

Even Mice Belong in Heaven





1960 - 2020
60 ANNÉCY
FESTIVAL

Even Mice Belong in Heaven

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DIRECTED BY DENISA GRIMMOVÁ AND JAN BUBENÍČEK
BASED UPON THE BOOK BY IVA PROCHÁZKOVÁ

A Fresh Films (Czech Republic) and Les Films du Cygne (France) production
and co-produced by Animoon (Poland) and CinemArt SK (Slovakia)

France - Czech Republic - Poland - Slovakia / 2021 / 1h26 / visa N°150.006



27th October 2021



Synopsis

Following an unfortunate accident, a feisty little mouse and a shy young fox cub unwittingly find themselves in animal heaven. In this strange environment, they will have to put aside their natural instincts and work together to succeed on their journey through this new world. The little mouse and the young fox share many adventures and unexpected surprises and ultimately become the best of friends.

Our film tells the story of a little mouse who is angry with the world for making her grow up in the shadow of her father. She sets out to prove to everyone that she's not afraid of anything. One day, she goes a little too far and finds herself in a parallel universe; she has landed up in animal heaven. There she meets a young fox with whom she could never really be friends in life, and yet, together they embark upon a great adventure and, on that journey, build a true, lasting friendship.

Denisa Grimmová
director

As members of two very different animal species, Whizzy and Whitebelly were destined to be arch enemies. But when they meet in the afterlife, they have little choice but to embark upon a journey together through the fantastical landscapes of animal heaven.

Jan Bubeníček
director

In 2010, Denisa Grimmová, a friend from film school, came to me with the idea of adapting Iva Prochazkova's children's book *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* into a feature-length animated film. The story lent itself perfectly to a twenty-minute short film. But it would need work to make it into a feature-length film. In the end it took us six years to complete. We wrote several versions of the script with two different writers, first Alice Nellis and then Richard Malatinský, until the story became the one that we made into a film and that people will be able to see in cinemas.

Vladimír Lhoták
producer

I jumped at the chance to work on this project the minute Vladimír first came to me with the idea. When I saw the first drawings, I could imagine the sets, the animals, the energy and the emotions that could come out of this story and how it would touch people and appeal especially to a young audience.

Alexandre Charlet
producer

Characters



VOICE-OFF :
Whizzy, is just an ordinary little mouse and yet...



Miro:
Miro is a really nice mole. With a lisp. He's a good friend - sincere, admiring and secretly in love with Whizzy. He has a permanent cold and never stops sniffing!



Whitbelly:
Whitbelly is a young fox who is quite shy and withdrawn. He was bullied when he was younger and lacks self-confidence. He also has a bit of a stammer



Big Fangs:
he is a big bad fox, and he's also Whitbelly's cruel and cynical uncle. The whole forest is afraid of him.



And then there are the wise men, who are the guardians and mentors in animal heaven:

The Goat:

at the gateway to animal heaven, this wily old lady goat writes everything down in her cabbage leaf notebook and knows everything there is to know about everyone.

The Maybugs:

the animal heaven police, military men who maintain law and order by handing out warnings and escorting away those who don't respect the rules or who are violent or show anger.



The Raccoon:
Raccoon is an eccentric and endearing fashion designer.

Crocodile:

he is one of the wise elders and is as serious as he is profound. And he's in charge of the bathing area.

The Frog:

a horrible stepmother character, who's often grumpy and constantly complaining.



The Crayfish:

science personified, he explains the principles of eternity.

The Parrot:

a bit of a comedian. A real chatterbox. A ringmaster, who's can sometimes be a little too much!

The Raven:

the raven is the parrot's alter-ego, and pops up when a more serious and more profound tone is required.



The Crab:

a real entertainer, who is warm, fun and full of beans! He's very talkative, and even a bit whacky, but mainly he's very easy going.

