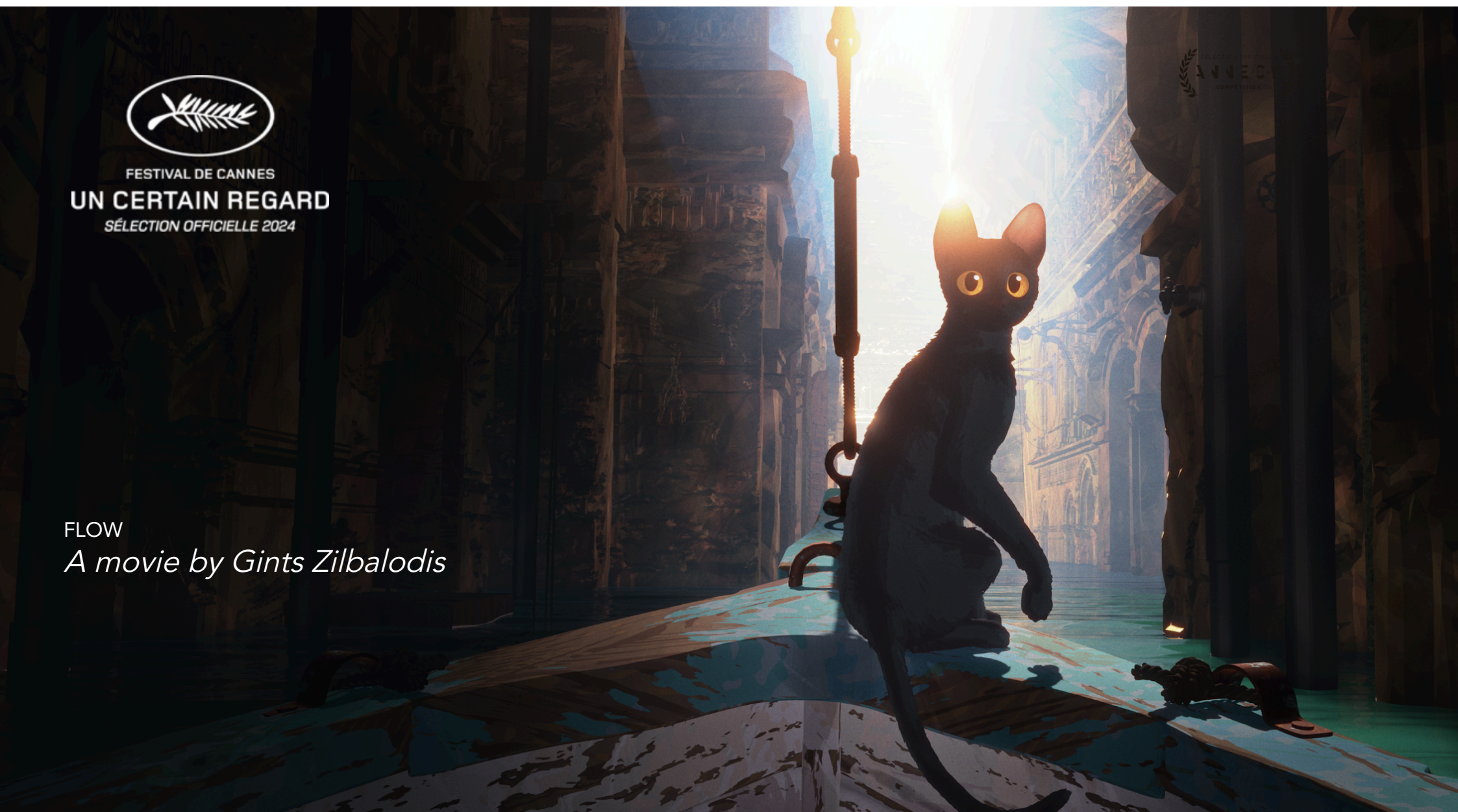FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2024

FLOW
A movie by Gints Zilbalodis

Animation - Latvia, France, Belgium – 84min – 2024

SYNOPSIS
The world seems to be coming to an end, teeming with the vestiges of a human presence. Cat is a solitary animal, but as his home is devastated by a great flood, he finds refuge on a boat populated by various species, and will have to team up with them despite their differences. In the lonesome boat sailing through mystical overflowed landscapes, they navigate the challenges and dangers of adapting to this new world.

