

Mara Eibl-Eibesfeldt about THABO AND THE RHINO CASE

“Baby rhinos love to take a nap”

How much would you like to have a chat with a baby rhino? Very much, especially after having seen THABO AND THE RHINO CASE, in which you meet the animal in all its droll charm. Yet I'd rather talk to director Mara Eibl-Eibesfeldt, who comes with stories about filming in Africa, about poachers and snakes, and... about filming a baby rhino!

Rhinos are an endangered species because of the brutal actions of poachers. Thabo's uncle - an experienced ranger - is suspected of killing a rhino. Thabo and his new friend Emma must catch the real culprits as quickly as possible.

Even if this turns out to be a detective story, it all starts like a National Geographic documentary on wildlife in the Savannah. How much stock footage did you use?

Mara Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We shot everything ourselves. My husband, together with a cameraman and an assistant, formed a second unit and went out for three days just to film

the wildlife. All you need is time, patience and a bit of luck. If you're all set up but the lions decide not to show up on that day... then you need a plan B. Luckily they were there.

So when finally there was a safari to be done, you weren't allowed on the fun part?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: I already had my share of safaris. While scouting locations, we went on probably 20 safaris. We visited three lodges per day, and every lodge offered us a safari with their best ranger. Every day we got up at five for our first safari and often we did three tours per day. Something you can easily get used to. By the time the shooting started, I had seen plenty of wildlife.

Enough snakes as well?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We needed that snake in the film, even if everybody was afraid of it. The producer wanted us to use a gummy snake, but I didn't want to. What actually caused some discussion was that Thabo in the script picked up the snake and threw



it out of the car. That wasn't setting a good example. So now Thabo gently puts it on the ground. Luckily we had a very good snake at our disposal.

How would you define 'a very good snake'?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We found a local guy who kept snakes as a hobby. We expected panic to break out as soon as the snake arrived on set, so we organised some time for Litlhoonolofatso Litlhakayane (playing Thabo) and Ava Skuratowski (Emma) to get used to

the animal. I love that scene; it works perfectly.

It is always clear that we're watching a cinema film and not a nature documentary.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: Because we always look through one of the characters' eyes - it's the actors that make a difference. The animals are watched by someone to whom we can relate.

Nevertheless the wild nature looks impressively appealing.



Eibl-Eibesfeldt: Entering that world, you're entering paradise. Going on a tour in a National Park, you'll be astonished. These aren't animals in a zoo; they live here for real and you feel blessed, being the one getting to observe them. I wanted to establish this feeling in the beginning of the film - then the finding of the dead rhino hits you even harder. Are there really people trying to destroy this? This majestic animal allowed us as a guest in his wild world, and we paid it back by killing it?

This story is set in a certain region?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We're actually not in South Africa but in Eswatini, a small, rural country next to it (formerly known as Swaziland). A traditional South African village is hard to find. Most of the original culture has been destroyed during apartheid. When passing through KwaZulu-Natal, this was the first time I recognised scenes from my earlier African journeys: little houses, small-scale farming, people cultivating their own land... The Zulus have always kept a special status in South Africa, they kept their king and culture, even during apartheid. Here we found the villages and landscape that we were looking for. We used the real huts and houses like we found them, we shot in the village's school



and in the local police station. This helped us to get the local people involved in our activities.

Still there is this elephant in the room... What can Africa add to a European children's film tradition and what can Europe add to African film culture?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: The film is based on a book by Kirsten Boie, a well-known German children's author. I was looking for an entertaining story about an important topic that made you travel to a different world. I appreciate the warm-hearted way Kirsten Boie por-

trays the people. She knows the country and its inhabitants - Boie has a foundation in Eswatini that takes care of children who have been orphaned due to HIV. That is why it doesn't feel like a stranger's gaze but more the perspective of somebody who is really involved. Moreover, poaching is an important global topic. My grandfather was a biologist and the interest in conservation has always been running in our family.

Still you go there as a foreigner, just like Emma, a German girl visiting the region.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: Emma and Thabo are portrayed as equals, they are both great kids. These are no strangers; these are people that you and I can relate to. We worked with an African crew - a professional team full of marvellous personalities - and we had a South-African advisor going through the script and adding her perspective to the story.

You could have felt this discussion coming?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: When we started talking about this project seven years ago, the reactions were: "Why would anybody in Germany want to see a film with African actors?" Then all of a sudden the perception changed and people were happy about our diverse approach. But one year later we were being criticised about a possible post-colonial point of view. That is how quickly the political vibes shifted. But wouldn't it be a pity to stop making films about other cultures, simply ignoring the others and only focusing on our own little lives?

When the ranger finds the rhino corpse, he sighs: "Now it's also happening to us." What is the poaching situation at the moment?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: National parks take strict precautions because there's



a war going on. Poachers and anti-poaching units are both heavily armed; poachers are shooting rhinos, and anti-poaching units are shooting poachers. When we filmed THABO in spring, 16 cases of poaching had been reported that year. The baby rhino we worked with was an orphan too; her mother was killed. Rhino orphanages are extremely guarded with electric fences. As a visitor you won't even get the address. Only when you're nearby will they send you some GPS coordinates. At the moment of arrival, you must switch off your phone, you can't take pictures... Only a small crew was allowed inside and controls were super strict, not only about who's entering the complex but also making sure that at the end of the day, everybody got out again. To obstruct poachers, often rangers dehorn the rhinos to protect them from getting shot. Poachers sometimes even slaughter a hornless rhino, just to show that they can.

Has anyone ever filmed with a baby rhino before?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We had a tumultuous start, when one after the other, all crew members fell out with COVID. Every day we wondered if we would ever be able to shoot the film. But for the scenes that we feared most, work-

ing with a baby rhino - her name was Daisy - everything went smoothly. After all those problems, now so much was given back to us.

How did you work with Daisy?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: We had three days to capture all her scenes. We were very careful not to disturb her but growing up among humans, she was always very comfortable with the crew, walking around freely, constantly rubbing her nose to the tripod. We had thoroughly planned all the scenes but didn't know if they would work out.

Like which scenes?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: For instance, when Daisy refuses to drink from a bottle, but drinks straight from the hand of the actress. We had never tried it before, so that was a glorious moment! Ava - who had the most scenes with Daisy - felt so privileged and was super courageous; it takes some guts to put your hand into the mouth of a wild animal! Another tricky scene was when the baby rhino wakes up next to the sleeping girl. Baby rhinos love to take a nap after having had their milk. Since Daisy could feel some tension, the zoo keeper had to crawl her belly until she fell asleep. We had a dummy, but most of the time you see the real Daisy at work.



Mara Eibl-Eibesfeldt on the Zlin Festival stage

Without making it a specific topic, you mention AIDS as a cause of many tragedies.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: Years ago when Kirsten Boie started her foundation, over 30% of the kids in Eswatini were orphans. Thus it felt like a natural part of the story, it's just a notion that I'm giving. This is an adventure movie, but it's not always light-hearted. The scene in which Thabo reads his mum's memory book was very important. Actually it was my daughter making the drawings for that book, which makes it extra meaningful for me.

One trivial question. Which film was playing on the big screen in the

lodge? Was it a random title or was it there for a certain reason?

Eibl-Eibesfeldt: It was DIE BUBI SCHOLZ STORY, a film made by our producer. So that certain reason was: not having to pay for extra film rights. But it had Götz George in it, one of the most iconic German actors. Since he died in 2016, this was my only chance to have Götz George in one of my movies.

—
Gert Hermans