The Whale:

the whale is a bit like the captain of this great ship who steers the course of our characters through animal heaven and ultimately guides them on their journey back to Earth. He has a meditative inner narrative voice.



Crocodile : *If you don't have a bath, you'll stay small, dirty and scared.*

Whizzy : *Oh, goodness! Heaven isn't much fun!*

Seven Different Settings

The School

Whizzy's classmates call her a scaredy-cat. So, she decides to prove to everyone that she's as brave as her father who is considered a hero by everyone.

The Paradise Baths

this is a fascinating place where animals can not only wash and get clean but can rid themselves of their natural instincts by shedding their claws or their fangs that were necessary for survival on Earth. Here, at the Paradise Baths, no matter what size, all species become equal.

The Mirror of Eternity

this is a bottomless pond where the wise crayfish explains to Whizzy and Whitebelly that they cannot return to the past, that it is behind them, and that they must both carry on moving forward on their journey.

The Paradise Amusement Park

this is where the animals come to have fun, where they can forget their troubles and mentally process and assimilate the bad memories and experiences from their past lives on Earth.

The Forest of Forests

the Forest of Forests is dark and a bit scary. It represents a final test to make sure that the animals accept their weaknesses and are ready to start a new life.

The Entrails of a Giant Whale

inside the whale's belly is a beautiful Italian-style theatre where films of each of the character's past lives are shown before they return to **Earth**.





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A Kingdom Of Puppets

« Stop-motion » animation: a Czech tradition

Centuries before puppet animation was first seen in Western cinemas, in the Czech Republic puppetry had been a long-standing tradition performed in small local theatres. Puppet shows reached their peak of popularity during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and, during that time, famous puppeteers like Josef Skupa took advantage of the lack of interest in puppet theatre from political censors who assumed that puppet shows were only children's entertainment. However, the censors overlooked the fact that large adult audiences accompanied children to performances of Czech folklore legends, and the puppet theatre became a platform for the anti-establishment political and satirical themes of the moment, rather like the Guignol in France.

Then, during the Second World War, Czech puppets took their first foray in front of the camera. Hermína Týrlová, who also liked to bend the rules of strict censorship, adapted a very popular children's book into an ambitious short film. It was called *Ferda The Ant* and was the first Czech animation film to use wooden puppets. As a result of the success of this film, she and Karel Zeman became major filmmakers at Zlin Film Studios.

But the person most closely associated in the public mind with Czech puppet animation films is Jiří Trnka. He is the Walt Disney of puppet animation. At the end of the war, Trnka, who was already known before the Second World War for his puppet shows in the great tradition of Skupa, created a studio in the heart of Prague along with a group of friends, where he went on to make some twenty films, including 6 feature-length films until his death in 1969. As early as 1945, Trnka took the extraordinary pioneering initiative of founding a national film school alongside his studio to develop techniques of 2D animation and puppetry. Directors from across the globe came to study there or to seek inspiration, including the Japanese animator Kawamoto and the well-known Dutch animator Co Hoedeman.

Along with Břetislav Pojar, his greatest collaborator and successor, Trnka developed a very fluid and controlled animation technique to express emotions mainly through gesture. Although often inspired by classic children's tales, the films felt very modern in both form and content. The stories expressed the issues of the contemporary world but were sublimated by the poetry and fluidity of an animated film. Other great names followed, such as Lubomír Beneš and Vladimír Jiránek, creators of the famous animated series *Pat and Mat* (1976-2004), or Jiří Barta, who in 1985 directed *The Pied Piper*, or more recently, the very original *Toys in the Attic*, which mixes puppetry with other animated techniques and which now can be seen on the big screen in a remastered version.

Although the growth of a society based on a market economy slowed down Czech animated film production for about twenty years, the famous Prague film school, FAMU, has continued turning out new filmmakers. Today, there are more and more of them following in the footsteps of the great names such as Trnka, Pojar or Barta.

