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Adventure Island: ‘Kensuke’s Kingdom’ Creatives Share the Joys & Challenges of Their Beautiful Adaptation



By Ramin Zahed February 26, 2024

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'It's a proper adventure story full of action and excitement, but at the same time it is also extremely gentle, with a complex emotional core. It also includes an important ecological message for our times.'

– Director Kirk Hendry

When Michael Morpurgo's beloved children's book *Kensuke's Kingdom* was first published in 1999, readers fell in love with its memorable characters and strong ecological theme. The story centers on a young boy and his dog, Stella, who are shipwrecked on a remote island. It's here that he meets a mysterious Japanese man who has lived there secretly since World War II. Despite initial mistrust and anger, the two strike up a friendship to protect the island from dangerous invaders.

Fans of the book will be happy to know that it has inspired a beautiful, 2D-animated feature, which is directed by Neil Boyle and Kirk Hendry and produced by Camilla Deakin, Ruth Fielding, Sarah Radclyffe, Barnaby Spurrier and Stéphan Roelants. After debuting at the Annecy Festival last year, the movie opened in French theaters in February and will be showcased at Cartoon Movie in Bordeaux and the New York International Children's Film Festival in March.



Natural Wonders: The filmmakers were keen on preserving the original book's gentle tone and deeply felt message about the importance of protecting animals and the environment.

An Epic Journey

Deakin, who is the co-founder of U.K.-based Lupus Films and has produced a long list of award-winning projects, such as *The Snowman and the Snowdog*, *Ethel & Ernest*, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* and *Mog's Christmas*, was familiar with the book as her sons had read it at school. "I knew it was a fantastic story," she says. "We met with the producers Sarah Radclyffe and Barnaby Spurrier and all got along well, so we decided to embark on this epic journey together!"

The producer says it took a while to raise the financing, and the project was finally greenlit to get into preproduction in the summer of 2020. "That was right in the heart of the COVID pandemic," she recalls. "We had to adjust pretty rapidly to everyone working from home, but we managed it fairly well, and Neil and Kirk quickly got used to briefing the crew and giving feedback over Google Meets and Slack."

'Michael Morpurgo always includes important themes, such as the value of respecting nature and protecting animals and finding understanding across different cultures – but always in a way that is integral to the story.'

– Producer Camilla Deakin

"We always joked that the pandemic created the perfect situation to make a film about being isolated on a desert island, because in reality we were all isolated in our houses and home studios!" says Boyle. "But credit to the production staff at Lupus Films — they figured out a way for all our artists and technicians to communicate and share work, and we even had a few online parties along the way, so we had a much easier time of it than the characters in our film!"

Deakin says one of the things that drew her to the project was the way her sons, who were around nine or 10 at the time, responded to it. "They were drawn in by the sense of jeopardy for the young boy Michael, the terror he feels when he first washes up on the desert island and the tenderness of the relationships he forms with Kensuke and the animals," she notes. "Michael Morpurgo is so good at writing adventure stories with a heart, and he always includes important themes, such as the value of respecting nature and protecting animals and finding understanding across different cultures, but always in a way that is integral to the story."

Neil Boyle

Hendry believes that the book is a rare beast. "It's [a] proper adventure story full of action and excitement, but at the same time it is also extremely gentle, with a complex emotional core," he explains. "These two things don't often sit side by side. It also includes a really important ecological message for our times. To have all

three of those things — adventure, emotion and a timely message — that plays well to all ages, is a tremendous gift.”

One of the biggest challenges for the creative team was to find ways of telling the story with the minimum of dialog. “We approached the film this way for two reasons,” explains Boyle. “The first is because it’s a film about people and other animals, who do not share a common spoken language: Michael is an English boy who cannot speak Japanese, and Kensuke is a Japanese man who cannot speak English. And none of the humans can communicate verbally with the animals. So, we had to find ways for our characters to show, rather than speak, their emotions. The second reason for minimizing dialogue is that both Kirk and I are fans of very visual storytelling. We love to play with composition, camera blocking, body language, production design, color palette, sound design and the musical score, the combination of which, we feel, gives the audience the strongest cinematic experience.”

Early Accolades: *‘Kensuke’s Kingdom’ was nominated for four British Animation Awards (Best Feature, Writing, Music and Sound) in February.*

About two-thirds of the animation was produced in the U.K., managed from the Lupus Films studio in London. The other third of the animation was done by co-producer Melusine Productions at their studio, Studio 352, in Luxembourg. Storyboarding, layout and background artwork were also divided between the U.K. and Luxembourg. The 3D visual effects and compositing were done in Wales at Bumpybox.

"The tools we used to make the film were quite varied, ranging from old-school pencil and paper for some of our initial character designs, through to TVPaint software for our final 2D character animation," says Boyle. "We also used Maya and Unreal Engine for our 3D work; Photoshop was used for much of the background painting; and everything was composited in Nuke."

Hendry adds, "In terms of characters, we went quite naturalistic in proportion as we felt the drama required it. In overall design terms, Neil and I often reference matte paintings from the Golden Age of Hollywood and beyond. The not-quite-real artifice of it all allows you to readily suspend your disbelief. They are full of charm that is often missing from [the] digital photoreal matte paintings commonplace in contemporary films. We also took inspiration from the sketch work of Japanese artist Hiroshige for our Nagasaki flashback sequence. The simplicity in the line and the use of negative space in the environment is beautiful and contrasted nicely with the rich style of the rest of the film."

"In a design story sense, we like to use the environmental elements to push how the characters are feeling," he says. "When Michael first lands on the island, it is alien to him. So it's sharp and jagged, grey, the animals are reptilian. As he learns to adjust to life on the island it becomes warmer, more colourful with furry animals that are more comforting."

"Nagasaki" sequence concept artwork, courtesy of Lupus Films

Kirk Hendry, Neil Boyle and author Michael Morpugo

The creative team hopes audiences around the world will fall in love with the characters and the involving narrative as much as they did. "First and foremost, we want them to leave the theater feeling they have been fully entertained and, perhaps, also wiping away a bittersweet tear," says Boyle. "But beyond that, we worked hard to preserve Michael Morpugo's message of hope and the idea that 'family' — blood families, chosen families and the wider family of humans, animals and the natural world — is something to be respected and cherished. And I really think we have successfully achieved that."

He adds, "Michael is very, very proud of our adaptation, and he has told us that it is the one film he feels is even better than his original book! So, obviously both Kirk and I, and our whole creative team, are thrilled to hear that, and we continue to be thrilled by the wonderful audience reactions we are getting."

"Kensuke's Kingdom" features beautifully drawn 2D backgrounds and meticulous craftsmanship.

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