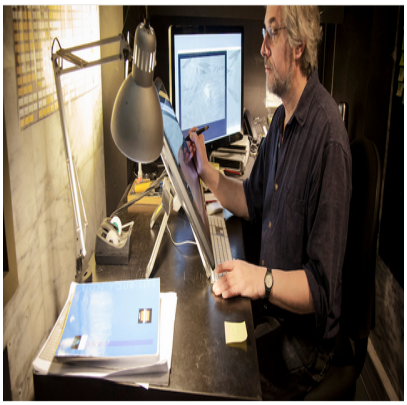

The AFI FEST Interview: THE RED TURTLE Director MichaÃ«l Dudok de Wit

Description

Japanâ??s Studio Ghibli has long been the gold standard in animated features, producing revered masterpieces such as GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES (1988), PRINCESS MONONOKE (1997) and SPIRITED AWAY (2001) since its inception in 1985. For Ghibliâ??s first international co-production, the studio co-founded by legends Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata invited Dutch filmmaker MichaÃ«l Dudok de Wit (OscarÂ® winner for his 2000 animated short FATHER AND DAUGHTER) to create his first feature-length film. The result, after eight years of work, is a breathtaking, original fable about a shipwrecked manâ??s struggle to escape a deserted island, and the unexpected course his life takes when heâ??s prevented from leaving by the titular sea creature. The film dispenses with spoken dialogue, instead allowing Dudok de Witâ??s vivid, meticulously rendered visuals to guide us through a lush natural landscape that contains both unimaginable hardships and simple, potent truths about family, aging and life.

AFI: What was it like working with Studio Ghibli as a first-time feature director? How were ideas exchanged?

MichaÃ«l Dudok de Wit: We had an excellent start, because I adore Studio Ghibliâ??s films and they expressed their strong appreciation of my previous work. I went to Studio Ghibli from time to time during the development phase of the story to discuss the latest progress and at one point I stayed for a month in Tokyo, working with intensely on storyboard changes. At Studio Ghibli, it is the film director who has the final say on the creative aspect of the film, and though the producers liked sharing their opinions with me, they did not impose them. I in return asked them a lot of questions, and we generally had fruitful, non-competitive conversations. To me, that was ideal.

AFI: Describe your collaboration with large teams of animators.

MDDW: There was a striking bond between us all and I felt nourished by that. The artists were all European freelancers, mostly French, selected carefully during a long recruiting period. Actually, the selection process was not unlike the selection of the samurais in Kurosawaâ??s SEVEN SAMURAI.

Iâ??m an animator, background artist and designer myself, so my colleagues and I often understood each other intuitively. The main team worked in AngoulÃªme, a small town in France, and most of us

lived at walking distance from the studio, also from our favorite bars and from the local food market.

The idea was to have all artists working in the same building, but we needed extra help, so we also collaborated with an animation studio in Hungary, KecskemÃ¨tfilm. To my relief that worked really well, because the Hungarians were excellent animators and their team had a strong team spirit. The exchange of animated scenes between France and Hungary was done instantaneously via the internet.

As I was both directing and exploring, I had to learn how to cope with many tasks all at the same time. That was new and extremely challenging for someone who is used to concentrate uninterruptedly on one or two tasks per day.

THE RED TURTLE

AFI: You spent five years working on the story of this film. What aspect of the story changed the most from the first draft of the script that you presented to Studio Ghibli?

MDDW: The ending. The first draft had a fine ending, the story felt complete, whole, but one day, actually while I was walking on the street, I suddenly imagined the new, current ending. I was immediately moved to tears by the beauty of the new ending.

AFI: What was your biggest challenge in developing the lush soundscape and intricate sound mixing for the film?

MDDW: Amazingly, there was no big challenge. The sound was created and mixed by a well-established sound studio, Piste Rouge in Paris. They understood right away that this film did not need cartoony sounds and that the noises of nature had a striking presence throughout the film. The sound artists also worked closely with the music composer Laurent Perez del Mar to create the right chemistry between the music and the nature sounds.

AFI: Since THE RED TURTLE is dialogue-free, what was your technique for ensuring the animated characters could clearly communicate thoughts and feelings with one another, as well as with the audience?

MDDW: The sensitive scenes, I mean the scenes where the absence of dialogue was a real challenge, were animated quite late in the animation phase, to ensure that the animators would feel really at ease

and intuitive with the characters. These scenes also took much longer to animate than usual. Moreover, we had filmed live actors who played those scenes, and the live footage was used by the animators, not for rotoscoping of course, but to use for inspiration. And the human sounds were important. Absence of dialogue can mean that the spectator has less empathy with the characters, but in the sound phase all the human characters were given natural breathing sounds, and that made a huge difference, we found.

THE RED TURTLE screens at AFI FEST 2016 on Tuesday, 7:00 P.M. November 15, at the Egyptian Theater and Wednesday, 1:15 P.M. at the TCL Chinese Mann 4, November 16, as part of the World Cinema section of the festival.

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