Among them are Jan Bubeníček and Denisa Grimmová, the directors of *Even Mice Belong in Heaven*. Their stop-motion film, in the tradition of their masters, is a dream-like tale full of animals, rich in humour and poetry, where «real life» topics such as death, overcoming one's fears and prejudices, and friendship are explored.

Creating A Fantasy World

By the directors Denisa Grimmová and Jan Bubeníček

This story, which has been adapted from Iva Procházková's book *Even Mice Belong in Heaven*, appealed to us for two main reasons. Firstly, because of its accuracy and sensitivity, and secondly because it addresses the questions asked by our own children growing up. When our first child was three years old, they asked, «Mummy, are you going to die one day?». It wasn't an easy one to answer, knowing that whatever we replied would fix in their minds, perhaps for life. It was a big responsibility. We couldn't say, although it's what we believe, that one day life simply comes to an end and after that there's nothing more. This type of answer can lead to a fear of death, a fear of nothingness, a feeling of pointlessness and not taking responsibility for one's own life. On the other hand, we didn't want to encourage belief in God or heaven.

Fairy tales have always been a simple way to communicate information about the harsh realities of life to children in a light-hearted way and easy to grasp format. The tales give them the freedom to explore ideas on many different subjects in an imaginative and non-threatening way.

The taboo and fear surrounding death is very common in Western countries and is passed on from generation to generation. We don't speak freely about death and consider it to be a sign of human frailty, whereas, in fact, it is just a part of the cycle of life.

Iva Procházková's book speaks to children in a very natural, gentle and straightforward way. It speaks of a parallel world that is only the beginning - or rather a stage - before starting a new life on earth. Grief is balanced by hope and joy, philosophical questions about Being and Nothingness disappear and are replaced by a quest for courage to overcome one's fears.

It is a tale that deals with death as a step to enter a parallel world that is an animal heaven, and it is also a story of love and friendship, which in itself is one of the great and most beautiful challenges in life. Creating a fantasy world full of mystery, dream-like images, animals and funny creatures is the perfect material for an animated film for a young audience. With its noble guardians of paradise, this world stimulates the young imagination, while the serious subjects surrounding pain and mourning, and the joy of a budding friendship is a good starting point for creating a plot full of twists and turns, epic scenes and emotional highs and lows.

In this film, the story is told entirely from the point of view of our unlikely duo: Whizzy, a young mouse and Whitebelly, a fox cub. On earth, these species are natural enemies. In animal heaven, they come together and form a strong bond of friendship. On this adventure, our protagonists both learn some important life lessons: you have to overcome your prejudices, listen and learn to live alongside others.

We believe that this film, with its light, fun and deliberately naive approach will help children and parents find the answers to sometimes

difficult questions together. Or, that it will at least allow these difficult subjects to be brought into the open and start a conversation.

We have grown up with the works of the Czech animation masters, and over the years we have even had the honour of having some of them as our teachers at the Prague Film School, FAMU. We want to be part of this great tradition of Czech animation, a tradition that has opened itself up to the world. With a strong artistic ambition, *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* is part of the revival of Czech animation. And we are confident that the team of European talents we have assembled for this project have created an original and unique piece of work.



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The Directors

Denisa Grimmová

Director & Art Director

Denisa is an animator specialising in 2D and stop-motion. She has directed several successful short films and has worked as a set designer, including on the stop-motion feature-length film ***Le Jardinier qui Voulait Être Roi***, for which she was nominated for a Czech Lion award.

