The fantastic castle on the hill is Braunfels Castle, an hour's drive north of Frankfurt. The second one we found in Büdingen; it doesn't look quite as spectacular from the outside but the princely family of Büdingen lived here until two years before our shoot. We were allowed to use everything, i.e. we basically had a fully furnished interior set at our disposal. Vera's apartment was the for-



mer bedroom of the princess, including the original bed and props that we normally never could have afforded.

How did the idea for the books initially come up?

Oelsner: My wife Lisa-Marie Dickreiter was at home one day, assembling a cupboard together with her father, when suddenly there was a sentence circling in her head that came out of nowhere: *“My name is Max, I’m nine and I live in an old people’s home.”* She called me to ask for my opinion. I immediately jumped at it: Why is a nine-year-old living in a retirement home? What could he get involved in? We ended up writing the novel and the first sentence in the book is: *“My name is Max, I’m nine and I live in an old people’s home.”*

I actually know you as a director of documentaries about socially relevant political topics.

Oelsner: Indeed. I made a film about Brexit (before it actually happened), about the involvement of the German Reichsbahn in the Holocaust or about right-wing extremism in the Bundeswehr. At the same time, I also wrote and directed some feature films with my wife. This Max story wasn’t planned, there was just this sentence, and then we talked about our child-



hood and how all children would love to have a friend, a mentor, with whom they can discuss personal things or fool around.

Do we all have a ‘Ole Schröder’ too?

Oelsner: I didn’t have a boy bullying me in school, but I was rather shy and – like Max – a child of divorced parents, which I carried with me for a long time, without telling anyone. This was in the mid-1980’s, and I felt embarrassed and insecure about it. I wish I could have watched a SENIOR SQUAD story back in those days. That was my personal take on Max, who is brought up by a single mum, who makes himself invisible out of shame, and suffers from a lack of self-confi-

dence. The story is far from autobiographical, but there are some personal features to Max’s character.

Is the story complete now, or are you thinking about adapting the third book from the series?

Oelsner: That’s the plan indeed. We hope to start the adaptation of MAX AND THE WILD 7 - THE DRAGON GANG in the summer vacation next year and then release it in the theatres in spring 2026.

GEISTEROMA is generally praised as an entertaining mixture of a thrilling children’s detective, outsider drama, multi-generational comedy and empowering film. There is par-

ticular praise for the fact that the adult roles are not exaggerated, but portrayed authentically. Were there any points of criticism?

Oelsner: Oh yes! Both the books and films were repeatedly criticised for using too many swear words, insults or aggressive gestures such as a stinky finger. There are always parents who complain because they think that children shouldn’t be exposed to that. But it’s not about making a certain kind of language socially acceptable or by making ourselves more cool by being particularly vulgar or obscene. For us, it’s about authenticity. Kids simply are confronted with swear words. Apart from that, I think everyone – even kids – have the right to use swear words when you’ve hurt yourself, for example. A child is also allowed to think: “Oh man, what a stupid asshole that is” – instead of saying “What a doofus!” We want to depict everyday school life in such a way that children can relate to it. For some people, everything should be clean and conflict-free in order to set a good example. If children sense that, you’d lose all credibility.

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Uta Beth