THE DIRECTOR : GINTS ZILBALODIS

Gints Zilbalodis (1994) is a Latvian filmmaker and animator. His debut feature film *Away* which he made entirely by himself won the Best Feature Film Contrechamp Award in Annecy. It has been selected in more than 90 festivals and sold in 18 territories. His fascination for filmmaking began at an early age watching classic films and making shorts. Prior to *Away* he made 7 short films in various mediums including hand-drawn animation, 3D animation and live-action and often mixing their characteristic aesthetics. Flow is his second animated feature film, having its World premiere at the Un Certain Regard section in Cannes.

Filmography :

Away 2019
Oasis 2017
Inaudible 2017
Followers 2014
Priorities 2014
Clarity 2012
Aqua 2012
Rush 2010

DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

Nature, vast landscapes and animals are key elements of your feature films *Away* and *Flow*. What was your connexion with nature and animals when you were a kid and how is it now?

I have always enjoyed being in nature. I did not have animals when I was a kid, but later as a teenager I had cats and later dogs. All of those things inspired me. The reason why these kinds of settings are recurrent in my movies is that I spend a long time making them, so I prefer to set them in places I enjoy being in. I don't want to make dystopian films or realistic dramas so I don't need these kinds of environments. I can easily invent natural panoramas or combine aspects of actual landscapes I have picked. Then I use them in the storytelling, because they're not just a background, they are integral to the narrative.

What are your earliest memories of live action and animated movies which fascinated you during your childhood ?

I started being passionate about cinema at 13 or 14. My dad showed me a lot of classic movies, many Hitchcock and Kubrick films, which I found fascinating. And ever since I have been watching mostly live action movies, but a lot of animation too. There are so many directors I admire. Of course, in animation there's Miyazaki. I love how unpredictable his films are. I read that when he starts a movie, he doesn't even know how the story is going to end and finds it during the creative process, which is something I also do. My process is not exactly the same, but the story keeps developing after the script is finished. I start working on the first scene and then find the film while making it. In live action, I like Paul Thomas Anderson's earlier movies. Alfonso Cuaron is great too, I enjoy how he uses long takes, but all his shots, even the simpler and shorter ones, are very moving, very deliberate. Cuaron's films give the impression that they're very spontaneous and documentary-like. Everything is so carefully designed, even small things in the background. I like this balance in a movie, where it does not feel constructed, although it actually is. It creates this powerful sense of immersion.

To go back to your beginnings, how have you learned to create CG character models, sets and accessories and animate them ? And how did you start composing music as well ?

When I was a teenager, I was interested in making movies in general. But I found it very hard to make the films I wanted to make with no budget or no skills. I was shy at that age and probably lacked confidence, so I felt I would struggle a lot if I had to work with large teams and had to tell people what to do. I found out that I could do animated movies on my own, at my own pace, and could create anything I wanted. At first I started with 2D hand-drawn animation because that seemed the simplest of all the

techniques. I struggled to draw as well as I hoped I would. As I said, I was fascinated with the camera and the movement and these kinds of things are very difficult to draw in 2D. So I started learning CG animation. Some of the first short films I made with CGI were not very well done technically, so I tried to compensate that with the camera moves. The sets were very rough and the animated characters did not really have much weight. But I felt that with the camera moves, the pacing and the music, I could compensate these shortcomings.

Just for clarification, did you learn all that on your own or later on, in a film school ?

I started making my short films in our high school, which was a specialized high school with art programs. But I learned mostly on my own, while making these shorts. I think I probably have learned more from YouTube tutorials and from making the shorts rather than in school. But of course, this experience in high school was very valuable as well. Afterwards, I didn't attend university. I made a bunch of short films because one of the shorts I made in high school got in festivals and won a small prize. That gave me a very small budget to do another short film. I decided to keep learning by making more shorts rather than studying in an animation school...I felt I learned better going at my own pace rather than receiving assignments from teachers. So each one of the shorts I made helped me learn something different. And each time, the next one was a bit more proficient technically. I also learned a lot when I made my first feature film *Away*, which I am proud of. But *Away* is almost like my student film, my unofficial graduation if I may say so. I learned so much because of the film's scope, even if I made it around things that I knew would be easy to do, like animating the boy riding his bike with animation cycles. It was how I made it possible, just like when a live action filmmaker sets his story in his hometown and uses his friends and the props they have in his family's home. *Away* was set around things I knew how to animate, so the story is influenced by these limitations. Of course, I learned so many new things making *Flow*, and this process continues.

Can you talk about what animation represents for you on a personal level and as an artist and storyteller ?