FILMOGRAPHIE :

2011 – ***Le Jardinier qui Voulait Être Roi*** (Art Directo

DIRECTOR:

2010 – ***Czech Pexeso*** (mixed media)

2006 – ***On a Park Bench*** (Puppets)

2003 – ***Stork Movie*** (2D)

2002 – ***The Hiccup*** (2D)

What I like about this story is that it deals with problems that all children face, such as fear. All children experience fear at a different level or intensity, but they all have to deal with it. Just as death and friendship are topics that come up at a very early age. Another very important theme is prejudice. Whizzy always believed that foxes were bad and that she could never be friends with one. But in this parallel heavenly world, where animals can

no longer eat each other, and where they are freed of their natural instincts, Whizzy discovers that she has a lot in common with the fox cub, they both like the same things and have similar opinions. It is a film that says that sometimes it is important to shake up the established order, whether natural or not.



Jan Bubeníček

Director & Technical Designer

Jan studied under Břetislav Pojar at the FAMU Film School in Prague. He also participated in workshops at the Skintoku Festival, the Animation Kobe festival, the Kyoto University of Art and Design and the Yamagata Film School as a coach. His film ***The Three Fuos*** was selected for Kodak's New European Talents at the Cannes Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY AS A DIRECTOR:

2016 – ***Murderous Tales*** (feature-length animated film)

2002 – ***The Pirate*** (19'21, Stop motion)

Best animation IFF Karlovy Vary,

Best Director Dahlonga IFF

2000 – ***The Three Fuos*** (8'53) – Kodak selection Cannes

1998 – ***Lewis' Watch*** (8'58) – Special Mention Anifest

This is also a film about love and about self-fulfilment. Our little mouse, Whizzy, strives to find the lost love that of her father who died prematurely at the hands of a nasty fox, and she must banish her fears. In

this adventure, she crosses paths with another fragile being, Whitebelly, a young fox cub also in search of love, who will do everything to win her friendship and her trust.





Treasure Hunt

Interview with the children's author, Iva Procházková (winner of the Czech Magnesia Litera Prize)

How did the idea for this story come about?

Although much has been written about the human soul, even though its existence has never been proven, few people have written about the souls of animals in literature. I have always considered this an injustice ever since I was a little girl. When our hamster died and we buried it, my little sister was really sad, so I made up a story about our hamster's soul going to animal heaven and all the things he would find there. It helped her feel better, and so I decided that when I grew up, I would write a book about our hamster and his adventures in heaven. In the end, the hamster became a mouse.

Why do you want to tell this story?

Almost all children like to have fun and almost all children wonder what death means, what happens after you die. I decided to bring the two together and write a fun book about death, but also about friendship, and particularly an impossible friendship. We can only guess at what happens after death, so I wasn't worried about complaints from literary critics that I was too detached from reality, or that I had written an unrealistic scenario or an implausible ending. Writing this book was one of the best experiences I ever had as an author. It was like going on an adventure, on a treasure hunt.

The story of a mouse and a fox is a literary classic, how is this story any different?

It's not a classic, it's my own story. Even in my other books, I stick to what interests me, what I want to say, no matter if the path I take has been seen and seen again or if it respects or overturns such and such artistic and social constraints. The characters in my story are not symbols or surrogates for theories I want to expound. They are individuals. I want children to accept them as such and feel something for them. Evoking empathy, feeling emotion, is always the most important thing for me.



Animation Techniques: A European Co-Production

The visual element of the film combines stop-motion animation techniques for the puppets in traditional settings, digital 3D animation for certain animals and insects that fly or swim, with special effects combining photogrammetry, matte-painting and digital video-mapping for the sequences in the Forest of Forests.

Puppetry techniques

Each puppet has an articulated steel frame, which enables the animators to manipulate them into the desired position or movement. Each metal frame was dressed with realistic fabrics and/or fur. Each head (or parts of the head) was also animated with specific facial expressions and jaw movements so the dialogue is synchronised with the mouth movements. We filmed over one hundred puppets in more than 80 settings on 8 simultaneous sets over a period of 14 months.

3D animation - Setting up the production pipeline and 3D tools

While all of this considerable puppetry work was going on, we set up digital animation tools for the crowd scenes, for the action sequence in the tunnel, and for the characters that needed to be able to fly or swim, such as the maybugs and the whale, as well as butterflies, bats, fireflies, fish, etc..

