

Rasmus Sivertsen about 30 years Qvisten Animation Studio

"A weird Norwegian cocktail"

It is not so much the 30-year history of Norwegian animation studio Qvisten that deserves a round of applause, it is the constant supply of new and exciting animated films for all segments of young audiences that I am impressed by. And by the presence of co-founder and top-director Rasmus Sivertsen, every inch a gentleman. I don't know how many inches there are in Rasmus Sivertsen, but there's for sure a lot of gentleman in him.

The Zlin Film Festival is proud to have entrapped him as a jury member - you don't often run into Sivertsen at festivals, but you can hardly imagine a festival that doesn't feature at least one title from the Qvisten catalogue. CATTLE HILL, PLODDY THE POLICE CAR, THREE ROBBERS AND A LION, JUST SUPER, LOIS & LUCA, IN THE FOREST OF HUCKYBUCKY, KURT TURNS EVIL, ELIAS – ANCHORS UP... none of it was anything less than 'outstanding'. On the occasion of Qvisten's 30th anniversary, we take a walk through their catalogue with Rasmus Sivertsen.

I want you to complete this sentence: "I'm counting the cattle, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5..."

Rasmus Sivertsen. Uh... doesn't ring a bell. Am I disappointing you?

Not a bit. I read on the Qvisten website that you had three ambitions when launching the company. One was to make a video clip for D.A.D. (Danish rock band, formerly known as Disneyland After Dark). I was expecting you to complete their famous lyrics.

Sivertsen: We are three owners of Qvisten, and I was the one who wasn't into Disneyland After Dark; I was into Britpop. D.A.D. had these roughly animated stop motion videos, and for my two colleagues, this has partly paved their way into animation.

After the iconic PINCHCLIFFE GRAND PRIX (Flåklypa Grand Prix by Ivo Caprino, 1975), things became pretty quiet on the Norwegian animation front. Was the work of Qvisten fitting into a Norwegian tradition, or rather launching one?



JUST SUPER

Sivertsen: Nothing much happened in Norway back then. Sweden was the big brother, they had the best animation. When I wanted to become a professional - walking in the footsteps of my father - I went to Sweden. For two years I worked for a big company in Stockholm. Nowadays things have changed. Apparently Swedish colleagues are having a hard time getting their films financed, and all young talents seem to end up in the gaming industry. So here's a shout-out to Norwegian film funding, that

seems to bear fruits.

What did you bring back home from Sweden?

Sivertsen: The dream of professionalising Norwegian animation. After the PINCHCLIFFE success in the seventies, I had the impression that Norwegian audiences easily embraced animation. It felt like a part of their heritage, for which they were willing to buy a cinema ticket.

Reviving the PINCHCLIFFE universe





PLODDY THE POLICE CAR

in **LOUIS & LUCA** must then have been a huge challenge. What gave you the guts to think you could do it?

Sivertsen: What helped me was that Ivo Caprino's film was based on the works of the author Kjell Aukrust, who created this 'Louis & Luca' (originally: Solan & Ludvig) universe in the 1960's. PINCHCLIFFE was an interpretation, and for our film we went back to that original source, to the books that are so dearly beloved in Norway. That lifted a bit of the pressure. Actually most of our work at Qvisten is based on characters that our primary Norwegian target audience is familiar with.

Which of your characters would you describe as a typical Norwegian?

Sivertsen: The characters in **LOUIS & LUCA** are this typical triangle of the outrageously optimistic magpie Luca...

Would you describe Norwegians as outrageously optimistic?

Sivertsen: We should be, given our tremendous wealth! And then there's Louis the hedgehog, who's afraid of almost everything. Up in our Northern country, people can feel a bit scared off by the outside world. Combining that self-assured 'we are the champions' attitude with a fear for the world is a weird Norwegian cocktail. Also **THREE ROBBERS AND A LION** is

a typical Norwegian story. The book 'When the Robbers Came to Cardamom Town' - written in the 50s - is probably the most famous among all Norwegian novels. In this little town, people generally tend to be nice; 'do whatever you want as long as you don't bother anyone' sounds like a very Norwegian rule. Telling our traditional stories to Scandinavian and worldwide audiences is Qvisten's ambition. Which corresponds nicely with our national funding system.

In what sense?

Sivertsen: In order to get funded, you need to prove that your film will reach a huge audience. It helps if your film is based on an existing IP. Under such conditions, few original stories might see the light of day, which is a shame, but I think that we need both. We're happy to offer solid, well-known stories to new audiences. Strikingly enough, Norwegians perceive such films as if they were big Hollywood movies. They can easily choose **THREE ROBBERS** over a Disney movie, which is a promising perspective for cinemas, where our classic stories compete with US blockbusters.

Talking about well-known IPs... In your catalogue I found the title CHRISTMAS WITH ASTRID LIND-

GREN.

Sivertsen: The Astrid Lindgren family gave us the rights to a series of Christmas stories that could be compiled into one 'Christmas Hour'. Are you familiar with Disney's 'Christmas Hour' concept, with stories about Mickey, Donald and their friends celebrating Christmas? Here in the North we have our own Christmas traditions, and we already produced one 'Nordic Christmas Hour'. Astrid Lindgren is the one who could make it an even stronger brand.

One thing that all Qvisten films have in common is something that could be described as "pure passion for animation", Qvisten's 30th anniversary slogan.

Sivertsen: Animation is a collaborative art form. We have approx. 80 people working in the studio and we can't be without each of their passions. This is how we can make a feature film for €3 million and still compete with Disney's €50 million production budgets. It's about people saying: Yes, I can do better! In our case, one plus one is definitely more than two.

Most studios mainly work with freelancers.

