

Kristina Dufková & Matěj Chlupáček about LIVING LARGE

"I remember her making a delicious beef stew"

Ben Pipetka is a witty teenager, facing the hardships of adolescence with humour and optimism. He plays in a band with his best friend, and his greatest passion is in cooking and eating. However, Ben's obesity is becoming problematic, and a bunch of classmates find him a perfect bullying victim. More and more, Ben doubts himself, especially when he falls in love with beautiful Klara. Wanting to please her, Ben starts a diet. But when Klara rejects his amorous efforts, he falls into an emotional hole of apathy and gluttony. How can Ben find the courage to accept himself the way he is, even with his physical imperfections?

Czech director Kristina Dufkova has made a film that combines an artisanal design with a hilariously funny yet poignant and universally relevant story. No wonder the filmmakers have just returned from Los Angeles, where - with the Grammy Awards and the Oscars around the corner - they've been working on the film's international promotion.

Matěj Chlupáček (producer Barletta): Los Angeles was great! It was interesting to see how bigger titles go about things - we were competing with films like MOANA 2 and INSIDE OUT 2. The quality of all competitors is undisputed, but what truly matters is what you can organise in terms of dinners and parties. It all depends on the scale of your film, but with our marketing budget we did the best we could.

After seeing LIVING LARGE, are we supposed to feel hungry or fat? Or just happy?

Kristina Dufková: Happy! Hope was the most important feeling that I wanted to evoke. The hope that we're not left alone in times of need. That is why I wanted the film to be so colourful, creating an elevated type of reality. I love colours!

I can imagine one of the fun parts must have been designing the food: the colourful candy, the meat sizzling in the pan, the sky-high burgers... you even make vegetables look yummy!



Dufková: The food had to look convincing, as if it was edible. We used many techniques, but often we used real food - like mashed potatoes or whipped cream - because it needed to look realistic and tasty in a close-up. The biggest challenge was the soup; animating liquids is never easy.

Chlupáček: I remember Kristina making a delicious beef stew, because it needed to look tasty on the big screen.

Ben has a good sense of humour, he is good with words, he is poetic... In general he is this charming kind of kid that seems fun to hang out with.

Dufková: That was the first reason

for choosing Mikaël Ollivier's book for an adaptation. Ben is not just the usual bullied kid. He can make fun of himself and he is a sharp observer of things happening around him. His cleverness makes him stand out; he knows how to use his humour and intelligence.

He seems to be fine with who he is, until he is confronted with his imperfections. Ben's positive mindset changes and he becomes angry and pessimistic. What causes this change? Is it love, growing up or being bullied?

Dufková: A combination of all those things, with love as a big barrier to

overcome. What has the biggest impact is that from then on he is alone, there's nobody around to help him with his issues. Those who are self-centred can easily suffer from tunnel vision; Ben's perspective is completely subjective. Only when he widens his scope again and starts looking at things from a different angle, can he become optimistic again.

I was watching the film at the Schlingel Festival with a friend sitting next to me. When Klara sends Ben the message that "I hope we can still be friends" I heard her saying "that's the most cruel sentence on the planet."

Chlupáček: It is! Those dialogues were written together with children of Ben's age. In the "writer's lab" that we organised with them, they told us about the type of text messages they send and the wording and expressions they would use. So I would call it "cruel but credible".

It's a cruel sentence, but written with love?

Chlupáček: People often come to ask about the film's ending. They want to know if Ben and Klara became a couple. This is something you should decide for yourself, but for me those scenes were never about dating but



about becoming true friends. The book was conceived more or less as Mikaël Ollivier's autobiography. He fell in love at Ben's age with a girl that was very similar to Klara. They never dated though, so Ben's journey somehow reflects the author's own life experience.

Your film promotes a healthy lifestyle, but doesn't promote the concept of a diet. Every time a diet is brought up, all alarm bells go off.

