



Henrik Ruben Genz    Thomas Gammeltoft

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***Terribly Happy* Director and Producer Present *Excuse Me***

After his successful film adaptation of Erling Jepsen's novel *Terribly Happy*, the internationally-acclaimed Danish director Henrik Ruben Genz goes back to the writer's universe with *Excuse Me*, based on the novel 'Birollen'. Pitched as a 'comedy drama about a father, a murder and a dog', the film will arrive on Danish screens on January 5, 2012. The director and his producer Thomas Gammeltoft (Fine & Mellow) spoke to us.

**Henrik Ruben Genz, this is the second time you adapt a novel by Erling Jepsen. What is it that attracts you so much to his universe?**

Erling's writing is very familiar to me. We grew up together in the same part of Denmark so we share the same background, and vision of the world. It's quite a poor area, so to survive you have to create a certain universe. Erling's weapon is to use black humour. I totally relate to that spirit which I haven't found in other writers. Also, Erling often depicts outsiders in his stories. There is always a loner trying to be part of a community. That was already my favourite theme before I started working with him.

**In *Excuse Me*, the young girl Helene (played by Sara Hjort) is the outsider who tries to be accepted in the theatre group. What are the other main themes of the film?**

Helene lives in Copenhagen, like in a prison at her mother's home. She is isolated until she makes her way into the theatre environment to find her father. The film is also about her search for identity within a dysfunctional family.

I actually see *Excuse Me* as a kind of Hans C Andersen modern tale. There is always a new way to think about the film. For instance, on a global perspective, while writing the script, there was the COP 15 Copenhagen 2009 meeting about climate change. Everyone came to 'save the world' and everybody agreed it was a good project. But at the end nobody was able to agree because everyone had different agendas. Here, it's the same. The theatre -representing a microcosm of society - is about to close down. All characters – director, actors - agree it has to be saved, but they can't agree on anything. They are greedy, bitchy, they have been there too long; they are not really interested in the common project.

**So the film is a critique of the world in which we live, a satire of what's happening in society today?**

Exactly, it's about people having to work together to handle a project, but greed, fear, big egos take over, until an outsider arrives and shakes things. In *Terribly Happy*, it was the policeman who came to the village and his arrival shook all the dirt and made the mud come back to the surface. Here it's Helene. She's totally naïve, but very competent and clever. When she sees how dysfunctional the people in charge are, she becomes stronger and discovers her own skills.

**One of the key characters in the film is a dog. Can you explain the role it plays and its symbolic meaning?**

Helene lives with her mother and a dog but she comes third, after the dog and is jealous of it.

There is an inner aggression towards the dog that has some consequences. At the same time, the dog sees and feels her desires. He is an expression of her longing, a kind of alter ego.

**Did Erling Jepsen have any input on the film adaptation?**

No. This time he didn't want to be closely connected to the film adaptation process because he was busy writing another book. I wrote it together with Maja Jul Larsen. We made some changes to make it work.

**What kind of changes?**

For instance, Helene's motivation to go to the theatre needed to be changed. In the book, she's a wannabe, a girl wanting to be famous. That wasn't interesting to us. We needed a deeper motivation, something more human that an audience could relate to. We didn't change her that much otherwise. The dog was there and what happens in the theatre, what her arrival creates in terms of catastrophes. But her personal journey is changed.

**This is the first main feature film role for Sara Hjort. What convinced you that she was right for the part?**

I had heard about her, but she was in New York when we did the casting. I cast other girls who were pretty good. But for instance, when the character has to play the dog, the other actresses were kind of scared and self-conscious. They didn't like to go on all 4 on the floor and give themselves away for the role. Summer came, we hadn't finished the casting. So we said let's give Sara a chance. When I saw her, I knew immediately she was Helene. I just said 'dog' and she threw herself to the ground, doing things hardly shameful to her, without any restraint. She was very prepared and wanted so much to give herself to the project.

**Painting was your first passion. Is that why you take a particular care in frames and colour scales?**

I'm not that aware of why I do something, it's just a natural need I have to express myself. When I go to the cinema, I want to look at great pictures, colours, to have a great visual experience. I hate when directors don't pay attention to that.

**I guess you didn't like the Dogma movement...**

I hated it! I was invited to do a second Dogma wave film, but I hated the rules. It wasn't inspiring for me to make ugly films.

**Tell us about your current projects in development in the US...**

The short version is that there is a lot of talking with US potential partners. They are quite serious but you never quite know where they are and what they are looking for. There is no concrete decision yet. I'm discussing the remake of *Terribly Happy* and other scripts to be remade in the same style.

**Peter Refn (former MD of Camera Film/Grand Teater in Copenhagen once told me: a good film is a well prepared surprise. *Terribly Happy* was exactly that. Does *Excuse Me* offer the same magic ingredients and do you think it could appeal to foreign audiences?**

What I wanted to achieve here is to make a clever comedy that makes people think, a comedy with some heart that could be a surprise. I think the film should appeal to Spanish, French audiences because there is a bit of Pedro Almodovar in it.

**Producer Thomas Gammeltoft**

**Why didn't you want to keep the same name for the film as for the book ('Birollen, meaning 'Supporting actress)?)**

We were a little scared that the title 'Supporting Actress' would be too much theatrical. Secondly, we wanted to show that the film is different from the book. *Excuse me* also works in this context because it's about a girl who interrupts something that goes on.

**Was *Excuse Me* an 'easy' film to make on the back of *Terribly Happy's* local and international success?**

It was easy to get the DFI involved, but not that easy to have a broadcaster involved. What they experienced was that the script was tough. It wasn't quite finished when we came to them. We had a refusal from DR and TV2, then we polished the script, came back to DR and did a special pitch. They gave us a small sum of money, but it was enough for us. We wanted to make a cheaper film anyway to wrap it relatively fast as Henrik and I had several things going on in the US. The overall budget was €1.8m.

**How is the film positioned and who is the key audience?**

It's positioned like a quirky or edgy comedy with romantic element. The primary audience is from 22 up. We had quite some success during preview screenings with younger audiences who take it more like a comedy although accepting it has tougher issues. What they like is that it's about big issues said with a glimpse. Older audiences reacted in a different way. They take the subject seriously, but also enjoy the comedy element.

**How are you working with TrustNordisk on the film's international strategy?**

We'll present it as a closed market screening in Berlin. Then we hope to get it into Karlovy Vary in 2012. We're very keen to see how the international audience will react.

*Written by Annika Pham*