I feel like it can go deeper in the subconscious than live action could. Animation is not as affected by cultural or language barriers as live action is. It can be much more universal and primal. But at the same time, I don't think it should be seen as something different. It's just another storytelling technique. I felt that *Flow*'s story could only be done in animation because of the animals and the camera moves I had in mind. I hope that it is not going to be perceived only as an animated film because it's very much influenced by live action movies. So *Flow* is like all my live action and animated movies influences mixed together.

I enjoyed *Flow* as an almost dreamlike visual experience, and also as a fable…Once again, you only use visual storytelling to embark the audience on the character's journey. So can you explain why you have chosen to never use dialogues in any of your films since your very first short, *Rush*, in 2010 ?

Dialogues do not come naturally to me. *Flow* was always meant to be told like that. Maybe one day I will try to use some dialogues if the story depends on it. But the film would still be led by visuals and dialogues be quite sparse. It's just that I feel more comfortable using visuals, it is more exciting. My favorite movies and scenes in films do not rely on dialogues. What I remember most are the images and the experience. Animation is especially well suited for this, because you design the images to much finer details than you can in live action. The visuals are more precise.

Do you feel that current animation movies are too talkative ?

Yes, but they probably have always been like that. The big ones, especially. There are many exciting and more independent films out there which are more visually driven. I don't know why most animated movies have so much dialogues. I enjoy the more quiet moments in films, enabling the pacing to go up and down, so that it is not always very fast and loud. I wish there would be more change of rhythms in the bigger animated movies. I guess they add these jokes and constant talking in order to entertain kids. But I believe kids can be completely interested in a film without dialogue if it is very exciting visually.

The themes of catastrophic events, survival and characters helping each other to stay alive are important in *Flow*. Why do you like to tell these types of stories ?

I guess mostly because I don't want to have a villain in a film or an antagonist. So this catastrophy is something that I can use to create the conflict and send the characters on their path. In *Flow*, the flood causes many devastations in the natural landscapes. Maybe it starts as the villain, but eventually the characters come to appreciate the beauty of the submerged vistas, as water is reclaiming some of the world. This type of natural disaster is also something that you don't need to explain : everybody knows them. Because I do not use any dialogue, I have to use ideas that are very direct and do not require any exposition or backstory. Then I can just focus on the characters themselves.

Cathartic events also bring the best and the worst in people. So this also helps the storytelling and setting conflicts…

Yes, and they are also very cinematic. You can use the elements and the colors and the movement and animate them very precisely. It's very art-directed, all of that. It's not random. One spends a lot of time on creating all those elements.

In *Away*, the menace is the dark giant spirit following the boy in order to eat him. And in your short film, *Aqua*, as in *Flow*, it is the flood which submerges and threatens everything. You explained what the flood helps you to tell in *Flow*, but can you talk a bit more about your inspirations for this previous menace ?

In *Away*, the dark spirit is not evil, in a sense. It's almost a primal force of nature which doesn't have any emotions or human motivations.
So it's very similar to the flood. I needed something to push the characters forward.

Although it was created with a blend of 2D hand-drawn animation and CGI, your short film *Aqua* is almost like a rehearsal for *Flow*…

Yes, *Aqua* is one of the first shorts I made. It is about a cat who is afraid of water. That was the main focus there. But in *Flow*, which is a feature film adaptation, I took that just as a starting point. In *Flow*, the cat is more afraid of others. Water is just the background. I felt like that *Aqua* was special somehow…I found something in it, and later struggled to create the same kind of energy in the next shorts, even if they were a bit more polished technically, more professional. I liked that early short film quite a lot. And after a while, when I had to come up with something to do next, I figured I could adapt *Aqua* as a feature film, if I could add themes related to society. Because in *Away*, the theme was about the character being alone on an island. Basically, just like me, making that film alone ! I wanted to continue using this kind of meta-narrative in my next film. So I designed *Flow* to tell a story, but also to reflect my experience of working with a team for the first time. The cat must collaborate with the other animals…In *Aqua*, there were many very quick shots, fast editing, and lots of close-ups. *Flow* is more contemplative, and on a bigger scale. I wanted to create a feeling of exploration and curiosity with the camera. That's one of the big stylistic differences.

Can *Flow* be described as a fable with animals representing us humans ? And also different aspects of humanity confronted to adversity ?