Sivertsen: Qvisten has around 50 people permanently employed, the oth-



ers are on project-based contracts. We are probably the biggest animation studio in Scandinavia, and I must be aware not to lose my passion for animation while puzzling with budgets and schedules. I'm involved as Creative Director and applying to acquire certain IPs, but I'm still involved as a director in many of our projects. Making the films is pure fun.

Over the years, you've been targeting a range of audiences, from the -5 (THREE ROBBERS) to the 11+ age group (KURT TURNS EVIL)..

Sivertsen: And this year, we're doing something crazy. I can hardly believe this film is actually getting made; SPERMAGADDON is such an insane project! It tells about the sperm cells' race for the egg cell; you could call it 'the ultimate race for life'. Basically it's a quite silly and probably provocative story: a young boy goes on a trip to the countryside where he will meet a girl and have sex for the first time. We see bodies preparing themselves – up to a certain degree you could consider it to be educational. We play around with taboos in a SOUTH PARK-kind-of-way. First sexual experiences are seldom glamorous, but rather awkward, which makes our story somehow demystifying, but also utterly crazy. I expect the film is

going to be rated 12+ in Norway, but in the US it will probably be rated R. According to our American distributor, he “can't believe a film like this really exists.” We have a festival version out, but the cinema version should be ready by January 2025 for its Scandinavian release.

In the ECFA Journal's “Meet the Mentors” series, you were asked about your ultimate dream project. Do you remember what the answer could have been?

Sivertsen: It was probably about making a series like THE SIMPSONS or FAMILY GUY for European audiences? In times of great tension, we need humour in our lives. Imagine a European TV satire, co-produced by several countries... we would have such fun making it. Look what THE SIMPSONS and FAMILY GUY did for their respective TV channels! If it's well-made, it would be successful.

Despite the cliché of introverted animators, silently locked away in attics, there's Qvisten Animation, saying: What about doing some theme parks? And so you did!

Sivertsen: We're involved in three theme parks, but only in one case there's a co-ownership. We want to offer people a good experience in



Rasmus Sivertsen

different formats; you can experience Cardamom Town in a movie, or in the Kristiansand zoo, where you can meet the characters. Our LOUIS & LUCA ride – a shaky, wobbly thing with 3D glasses in a theme park in Lillehammer – won “the Theme Park Ride Oscar”, so to speak.

You animated a car (Ploddy) and a boat (Elias) and made them main characters in your movies. What other vehicles do you have in mind?

Sivertsen: Planes and trains have been done before. And bicycles are too difficult to animate. Recently I challenged my family into a drawing competition: “Let's try to do a bicycle.” We

couldn't do it. You think that you remember how a bicycle looks, but actually you don't. At the moment, sperm cells are our ultimate vehicles.

PLODDY THE POLICE CAR did very well!

Sivertsen: PLODDY was one of my first experiences in directing; I have very fond memories of it. The first film was made on probably not more than €2 million. All we had was a character and a story; we tried to keep things very simple. PLODDY was the start of our commercial success: it helps when people can make money on your product. If your films prove to be viable, it will help you to keep going.



You've seen your films being screened in countries around the globe. What did you pick up from that experience?

Sivertsen: Wherever your films might travel, in general audiences will react correctly to the impulses you give them. We brought THE HUCKYBUCKY FOREST to China. Basically this is a story about 'one man, one vote'. Chinese journalists were confused. "Is this really a movie for young kids about democracy?" - "Yes, it is."

This might be the moment to bring up the tricky JUST SUPER episode in your career.

Sivertsen: It was the third time that one of our films was invited for the Generations section at the Berlinale; a fantastic vehicle for showcasing your work. The day before the screening, we received a message: one activist group had seen the poster and the trailer - not the film - and felt offended by it. They experienced JUST SUPER as a racist film because they interpreted characters putting on a mask as changing their ethnicity. We discussed it with the festival staff: "This must be a misunderstanding. Our film is not at all about ethnicity; it's nowhere mentioned in the story." The festival asked us to pull back the film; that is a terrible pressure on a film-

maker! Luckily, I had been at the Berlinale before. Luckily, I had my team. Luckily, I had the Norwegian Film Institute. Everybody was so supportive. Discussions continued for another 24 hours, we didn't do the red carpet, we didn't do the main premiere, but we agreed to give the film three screenings. Things cooled off rather quickly. A few weeks later, the Berlinale informed us that there hadn't been any reactions from the audience - which is what they had feared the most - and that maybe some mistakes had been made on their side. Luckily no sales agents were influenced by these tribulations - none of them reacted.

I know some distributors have changed their release strategy.

Sivertsen: Luckily the film had already done good sales beforehand; it didn't get affected by what happened. Finally JUST SUPER became our bestselling title outside of Norway.

If ever a European animation had the potential to compete with Pixar, this was going to be the one.

Sivertsen: It is important to have JUST SUPER screened in festivals, where films are being discussed. It is my wish for the festivals to have the backbone to play that role and create opportunities for debate. The Norwegian Film



SPERMAGADDON

Institute facilitated such occasions where I was invited to talk about the incident and share my experiences.

Was it sharing, or more like justifying yourself?

Sivertsen: It's hard not to try and justify yourself. We didn't get a single reaction from people feeling offended or hurt. On the contrary; many people wrote to me how they felt sorry about what happened.

Qvisten's mission includes "creating positive formatting experiences for children and families by sharing stories with heart and humour that will remain with them for life." What does that mean to you?

Sivertsen: Children and parents need those shared experiences. Nowadays within one family, viewing experiences are fragmented, with me watching a programme here, my wife watching a show over there, and who knows what the kids meanwhile are watching in their room? While there's nothing as fantastic as going to the movies with the entire family, laughing and having fun together, and afterwards discussing what you have seen. Creating such opportunities is a wonderful job.

-
Gert Hermans