

*Ulrich Breuning*

**WITH DAD TO THE FOUR O'CLOCK MATINEE**  
**a personal guide to the history of Danish children's films**

"I seize an idea for a grown-up  
and relate it to the little ones,  
remembering that Mother and Father  
are also listening and they  
need food for thought as well."  
(Hans Christian Andersen)

**The '40s: The beginnings**

I have always loved stories, and I am mad about film stories for children that, with intelligence and their hearts in the right place, tell children the most splendid of adventures and the most naked of truths.  
In the right tone and with the right choice of perspective.

Ever since I sneaked in as a kid to watch films at the cinema in my home town of Vordingborg, not a very difficult thing to do, I have loved adventures and fairy tales on celluloid - and it was my destiny as a grown man to pass this pleasure on. No more and no less. But there is also more than a personal motive in my commitment to films for children, because of course good stories are a children's right, if one is of the opinion that Denmark ought to be a society that provides quality entertainment for children.

Actually, today we can justifiably assert that in Denmark we make lots of good films for children. We are renowned world-wide for doing so. We have a little niche all of our own. We have a policy for culture and film legislation with positive discrimination for children that is the envy of many others.

We also have a good, long tradition to build upon, even though the history of Danish children's films did not really begin until after the Second World War.

Of course that does not mean there was no children's audience for the popular silent movies and the popular comedies of the past. Children have always loved the stories told in moving images and the temptations of the cinema with the lights down. The art form of the 20th Century became the people's preferred story teller with true rapidity; and that goes for people big and - specially - small.

But it was in the nineteen forties that the term children's film came into use and people tried to define a new genre, though we have never quite managed to solve the deepest mystery of the children's film, nor its innermost secret:

1. Are children's films films children like watching?
2. Are children's films films adults like to watch, too?
3. Are children's films films adults would like children to like watching?

Pedagogical engulfment was an obvious peril right from the start, and indeed, many people think that children's films are precisely the genre which, at its best, united pedagogics and the art of the cinema.

I myself subscribe more to the ideas and methods of Hans Christian Andersen, and there is an almost symbolic value in the fact that our great poet's fairy tale *The Tinderbox* was filmed in 1946 by veteran director Svend Methling, and was thus the first long Danish animated picture. Perhaps the first children's film, too, although one can of course claim that it was not conceived as a children's film as such, but as a cartoon for the whole family.

On the other hand, most people would agree that the honour of being the very first real children's film belongs to *De Pokkers Unger* (*Those Damned Kids*), from 1947. Astrid and Bjarne Henning-Jensen, who had made their Martin Andersen Nex film *Ditte Menneskebarn* (*Ditte, Child of Man*) the previous year, set quite exceptional standards for children's films.

Abroad, especially in England, where the Children's Film Foundation was founded in 1948, the *term* "children's film" was soon diluted into a synonym for cheap irrelevancies that must not be about anything at all, but merely entertain smoothly and harmlessly for a couple of hours. Maundering time-wasting without rhyme or reason. Actually, people argued more about what children's films mustn't deal with than which stories could be told, stories that needed telling and which could provide food for thought.

*Children's films* were preferably to be edifying, pedagogically house-trained and quite devoid of any intelligent dialogue with the audience. *Children's films* were there to educate and instruct. They must not contain war and violence, sex was inconceivable, the grown-ups in the films did not touch *alcohol*, *marriage* was sacred and sacrosanct, the *church* and the *royal family* must be respected, and *those in authority* were always good and just. If strict at times. Did a firm hand ever do anyone any harm?

But when children's films are forced to suffer from fear of contact with the facts of life, and respect for the immutability of everything, what film stories are left that may be told?

The way was thus paved for the two main types of the now traditional, ponderous, unimaginative children's films that still beset the cinema like a nightmare:

1. The children's thriller, where children act like little adults, catch dull-witted, actually perfectly harmless criminals and have a super time in an utterly anonymous community devoid of any differences or conflicts.
2. Animal films where children cast their affections on hordes of mice, rats, moles, beautiful horses, birds with broken wings, lame deer and bunny rabbits, dogs and cats.

But *Those Damned Kids* was not toothless idyll.

It is set among the ragamuffins of the cobbled streets and the dustbins of the back yards, and at the time it had great expressive power with a

realistic setting and genuine social indignation. No bowing your head and behaving nicely here, and even if the ravages of time have been a touch remorseless in their erosion, *Those Damned Kids* remains a handsome classic to this day.

