

Dagur Kári Speaks about his winning film *Virgin Mountain*

Recipient of the 2015 Nordic Council Film Prize for his drama *Virgin Mountain*, Iceland's Dagur Kári spoke to us about his winning film produced by Baltasar Kormákur and Agnes Johansen for RVK Studios.

How did you get the idea for *Virgin Mountain*?

Dagur Kári: It all started with the main actor Gunnar Jónsson that I saw for the first time 15-20 years ago when he was a side-kick at a popular comedy programme. I immediately fell in love with his presence. That stayed in the back of my mind, then three or four years ago, I was waiting in a plane and looking down at the airport luggage vehicles. They looked like toy cars from my perspective. The image of Gunnar and the tiny luggage vehicle somehow merged into the metaphor for the film because the character he plays – Fúsi – is stuck in his childhood, the way Gunnar in the first image of the film is stuck in his small luggage vehicle, waiting for the planes to arrive. Suddenly it all fell into place.

Although Fúsi is stuck in his childhood and still plays with miniature toys, he is nevertheless stronger mentally and wiser than most of the other characters...

DK: He is a creature of habit, and still lives with his mum, in a kind of bubble, and when he is forced out of his routine, he realises that he can deal with lots of things.

The film is also about prejudice. Because of Fúsi's awkward looks and behaviour, he is bullied by his co-workers and people think that he is a simple man, even a paedophile. But he has a pure heart, he doesn't judge people, and he eventually earns their respect.

You write, direct and also compose the score for your films. Which part do you prefer?

DK: I was trained as a musician before making films and one of the reasons why I decided to become a filmmaker is that it combines everything I love: music, writing, visuals. The music is one of the phases of filmmaking that I enjoy the most, like dessert after a big meal!

Gunnar Jónsson – who picked up a Best Actor award at New York's Tribeca Film Festival 2015 – is not a trained actor but he carries his part magnificently. How was your collaboration with him?

DK: He is a natural and one of the best actors I've ever worked with. It was very interesting to collaborate with him because we hardly discussed the part before shooting. While I was writing the script, he was working as a cook for a big cargo ship so he was away three months at a time. I emailed him the finished script a long time before shooting, and he didn't ask one question about the character or the story. I didn't know if he was prepared for a two month shoot where he would be in almost every frame, so I was a bit nervous.

Then shooting time came and he was totally prepared. He had read the script so many times that he knew it by heart. It also felt like he had made 20 movies as a lead actor, because technically as well he was perfect. If he would take a sip of milk, he would do it the same way, every time. He had a natural understanding of the subtlety of acting, of behaving in front of a camera. He didn't ask either for praise or for my opinion after each take. It was a silent but liberating experience.

How was your experience of working with producers Baltasar Kormákur and Agnes Johansen?

DK: I had a great experience. They understood that the film needed time to develop and in the editing process. We needed to find the right balance.

What's your plan after *Virgin Mountain*? You are working at the Danish Film School as Head of the Directing programme, so how will you find time to make another movie...or perhaps a TV series?

DK : I love working at the Danish Film School, where I studied in the late 1990s. It is a very stimulating experience to go back on the other side of the desk and I almost feel I have learnt more one year as a teacher than four years as a student. However my duties involve a lot of responsibility, so there is little time for anything else. But I have many ideas for projects both in Iceland and in Denmark and for film and television. I've always been fascinated by the sitcom format and in a way my films use the same principles as they are about characters in situations.

Written by Annika Pham