Dufková: We aren't professional experts and therefore didn't have the ambition to be too didactical about diets. The most important thing is to find peace with yourself and with your feelings. Staying true to your

emotions, that's what the film really is about.

I thought you yourself might have an aversion towards diets.

Chlupáček: I do; I hate them intensely. I only tried intermittent fasting - 8 hours of eating and 16 hours of fasting. You can eat anything and still get slimmer; that works for me!

Dufková: I must have gone on a diet a million times. Our scriptwriter was Czech author Petr Jarchovský, who has struggled with diets all of his life - it's his ongoing nightmare. He never expected we would have this topic of conversation in common. In my perception, everyone is constantly on a diet or talking about diets.

Where exactly is the story situated?

Dufková: The book is very precise about the locations in France, but since there is an ambition to screen the film worldwide, we needed to set the story in a more universal place. I drew inspiration from places that feel familiar to me, like the school, the playground... It's definitely not Prague or Paris, but a smaller town, where specific details were added to the street scene.

Let's take a closer look at the puppets' physical appearance. Their eyes look like marbles but they are full of life.

Dufková: What I specifically wanted was moveable eyelids. That's not very common, so I had to create that system myself for every puppet, manually. It allowed me to move them freely from side to side and play around with their colouring.

What I admire most about the puppets, is the haircuts. I have my personal favourites. Erik the drummer and the female gym teacher have the most amazing hair!

Dufková: We wanted haircuts that we could animate, but therefore we needed real hair - the tests we did with artificial material looked underwhelming. We involved a real hair styl-

ist and created tiny wigs, which were pure horror for the animators. They were constantly complaining about it, because natural hair sticks out on every side and it's impossible to keep it under control. It opened countless possibilities in terms of making the hair move, but we should develop a more animator-friendly technique.

The animation industry in Central and East Europe is currently reviving, but is there also a stop-motion tradition that you feel like fitting into?

Dufková: I come from the world of hand drawn 2D animation. I didn't study stop-motion at school because I found all such practical challenges technically too complicated. With paint, I could simply draw everything that came to my mind, and if I messed up, I started all over again, while for stop-motion you needed to plan everything ahead. Now that I tried myself to master the technical specifics of stop-motion, I found it much more enjoyable.

With Barletta (CZ), Novinski (SK) and Novanima (FR) this co-production brought together three interesting partners.

Chlupáček: Co-productions are always complicated, and some are super com-

plicated... like LIVING LARGE, which was conceived as a small family film, made by a crew of 10-15 people in one studio in Prague. But we needed co-production partners and we love them dearly. We invited French and Slovak animators to our studio and the few poetic scenes in hand-drawn 2D animation - when we dive into Ben's imagination - were done in France by Novanima. Our Slovak co-producer Michal Novinski is our composer, and some sets were built in Slovakia.

The perfect audience for this film would be young teenagers... which is exactly the age group that won't go to the cinemas to watch an animated film.

Dufková: This is one of the reasons why I decided to make this film. My daughter was struggling with a similar problem and I couldn't find a single film that addressed the topic or that even paved the way for a discussion. So I made the film myself, even if it took me 13 years, and meanwhile my daughter has grown up. But I love it when people come to tell me or write to me how they found something in my film that speaks to them.

Chlupáček: It needed some courage to make this film. Teenagers usually prefer to watch Marvel films or main-



stream stuff from big studios, so we were making a film for an audience that is not very keen on seeing it. But we succeeded; LIVING LARGE was sold to more than 20 territories already.

One last thing... Why does the world need gym teachers?

Chlupáček: I hated my gym teacher! My experience was very similar to the film.

Dufková: I guess it's a universal feeling. Don't we all generally hate them? The film is based on Mikaël Ollivier's story, so I guess he hated them too. However, I do think that physical edu-

cation in schools is a necessity; it just needs teachers who motivate their pupils rather than discourage them.

—
Gert Hermans