

Brillebjørn: the “resilient voice” of the children

A CONVERSATION WITH NILS STOKKE* ON BRILLEBJØRN

Brillebjørn (Bo Bear) is a 26-episode live-action drama series featuring a teddy bear. Every 5-minute episode deals with something the main kid character finds scary or difficult. When Bo Bear claps his hands, something magical starts to happen, which makes it easier for the 3-year-olds to overcome their daily difficulties.

How did you come up with the idea of *Brillebjørn* or *Bo Bear*, as the show is called in English?

Stokke: It started back in 2014. I had just started my company Spark together with Eda Syvertsen, and we wanted to make a really good series for preschoolers. We then quickly figured out that we wanted to do something with live-action, because we prefer live-action to animation. We also knew right away that we wanted the kid to be the main character, i. e. with almost no adults involved, truly through the eyes of a young child. And then we asked ourselves: what is the youngest possible age group? How about 5-year-old kids? We have done it before. What about 4? Is 3 possible? We said: well, we cannot do 2-year-olds, but 3 is a challenge, let's give it a try. So we started thinking about 3-year-old children as the main characters. And then we just did the basic research we always have to do. We asked what is interesting about 3-year-olds, what they fear, what they love, what makes them mad, glad, sad – just to make sure we tell intriguing stories for kids.

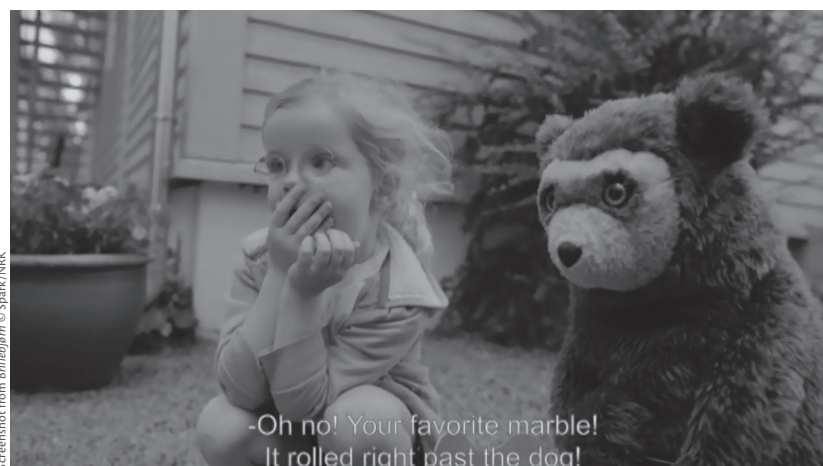
Who is Bo Bear?

Stokke: We needed to have some kind of sidekick and researched tons of different animals. And we finally landed on Bo Bear. It is based on what is called a spectacled bear, a bear in the Andes mountains in South America which eats only plants – and not kids. He is supposed to be any child's teddy bear with slightly worn out fur. Bo Bear is playful like a 3-year-old, but he has more knowledge. And if he claps his paws something magical happens, which makes it easier for the 3-year-olds to overcome one of their daily difficulties. We call this “imagination”. Bo Bear always supports the kids. He doesn't really know what they want, but he, of course with his magical powers, can transform the situation for the kids in their fantasy into something that makes them overcome whatever they are facing. It is like in the comic *Calvin and Hobbes*. When there is just the child and the bear present, Bo Bear is alive. But when adults are around, he turns into a regular teddy bear.

How does your bear help children to become strong, to face and deal with obstacles, emotional imbalances, and crises in everyday life?

Stokke: I think we are spot-on in terms of resilience, because every episode deals with something any kid at the age of 3 experiences. It can be that you want to continue to play in the garden instead of going to the store with your dad or a new babysitter and you are not quite sure how to deal with the situation.

In one episode, the girl Ruby plays with her marbles. She throws one of them too far away and it rolls right past her grandma's dog (Ill. 1). She knows it is a friendly dog and it is, of course, on a leash. But still it is a dog and she does not feel too secure about it. She has to pass the dog in order to fetch her marble. And she definitely wants to get her marble back, because it is her favourite one. Then Bo Bear starts talking to her. After a bit of back and forth, Bo Bear transforms the dog into a frog. The dog-frog starts quacking like a frog



Ill. 1: Ruby's favourite marble has rolled right past her grandmother's dog



Screenshot from *Brillebjørn* © Spark/NRK

Ill. 2: Bo Bear transforms the dog into a frog to make it less scary for Ruby

which makes it less scary (Ill. 2). So Ruby can pass the dog and fetch the marble. This story is so relevant for every kid at the age of 3.

How does this episode foster resilience?

Stokke: It shows courage, and it shows that when you put your mind to something, you can really make it. Of course, we tell it in a story in which the dog is friendly and on a leash. So it is not about a real fear of being attacked by a dog or anything, but it is still a strange animal that Ruby doesn't really know how to assess. You might say that the bear is somehow the "resilient voice" of the children. The bear sparks the imagination and "imagination" of the kid. The "imagination" happens in the mind of the children only and makes them see the obstacle with different eyes and from a different angle and then they figure out: well, this might not be so difficult after all.

What did you learn about shooting with 3- or 4-year-olds?

Stokke: Of course we knew that 3-year-olds are not normal actors. They don't know what acting is. So we spent much time on just establishing their playing zone where they were playing the characters and the situations the director showed them. We never told the kids the entire story. They never knew what was going to happen. We wanted true reactions from the kids

especially when it came to the imagination. So they never saw the imagination, for example when the dog turns into a frog. But the imagination also quite often happens on the kid, and they never saw the costumes or anything before we started shooting.

We also learned that the team needed to be as small as possible, because the children freak out when there is a big team. They somehow feel: "Oh, I am in a room with 15 people now and their job is dependent on what I perform. I don't really know what I am supposed to perform." Then they freak out, start crying and don't want to do anything. So we needed a small team, and the same team quite often, and we needed a really good photographer. It sounds strange, but it was such a good thing that we had found one with a reality TV background, because he was used to just being in the situation and not spending half an hour establishing the scene. He was just there with the camera all the time, which means that he was able to capture true emotions from the kids, way better than a traditional drama photographer would have done. So that helped us a lot. And of course: short days and never sugar on the sets – just fruit. (laughs) I could do a whole session on how to work with kids, but these are just a few points.

What was important for you in the casting?

Stokke: First of all, I wanted to have many children. Our cast now consists of 6 children. We didn't plan to find 6, it could also have been 5 or 7. But I wanted to have more episodes with girls than with boys. When you have at least 6 children it is easier to have a wide range of kids from different cultures, backgrounds, different family environments and so on. This was important, because in the programmes and movies they very often cast children who are really outgoing, over-ambitious or over-cheerful. I also wanted to have the shy kids. Not because I was a shy kid myself, but because I wanted to have a wide range of kids. I wanted the children watching the series to be able to relate to one of the 6 kids we have. There are shy children out there, and I wanted exactly these "normal average kids" that the audience can relate to. I really believe that this is one of the key elements of *Brillebjørn's* success in Norway.

Is your show successful?

Stokke: Yes, I would say that it is a success. It has really good ratings on NRK, and it is a huge success on the web player: two thirds of the viewing happens online and not on the TV transmission, which means that they look it up and want to see it again and again. That is, of course, one of the cool things with children's content: when you make something that they like, they want to see it over and over again. So it has really good ratings. In addition, we just finished producing the first *Brillebjørn* movie. It premiered in Norwegian movie theaters this spring, and we are really proud of the result. ■

* Nils Stokke is founder and CEO of the production company Spark, Norway.

