

A FAMILY Q+A with director Jayden Stevens

What inspired you when piecing together a script like this? Any cinematic influences?

The initial spark came from hearing about a guy who advertised on the US website Craigslist for someone to come to his home dressed up as an owl and watch him sleep. This touched on something unsettling for me; the loneliness and desperation that would lead someone to place such an advert intrigued me. We were especially interested in someone who paid people to act out mundane and seemingly regular situations in an attempt to build a sense of connection.

Contrasting the absurdity of the situations with quite a serious style and tone was something I was excited to explore. Filmmakers like Ulrich Seidl, Yorgos Lanthimos, Rick Alverson, Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim were all in some way an inspiration. I think a bit of Monty Python might have snuck in there, too.

The central protagonist appears to have no genuine friends or family in his life. What about our current climate drew you to him as a subject?

In a world that is quite connected — perhaps too connected at times — we wanted to explore someone who was completely devoid of that. We wanted to give this character a desire to forge moments of happiness and a perfect family, despite not knowing how to belong or act in either situation.

The central characters demonstrate a distinct lack of shame and matter-of-factness in asking for what they want. Why do you think this registered as being so darkly comedic?

Perhaps because it's not the way we are used to people speaking to each other. We only know what we have seen, so for these characters that lack meaningful social experience, their reference is limited. Their world and some situations seem familiar, but the rules within it are different.

How did you come to shoot the film in the Ukraine? What advantages and challenges did this pose? How does one come to shoot a film in a language unknown to them?

I had a strong idea of how I wanted the film to look and feel, and was struggling with the idea of pulling that off in Australia with no money. If I had to make it in Australia I would need a budget for design and locations and at that point I couldn't see how that was going to come about. My co-writer and cinematographer Tom Swinburn had been to Ukraine and after seeing his photos and hearing about his experiences there, I thought it would be a perfect backdrop for this type of film. It also meant that I didn't need to create and build the aesthetic I wanted; I could harness what was already there.

Shooting the film in another language meant I couldn't change dialogue on the fly or make too many blocking changes once we started rolling. I couldn't risk being in the edit room six months down the line and having no idea what they were saying, so the actors needed to stick exactly to the script. Having a translator going back and forth took a long time, which meant I had to be extra prepared before shooting each scene. That was challenging, as I was also the 1st AD, costume designer and production designer.

Most of the cast will be unfamiliar to an Australian audience. Are they newcomers? How did you find them and what was the casting process like?

We used a Ukrainian version of Star Now, the amateur casting website. Most of the cast of the family members are non-actors. For example, the brother is a dentist and local tour guide. I don't actually know too much about the father — he's a bit of a mystery to me. Our lead actor Pavlo Lehenkyi was so striking when I first saw him. He carried a weight on his shoulders and was quite elusive. He couldn't speak any English so we would just nod at each other whenever there wasn't a translator in the room. Liudmyla Zamydra, who plays Ericka, was working as a receptionist at the theatre school where we held auditions. I needed someone to stand in for an audition one day and she helped out, and as soon as we started the scene I couldn't stop watching her instead of the auditioning actor.

What do you hope audiences will take away from this film?

I hope this film will take audiences on a journey behind the curtains of a world very different from their own. I hope it leaves them with the feeling that they went on a ride they didn't fully understand or comprehend, but one that drew them in and affected them viscerally. Things reveal themselves slowly and the audience becomes witness to bizarre situations as these family interactions become stranger and more personal. The film is by no means an authentic representation of Ukrainian life; it's a showcase of the bizarre and the unfamiliar.