

Interview with Denisa Grimmová



(caption: Denisa Grimmová at work)

By Marian Evans
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With your husband, Jan Bubeníček, you're making "Even Mice Belong in Heaven", based on Iva Procházková's award-winning bestseller about Whizzy the mouse and Whitebelly the fox. It's a stop-motion puppet animation combined with 3D and CGI and will be released at the end of 2020. What drew you to the story?

Denisa Grimmová: I came across the book eleven years ago, when my son was a year old. Thanks to him I read the book. As an artist, I saw its fantastic world and realised that it could be perfect for an adaptation. But it seemed unfilmable because of the quantity of characters and sets.

It's a very beautiful story about friendship, life, death and hope and it remained in my head. To make the film, full of colourful animal characters, fulfils my dream.

What were the main challenges of the adaptation?

DG: The project is a very personal one. It has a certain magic that is fragile, delicate, subtle. From the beginning I knew that I wanted to work on it with people I really trusted and respected as professionals as well as humans.

The first contact with Iva Procházková was very pleasant and I was happy that she liked the idea of a film based on her book. And then we worked with a great screenwriter with a lot of experience, our friend Alice Nellis. We see the world similarly and have children of similar ages.

It was a joyful collaboration. It was Alice's first experience with writing a script for animation, and I was fascinated by her work. The book version is quite short and simple for a feature film so she had to add a lot of themes and develop characters. She had to add dramatic parts and build a more complicated plot. It worked out well and the author was satisfied.

After the second draft of the script we collaborated with Richard Malatinský, who is our classmate and friend from Prague's Film Academy, FAMU. He took over the script in a very sensitive way and worked with us on another five versions. His sense of humour and understanding of children's perceptions of the world refreshed some passages and the script's whole dialogue. Both screenwriters gave the story energy and new themes, which always touched and amused us.

How did you and Jan find each other?

DG: Jan's films inspired me to apply to FAMU. I saw them in a festival and decided that I wanted to make films as good as his. We were classmates at FAMU, but we didn't really know each other very well, because we were in different years of study. Years passed, and one day, in a class meeting, drinking wine, I asked him if he wanted to make a film with me in future, and he said yes. This is how we found each other.

Is there any tension between the female and male perspective, or your different styles, as you develop the characters?

DG: (A long laugh.) There is a tension all the time. We are getting used to the collaboration. Two directors and beyond that a married couple – it is quite a funny household.



(caption: Jan Bubeníček at work)

What are your respective responsibilities?

DG: I am directing and taking care of the artistic side of the film. I designed all the characters. Jan is a director, a VFX supervisor and the architect of the technical solutions. He will lead the postproduction of the whole film and take care of the film's music; he grew up in a musical family. We develop the sets together, with 3D/2D compositionist Jak Kurka.

How do you manage your parenting responsibilities?

DG: Just great. Our kids (aged 12, 10, 3, all boys) have accepted that there will be about ninety other animals living with us for some time and we have promised them that in about two years' time we'll become 'normal' again.

Why did you choose stop-motion animation with combination of 3D and CGI?

DG: The technology came naturally. Puppets always attracted me. I love materials. We had some problems with convincing our co-producers, but thanks to the abilities of our producer Vladimír Lhoták, we managed to convince our co-producers to make this film using the traditional puppet animation technique. Often, we were confronted with the argument that a puppet will not be able to play emotion, but after showing the first animation tests we managed to crush the biggest doubts.

Puppet animation (stop motion) is native to the Czech Republic – we have a rich and famous tradition. We rely on the advantages of this tradition – the natural beauty of the materials and products of nature, their detail. However, we realise its limits. We care about the result and we see technology as a tool to achieve it. CGI helps us in the scenes which are difficult to manage with puppet technology only. The intention of CGI is to adjust the overall look of the film so that these scenes are visually indistinguishable from the puppet scenes.

What films and filmmakers inspire your work?

DG: Many films inspire us. We grew up on the art of Jiří Trnka, Karel Zeman, Vlasta Pospíšilová and Břetislav Pojar, who later taught us at FAMU. His series “Hey Mister, Let’s Play!” inspired me to make animated movies.

From among the Czech women directors we were influenced by Hermína Týrlová, Vlasta Pospíšilová, Bára Dlouhá and Michaela Pavlátová. When Jan was four years old, he was in love with Hermína Týrlová and wanted to marry her. She was 70 at the time. It might have influenced his career decision.

Besides the films that everybody knows, there are a lot of short films, from which we remember only a couple of scenes. You see these films in festivals and some of them just leave an imprint on your mind. Of course, we were also inspired by films with foreign directors such as Tim Burton and Wes Anderson and from studios like Aardman and Pixar.

What are the main challenges and pleasures of the production?

DG: This is a big project. Challenges are everywhere! As directors we try to participate in and understand everything. However, sometimes it is not easy. I like it when I meet people who work well and appreciate the process.

The film’s primary audience is children, but you have layered the story for adult enjoyment too. What messages do you want to convey to the audiences?

DG: I want them to leave them with a feeling of hope. And reflecting on the importance of compassion. With the thought that very often our problems are small in comparison with the problems of others. With the thought that to love somebody is beautiful and uplifting, so if you have somebody in your heart, he or she will be still there, even if the person is not near you at the moment.