Yes, I think people will see themselves in the animals. But from the get-go, our plan was also to make the animals behave mostly as real animals do. Of course, there are also some artistic liberties : at one point, the cat is attempting to steer the boat, which I guess would not happen in reality ! But we tried to make the animals movements as plausible as possible. We wanted to avoid

showing animals behaving like humans or have them think the way humans do. The characters' goals are primal and very simple, which is necessary, since we do not use dialogues. But although the characters have simple goals, it does not mean they are less deep, less signifiant. In other words, it's simple, not simplistic. We want to use these basic ideas and have enough time to fully explore them. We do not rush over them.

At the beginning of *Flow*, we consider the cat as the clever hero that we all hope to be. But later on, we realize that the other animals also represent other facets of who we all are, including the less positive ones.

It's funny to hear you say that the cat is a hero. I guess he is, but quite frankly, we also wanted him to behave like an asshole. Cats are very selfish and rude sometimes. But I guess we forgive him because he's so cute ! And also because he is on a journey. In the beginning, he's very independent and does not want to be with others. As I did not want to base the film on this simple, didactic idea, I decided to counterbalance that with the dog character, which is on the opposite journey. In the beginning, the dog is always following someone. But by the end, the dog becomes more independent and makes his own decisions. All the animals' personalities are related to this idea of society versus the individual. We talked about the cat and the dog. But there's the lemur. We see him collecting a bunch of stuff in the film. Only then we realize that he does this because he thinks others will accept him because of his materialistic values rather than for himself. So the lemur is also connected to this idea of belonging. And the bird as well is desperate to belong, to be part of his flock again. The last one, the capybara, is a bit of an outsider because it does not really change in the story. I picked a capybara for the story because I saw images of capybaras getting along with all kinds of animals, peacefully sleeping with lions and crocodiles. And cats and dogs. It felt natural to have a character like that in this story.

Is the lemur's behavior also a satire of consumerism, of our desire to buy stuff impulsively, and sometimes very illogically ?

Yes, it is. I hope the audience will understand him, though. Maybe he's behaving a bit irrationally but I think we eventually see why he does this : in our film, that is what they all do in the lemur society...So it's hard for him to break away from that behavior.

Flow has a fascinating dream-like quality. We are somewhere between reality and fantasy, almost like in a dream which continues once you are awake, and you want to keep experiencing. Can you talk about these atmospheres of dreams and nightmares in your films?

In *Away*, it was very deliberate, especially in the scenes where the boy falls asleep and dreams. In *Flow* it was not deliberate, but I guess the pacing and the cinematic language can evoke this feeling, which is great. I love to have this sense of heightened reality in *Flow*.

Not everything is explained in the film. We don't really explain why the flood comes, what it means, or the signification of the statues that the characters discover. There are some hints here and there, why they might be there, but it's not really explained. I'm not interested in making a puzzle that the audience has to solve. *Flow* is not about finding out the meaning, it's about embracing the whole experience...I imagine some articles or online videos will probably present their explanation of *Flow*'s ending, but I'm not interested in giving these answers. *Flow* is more open-ended, so I hope you will remember it better and maybe keep thinking about it. But aside from what is not explained, there is a very definite story for the characters. The cat starts at one point and then ends in a different place in his life. It's just that I am not interested in explaining the logic of the world : I am more interested in the characters' journeys. We also have a dream sequence in *Flow*, but its purpose is more about exploring the character's thoughts and motivations. Everything is designed around the cat. All the environments and all the different characters that he interacts with are put in the film to tell his story. At least that's how everything started. And then the other characters started to live in their own way. They found their own stories in the process. The dream atmosphere emerges later. It is probably something that comes to me naturally.

The english title of *Flow* - just to pass on this information to the French readers of the press kit later on - refers to the flood, and to the visual storytelling constantly moving with the characters, the boat and the water currents. Can you talk a little bit about the title and its meaning ?

I guess the title reflects the road movie aspect of the film, since the action is set mostly in this boat moving forwards constantly. The road movie aspect is important, because we get to discover all these different environments, and because there are no dialogues. It was also important for me to have some kind of end of the road point that's very clear, like the goal for the characters. And I wanted to have this sense of urgency all the time, with the cat always trying to reach these towers to escape from his fears. This narrative is very much linked to his character. It's not just like some Hitchcockian "MacGuffin" : the cat does not have to get some device or something. It's directly linked to his fears. Because the cat is constantly climbing up things to avoid problems. He climbs up his house, up the mast of the boat. So he climbs up these giant towers to run away from problems and I think escaping problems is something very human, which many people do, and myself probably too. I often try to avoid unpleasant things. But eventually the cat decides to climb down, embrace the challenge and take some risks, even if it makes him feel a bit uncomfortable.