INTHEBOX studio, who were in charge of the 3D animation and digital special effects in France, set up a production pipeline to monitor the production of all of the digital elements and to ensure the transfer of data between the different sites. The entire stop-motion part was produced and shot in Prague in the Barrandov studios. Whereas the animation work was divided between three studios in France: INTHEBOX studio in Annecy, Amopix studio in Strasbourg, and Le Studio Animation in Marseilles in the south of France.

The soundtrack was produced in New York for the original English voices, and also in Prague, Paris and Strasbourg, by the 3Beep, Soundsquare, TitraFilm and Innervision studios.

By using digital tools, the challenge was to preserve the original universes created by Jan and Denisa and the traditional aspect of stop-motion animation alongside a production pipeline that would allow the artists to express their creativity without having to worry about the technical side of things, despite the complexity of the large number of tasks involved in the production (3D tracking, restore, layout, 3D animation, special effects, integration and compositing).



This film is a real European co-production. At times, the film was being made in eight different locations in Europe. Filming lasted for just over 14 months. We built around 80 sets and created over 100 puppets. We filmed on several different sets simultaneously, with 8 animators, which makes it, in terms of organisation and budget, the biggest stop-motion production ever made in the Czech Republic.

Vladimír Lhoták

This venture was a producer's venture. We were faced with two screenwriters who wanted to make their first film, an ambitious film with a huge number of sets and characters. They needed producers who believed in their vision and gave them the means to make it happen. It wasn't easy, it took some time to develop. Vladimir and I did a lot of work to make this project viable in the eyes of the professionals.

We achieved this thanks to the support of all our co-production partners, whether in Annecy, Bordeaux, Amsterdam, Malmö, Montreal or Cannes.

Alexandre Charlet





A Cinematic Adventure

PRODUCERS' NOTE

The idea for *Even Mice Belong in Heaven* was first presented to us at the Annecy International Film Festival Market in 2014. It immediately stood out for its original storyline and ambition in attempt to appeal to a young audience. In addition to the richly textured story, which is also a profoundly universal one, we were drawn to the first series of images that illustrated the presentation.

The story is based on a children's novel that has received numerous literary awards. Apart from the fact that it has also been translated into Chinese, the book has been used in several psychological studies on childhood because of its ability to address sensitive subjects. The book offers a possible answer to what happens after death.

This film is therefore a way into a conversation with children about death and grief from an early age. But this is not the dominant theme, it is simply a springboard for exploring issues surrounding friendship, tolerance, difference, helping one another and building self-confidence. It is also a quest for love and courage to help heal old wounds.

Even Mice Belong in Heaven is an animated film principally aimed at children but its themes, which work on different levels of understanding, will have far wider audience reach.

Thanks to French and Czech expertise in stop-motion techniques, we have a truly fantastic animation film. With nearly 80 original sets and an impressive gallery of one hundred characters, Denisa and Jan have succeeded in bringing a light and humorous touch to their animation together with a unique and modern visual design.

The film benefited from a reasonable budget of €3.5 million, while maintaining a high level of artistic ambition. This was possible firstly, because the cost of filming in the Czech Republic was relatively low, especially since the artists and technicians are banking on this film reviving the stop-motion industry in their country. And secondly, because Jan Bubeníček, who has in-depth knowledge of all the different animation and post-production techniques, strived hard to find the most suitable solutions from both a financial and a technical point of view (live projections on the set, photogrammetry, etc.). Finally, each studio played their part and contributed hugely to the high production values, as did each technician and each artist who took great pride in participating and committing themselves to the artistic ambition of the writers.

Even Mice Belong in Heaven is an ambitious film and it gives us real pleasure to see this project that we have been working on for so many years finally come to life. It is now ready to be seen by the general public and we hope that many people will come to a screening in France thanks to GEBEKA FILMS, as well as in many other countries thanks to the work of CHARADES INTERNATIONAL.