Astrid and Bjarne Henning-Jensen have justifiably been called the parents of the children's film, and with the cartoon fairy tale *The Tinderbox* and the social realistic *Those Damned Kids* the history of Danish children's films commences, with imagination and colour, willpower and meaning. A tradition, a genre, cinema for children.

In 1949 Astrid Henning-Jensen made *Palle, Alone in the World*<sup>\*</sup>, a short film based on Jens Sigsgaard's beloved book illustrated by Arne Ungermann, and this film achieved international fame; it is reckoned by many to be the epitome of the (almost) perfect children's film: charm, wit and elegance, with a cosy dose of mini-philosophical existentialism at child level. Danish children's films indeed received a splendid start and sound traditions.

### **The '50s: Father of Four**

On 2nd November 1953 came the premier of *Father of Four*, and the patter for a success was revealed. Take a popular series of comics by Engholm and Hast, get a popular cast to donate a kind of flesh and blood to the thin cartoon lines, fabricate oozing cosiness from yesteryear and make sure that everyone, infants, older children, teenagers, grown-ups and the elderly, have someone to identify with.

But the overwhelming enthusiasm that launched a series of no fewer than nine features (with a new release a year in the period from 1953 to 1961, and an absolutely dreadful afterthought in 1971) did not conceal the fact that such loveable family nostalgia trips bombed Danish children's films back to the Stone Age. *Father of Four* permeated everywhere, and prevented any progress. For many years Danish producers continued to

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<sup>\*</sup>Unofficial translation of the Danish title

look for new material to squeeze into the same mould, and the '50s have not much more to offer than an insultingly hopeless children's thriller, *Jan Goes to the Movies*\*, based on the popular Jan books by Knud Meister and Carlo Andersen. Astrid and Bjarne Henning-Jensen were the only ones to keep the flag flying, with a well-meaning filmatization of *Paw*, a famous children's book by Torry Gredsted, which is of interest today for its depiction of the shattering of the Danish idyll when it encounters strangers, *racism*, even if the term was unknown in 1959.

Many ideological critics have tried to explain why the *Father of Four* films enjoyed such popularity and indeed, still do. Escapism at full blast is the frequent and dullest explanation, but nobody can spike the film unambiguously. Many films are escapist, and many films are made according to the same pattern as the series, but none has succeeded like *Father of Four* in striking that quintessential Danishness and for better or for worse, become part of our cultural heritage. But the children's film *cause* ground to a halt.

### **The '60's: Stagnation, the odd experiment, and *Cirkeline* (*Circleen*)**

Two embraces of utterly predictable, bumbling filmatizations of well-known children's books at the beginning and end of the decade respectively, *Flemming and Quick*\* and *Flemming Goes to Boarding School*\* (based on pedagogue Gunnar Jørgensen's children's detective stories), and *The Famous Five and the Spies*\* and *The Famous Five in Trouble*\* (based on Enid Blyton's children's detective stories) nothing new, let alone anything exciting or creative, was made for children and their adult friends. The animated picture experiments *The Swineherd*\* and *The Princess and the Pea*\* by Poul Ilsøe (again at the expense of Hans Christian Andersen) along with *Thomas is an Outlaw*\*, a happiness trip typical of its day, stuck to the noncommittal and playful, perhaps of sociological interest but never the stuff of which art is made.

The '60s was the period in which television invaded the Danish family, and where American TV series flowed through the nation's living rooms.

But it was also the period in which the Cirkeline cartoons became known and loved throughout the land.

Jannik Hastrup's wonderful cartoon series of twelve films (1968-70) was/is thoroughly on the children's side, full of imagination, and took up the serious issues of the day. They did the latter so well that there were censorship problems with number 7 in the series: *Cirkeline on Holiday*, where an evil cat in Mallorca was christened Franco! But one couldn't go round upsetting foreign heads of state like that, so the cat ended up by being called Mogens - the name of the then (and current) head of the children and youth department at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation ... In number 12, *Escape from America*, things spun right out of control. Cirkeline and her mouse friends go to Nixon's USA and side with Black and Red Power, poking fun at the president, whose "x" is written as a swastika. Number 12 was not shown on TV and is almost forgotten today, as the episode does not figure in the SFC (National Film Board of Denmark) distribution list either, where the little Cirkeline films are otherwise celebrating their 25th birthday. Still much in demand.