Flow is your first experience of collaborating with a big team of artists and technicians. Can you talk about how it helped you to evolve and grow as a storyteller and director?

I was 24 when I finished *Away*, and started *Flow* immediately afterwards.
It had a bigger budget and a bigger team. It took almost twice as much time : five and a half years, because everything is way more ambitious, bigger and complex. But yes indeed I learned so much. I just looked at some earlier sketches we did for *Flow* and what we achieved in the finished version is so much better, because of the team's input. We had really amazing people working on the film, and that was very exciting. At the beginning, it was intimidating to have this first experience of collaborating with highly skilled people, but it turns out that it was actually very easy to work with everyone, it was great. We were so lucky to get this talented team. I must also say that sometimes it was also difficult for me to work this way, because when I worked on my own and had an idea, I could figure it out how to achieve it. Now I have to explain things that I have not already figured out myself, so it is sometimes harder to convey how I want them to be. Before, I always discovered things in the process. But I am constantly adjusting, evolving, and I guess we figured it out. We used a lot of visual references and I made a bunch of sketches for the music as well. I started making the music for *Flow* myself. Then we brought another composer, Rihards Zaļupe. He's a professional musician and I'm not. This is only the second time I've done that. I had no prior experience when I did the music for *Away*. I don't play any instruments or anything. But my first sketch of the score was useful : I gave it to Rihards, and it explained musical ideas I would have been unable to depict, because it is very difficult to describe a score. I did that for most of the other things as well. I would make some basic CG models or basic images and then all the team could take those and make them way better. So the communication was done not just by words, but also by collaboration.

Can you explain what the Blender software helps you to do technically in the film ?

One big advantage of Blender is that it comes with this real-time rendering sofware called Eevee. I'm not sure if I'm up to date with all the softwares out there, but when I was researching, this was a big bonus for us because I like to experiment with the visuals and I like to make many versions. Blender and Eevee allowed me make many different variations, try different camera angles and render it out very quickly to see if it worked or not. I can be more spontaneous and intuitive this way, less rigid. And of course it's great that it's a free software because the film has a moderate budget, at least by France's standards. In Latvia it would be considered huge because it's a much smaller industry. But in any case, it always helps that we don't have to buy very expensive softwares for the team. And Blender is also great because we can customize it a lot. We built many custom tools just for *Flow*. We had some very talented technical artists creating very specific tools for this film, and we adjusted them however we wanted.

The animals are wonderfully animated in the film. Can you talk about your animation team led by Léo Silly-Pélissier?

Basically *Flow* is a co-production between three countries, Latvia, France and Belgium. The animation was done in France and Belgium except for a few tests we did in Latvia, but everything is made mostly in France. We had a very young team, which was really exciting. They were all very enthusiastic, very talented and eager to do the best possible work. They wanted to prove themselves, so there is a lot of passion in their work. The funny thing was that they were often watching cats videos because it was very important for them to do their research.
We wanted the characters to move very naturalistically, so they had cats videos, dogs videos and a vast library of other animals references. For the sounds effects as well, we did not use any voice artist imitating animals, everything you hear is real animals sounds.

Although you do not like to explain mysterious scenes, I would like to talk about one, if you do not mind. When the wounded bird climbs on top of the tower and disappears into the light in the starry sky, we feel that he's going into the great beyond, into the afterlife…

Yes. This scene was made to reflect the cat's journey, and what happens then is really a turning point for him. Previously, the cat was only trying to climb higher and higher to stay safe, away from the rising water. He hoped that he could keep living alone. When he follows the bird all the way to the top of the tower, they reach the stars. It's like the ultimate environment for being alone, out there in space, where there's nothing, no life or nothing that will cause you any problems. That's why he goes up so high, reaching space, and all the visual narration started from that idea. The bird is a later addition, actually. In an earlier version of the sequence, the cat climbed up there alone. Then I realized how emotionally impactful it would be to have the wounded bird there, and later added him. Initially, I wanted the cat to be really, really alone. It's about expressing his emotions at that point, being very conflicted.
The cat wants to be alone, but he realizes he does not want to disappear. It is a big turning point, and after that he decides to go back down.

What do you hope children and parents will get from the experience of watching *Flow* together ?