Alexandre Charlet et Vladimír Lhoták

The Producers



LES FILMS DU CYGNE

Based in both Paris and Annecy, Les Films du Cygne is a production company dedicated to the development and production of bold and ambitious films (comedy, drama, romance, adventure, fantasy) for a wide and international audience. We have produced more than 40 short films, two feature-length films, including *Even Mice Belong in Heaven*, the first animated film directed by Denisa Grimmová & Jan Bubeníček, and a documentary film. Our films have received more than 1500 selections, 350 awards, including a César for Best Short Film for *Les Bigorneaux* by Alice Vial and a plethora of TV broadcasts in France and abroad.

Several feature-length films are currently in development including *L'écrivain de la famille* by Jérôme Cornuau, adapted from the novel by Grégoire Delacourt, *Précoce* by Alice Vial in co-production with Atelier de Production, *Vers le bleu* by Sophie Garric and *Carmen* by José Herrera & Manuel Sirgo. We are also developing several projects for television including *Alpha* by Louis Aubert & Matthieu Bernard, and *Avoir l'Age* by Frédéric Recrosio and Raphaëlle Moussafir, in co-production with Point Prod (Switzerland).



FRESH FILMS

Fresh Films is a production company based in Prague run by Vladimír Lhoták, which focuses on working with young European talent.

In the past few years, Fresh Films has produced several short and feature-length films, including:

Marta – 2006 – a feature-length film by Marta Nováková Best First Film - The International Ingmar Bergman 2007, Cottbus International film festival 2006. Cinematography Award FamuFest 2006;

Critics' Award - IFF Pilsen 2006

CzechRAPublic – 2009 – Documentary by Pavel Abraham. Best Documentary Award - IFF Pilsen 2009.

Jenica & Perla - 2015 – Documentary by Rozálie Kohoutová, co-produced with France



Cast And Crew

Stop-motion animation, 3D and SFX



Directors **Denisa Grimmová & Jan Bubeníček**
Screenplay **Alice Nellis & Richard Malatinský**
Based on the book by **Iva Procházková**
Producers **Vladimír Lhoták (Fresh Films)**
Alexandre Charlet et Jonathan Hazan (Les Fims du Cygne)
Co-producers **Grzegorz Wactawek et Piotr Szczepanowicz (Animoon)**
Marek Jeníček et Tomáš Janísek (CinemArt SK)
Design & Art Direction **Denisa Grimmová, Jan Bubeníček & Jan Kurka**
Original music score **Krzysztof A. Janczak**
Set Designer **Jan Kurka**
Cinematographer **Radek Loukota**
Editor **Vladimír Barák**
3D Animation Directors **Thibault Delahaye (Le Studio animation)**
& Mathieu Marin (InTheBox)
Special Effects Supervisors **Madjid Chamekh et Mathieu Marin (InTheBox)**
Compositing Directors **Jan Kurka et Philippe Jarland**
With the voices of **Marie Nonnenmacher, Vincent de Bouard, Jérôme Pauwels,**
Antoine Tomé, Boris Relhinger, David Krüger, Marie Bouvier,
Benoît Allemame, Alexis Tomassian, Antonia de Rendinger,
Patricia Marmoras, Loïc Guinguand
Casting & Direction **Marie Bureau**
Voice Recording **Pierre Aretino et Régis Debiold**
Mixing **Régis Debiold**
Studios **Titra Films et Innervision**

A Fresh Films, Les Films du Cygne, Animoon & Cinemart production

In co production with Czech Television, Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma, DD Production, Barrandov Studio, EC1 Łódź,

With the support of Eurimages, Creative Europe MEDIA, Czech Film Fund, Régions Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Grand Est & Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur,
In partnership with the CNC, Cinéventure 3, Polish Film Institute & Slovak Audiovisual Fund.

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