The Cirkeline series was also pioneering in its "primitive" animation style which almost seemed like an ideological counter to the virtuoso perfectionism of the Disney industry.

But it was a dull decade. One good cartoon series is not enough. Danish children's films practically didn't exist, and opinion-makers, movers and shakers argued energetically as to whether it could be right that via film and TV Danish children knew more about the American police than about living conditions in a modern tower block.

### **The '70s: A miracle, a couple of initiatives, and death bells**

Amidst the misery came the film that saved our lives.

In 1970 Jannik Hastrup and Flemming Quist Møller made *Benny's Bathtub*, a wonderful trick film that was a born classic. A boy lives in a grey tower block but imagination and colour cannot be wiped out just like that, and in a pyrotechnic display of ideas and captivating musicality,

*Benny's Bathtub* leapt into immortality. Although technically it was not tip-top, and although its tiny budget is revealed today in brush stroke and animation, the film has preserved its vitality for two decades and more.

1970 was also the year Lise Roos entered the debate on Danish children's films with *Hi, Stine*, which introduced down-to-earth kitchen sink realism to the genre at a gentle pace and in a pedagogically irreproachable language of form. Quite in keeping with the spirit of the times, she held the camera at child height on the little, perfectly everyday chores. The film was the first of a trilogy about a little girl called Stine, and today that trilogy stands out as documentation of an entire decade of reflection on policy on children and cinema.

It was also the decade in which Nils Malmros aroused attention with *Lars Ole 5C* (1973), about precisely discerned portrayals of schoolchildren and their fates in Denmark's second city, Århus. But otherwise all we got was date-marked irrelevancies like the family happiness yuckeroo *The Family with 100 Children* (1972), the total flop *Prince Piwi* (1974), and the well-intentioned screw-up *Skipper & Co* (1974).

The teenage film concept was introduced in 1975 by the controversial *Leave Us Alone*, which introduced with stark realism bad language, sex and violence - and was banned for the under-twelves.

But through the '70s the output of children's films practically dwindled to zero. Jannik Hastrup continued to make superb short films for older children, but they don't take up enough room in a landscape that ought to have been blooming with film stories for children, though that octopus of children's films, producer and director Svend Johansen, did make a charming five part children's series in 1978: *The Lake of Perches*, about the ecology of a Danish lake.

The new Film Act of 1972, which founded the Danish Film Institute and introduced the consultants' scheme, does not mention children's films at all, apart from a brief remark that good children's films may be imported from the rest of the world.

Still from: *Little Virgil and Orla Frogsnapper* (1980)

But debate continued, and in 1975 the Film Institute set up a special children's film committee which functioned until 1977, and in 1976 the part-time position of children's film consultant was created on a trial basis. There was lots of discussion, but things looked bleak.

### **The '80s: Breakthrough**

1979 was United Nations Children's Year, and this fact meant that finance could be raised for the first proper children's film for years.

In 1980 came the premiere of *Little Virgil and Orla Frogsnapper*, based on books by Ole Lund Kirkegaard, and with this film Gert Fredholm created a landmark in the history of Danish children's films. It was made on the same budget as a normal Danish feature, and it took



Still from: *Rubber Tarzan* (1981)

children - those on screen and those in the auditorium - seriously.

The film formed a school, and author Ole Lund Kirkegaard's name became a mark of quality for Danish children's films; just a year later Søren Kragh-Jacobsen's masterpiece *Rubber Tarzan* appeared, in my opinion one of the very best - if not *the* very best - children's film ever made. Realism, adventure and poetry blended into a life-confirming message that all of us little people are good at *something* or other. All we have to do is find out what! *Rubber Tarzan* was the first film to receive UNICEF's newly established Children's Film Prize, an honour that was later bestowed on Bille August's *The World of Buster* (1984) and Niels Gråbøl's *The Hideaway* (1991).

Ole Lund Kirkegaard filmatisations continued with *Otto is a Rhino* (1983) and *Hodja from Pjort* (1985).

In 1982 the Film Act was revised, and now emphasised that the Danish cinema was also to be cinema for children. The act states that there must be a full-time children's film consultant who works for the Danish Film Institute on features and for the SFC (National Film Board) on shorts and documentaries - and that of all state subsidies for the production and import of films, 25% must go to films for children and youth. This was retained in the 1989 revision to the act, which also gave both the Film Institute and the Film Board a full-time children's film consultant, and which also introduced subsidy arrangements for video art for children.