I am very curious to see the audience's reaction to the film. I think there is something for everyone, kids and adults as well. Parents will understand the deeper symbolism and I think kids will also get the subtext. It's not exclusive to adults. Some of our crew

showed clips of *Flow* to their small children, and they seemed fascinated by everything. But I am not really thinking in these terms. I am not trying to make a film for kids, I am trying to make a film I want to see, hoping that everyone will understand it and like it.

THE PRODUCTION COMPANIES

TAKE FIVE

Located in the heart of Brussels, Take Five is an independent production company founded by Gregory Zalcman and Alon Knoll. It stands out by seeking synergy between a strong narrative and a unique graphic atmosphere, a philosophy that guided their first notable production in 2015: *Dernière porte au sud*.

Following this success, Take Five collaborated with promising Belgian talents such as Bruno Tondeur, Hannah Letaïf, and Margot Reumont, thereby enriching their filmography. They have also co-produced feature film projects on a European scale, including *The Island* by Anca Damian, presented at Annecy in 2022, and *Sirocco et le royaume des courants d'air* in 2023.

In 2023, their collaboration on the web series *Boys Boys Boys* with Melting Productions, broadcast on Arte, demonstrated their ability to explore new formats. Take Five continues to explore new territories, affirming its position as a favorite collaborator in the European animation sector.

SACREBLEU PRODUCTIONS

Founded in 1999 by Ron Dyens, Sacrebleu Productions ventured into animated feature films with *Tout en haut du monde*, which won the Audience Award at Annecy and was released in 2016, attracting nearly 600,000 viewers in France and selling in more than 20 countries worldwide.

In early 2020, the animated feature film *L'Extraordinaire voyage* de Marona by Anca Damian, distributed by Cinéma Public Films, was released in theaters after numerous festival selections (Annecy, European Film Awards), awards (BIAF, Reanimania), and critical acclaim. It has already been sold in over 15 countries by Charades. It received the André Martin Award at Annecy and joined the CNC's École et Cinéma program.

Ma Famille Afghane, Michaela Pavlatova's feature film released in theaters on April 27, 2022, received the Jury Prize at Annecy, was selected for numerous festivals including the Golden Globes, and won many awards worldwide. In 2023 it also won the César for Best Animated Film.

Sacrebleu Productions has also produced over 90 short films selected in nearly 2000 festivals in France and abroad, such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Sundance, Clermont-Ferrand, Stuttgart, Brest and Hiroshima. Recipients of prestigious awards among them include *Chienne d'histoires* (Palme d'Or 2010), *Le Repas Dominical* and *L'Heure de l'Ours* (respectively awarded the César for Best Animated Short Film in 2015 and 2021), *Madagascar, Carnet de Voyage* (nominated for the Oscar for Best Animated Short Film in 2011), and *Tram* (Cristal for Best Short Film 2012).

DREAM WELL

Dream Well Studio is an independent animation production company founded by Gints Zilbalodis, whose film *Away* was selected in over 90 festivals and won 13 awards including the Contrechamp award in Annecy. The studio has also worked on *Flow* of the same director.
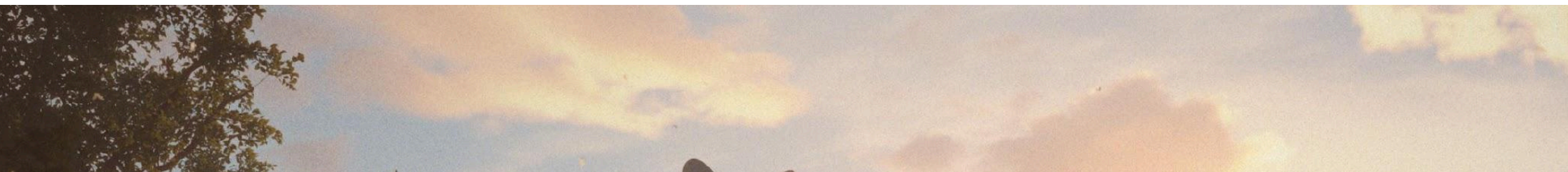
TEAM

Director	Gints Zilbalodis
Scenario	Gints Zilbalodis, Matīss Kaža

Production	Dream Well Studio (Latvia), Sacrebleu Productions (France), Take Five (Belgium)
Script Adaptation	Ron Dyens
Producers	Matīss Kaža, Gints Zilbalodis, Ron Dyens, Gregory Zalcman
Composers	Gints Zilbalodis, Rihards Zaļupe
Sound Design	Gurwal Coïc-Gallas
Director of Animation	Léo Silly-Pélissier
International Sales	Charades
French Distribution	UFO Distribution