With two children's film consultants and with a quarter of the subsidy funds for Danish films, continuity in Danish children's films was guaranteed; it meant that Danish directors could cultivate this special genre, whose new characteristics were that work was carried out personally, profoundly and with full artistic control. Danish film directors passed on the stories they had loved, or told the stories they had never been told, but stories they had always wanted to experience.

Jannik Hastrup now had the chance to make long animated features for cinema distribution. In author Bent Haller he discovered a kindred spirit, and together they depicted at child level the terms and challenges life presents us with. No subject was foreign to them, but pollution of the globe became a common theme. 1984 brought *Samson and Sally*, 1987, *Subway to Paradise*, and 1990, *War of the Birds*. Søren Kragh Jacobsen continued with his masterpiece *Emma's Shadow* (1988) and *Shower of Gold* (1988), a children's thriller that turned the genre upside down and proved that not only can children play detectives and have a wonderful time, but that an apparently innocent game can turn deadly serious.

More talent was bursting forth. Åke Sandgren made *The Secret of John* (1985) and *Miracle in Valby* (1989); the large scale animated feature *Valhalla* based on Peter Madsen's cartoon album about the Norse gods saw the light of day in 1986; short film director Svend Johansen made his feature debut with *The Redtops* (1988); in 1989 everyone's favourite clown and artist Erik Clausen directed the popular hit *Me and Mama*

Still from: *Tarzan mama mia* (1989)

*Mia*, in which the greatest cliché of all - an eleven year old girl and her horse - becomes a wonderful, beautiful tale that gives all little people a lust for life in cold times, and Jesper W. Nielsen, showing major talent, made his debut in 1989 with *The Knight of Justice\**, a new interpretation of the Christmas Gospel for children to a script by Mikael Olsen.

The short film essay for children also flourished. Eddie Thomas Petersen made *The Sissy\** (1983), *Salamander Lake\** (1984) and *Nanna and Pernille\** (1987), all shorts, while in 1981 documentarist Hans-Henrik Jørgensen made the National Film Board's greatest hit, *The Story of Kim Skov\**, which depicted bullying in the Danish school system with great authenticity and artistic power, providing both an explanation and a possible solution.

Yes, indeed - the Film Act has really created conditions in which Danish talent can flourish!

Still from: *The Hideaway* (1991)

### **The '90s: A hive of activity**

The positive discrimination of films for children and youth stipulated in the Film Act continues to give directors young and old the opportunity to express themselves.

Birger Larsen stepped onto the field with *Dance of the Polar Bears* (1990) and *The Big Dipper* (1992), both to scripts by Swedish author Ulf Stark, and Lasse Spang Olsen filmed his father, artist and author Ib Spang Olsen's, childhood memoirs *Silent Echoes\** (1991) and his sparkling, buccaneering fairytale *How We Got Our Neighbours* (1993).

In 1992 Jørgen Vestergaard, the master of the puppet film, made his feature debut with *The Snooks*, based on the books by Benny Andersen. *The Snooks* is the

first Danish feature to mix puppet film and trick shots with "ordinary" footage, and the Romanian puppet film creator Mihail Badica, now resident in Denmark, has provided a fresh, personal adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Tinderbox* in 1993, practically bringing us full circle from that first Danish *Tinderbox* in 1946.

The circle from *Father of Four*, that indestructible success, is also complete. Veteran director Sven Methling has made two films, *The Crumbs* and *Crumb at a Gallop* (*The Crumbs 2*) according to the old recipe, with great success. Once again Danes are stamping their feet in delight on cinema floors and enjoying the good old fashioned popular comedy tradition.

Brita Wielopolska philosophises over the nature of death in *Jasper's Ghost*, and Linda Vendel set elves and little folk dancing in the *Troll Movie*, *Viktor and Viktoria*. Meanwhile, Jannik Hastrup is continuing his partnership with Bent Haller on *Song of the Sea* and *The Secret Weapon*.

Short appetisers are now being made for the cinema, novella films, documentaries and features. Video art for children, too. Five short "music videos" of classic Danish children's songs will be premiered in 1993.

Yes, I have always loved stories, and I am mad about film stories for children that, with intelligence and their hearts in the right place, tell children the most splendid of adventures and the most naked of truths.

In the right tone and with the right choice of perspective. We try and tell stories like that every single day in Denmark. It's called the cinema. And the subsidies available are called a policy for culture.