

MOUSSE

By John Hellberg

PRODUCTION NOTES



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Mousse production notes offer a rare glimpse into the making of the film. It also includes a Q&A with John Hellberg and other leading artists behind the film. Mousse will have its North American premiere in the Narrative Shorts Competition in South By Southwest Festival 2013.

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Short *Synopsis*

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What could be easier than robbing a small bookie place on the outskirts of town? It's during the year's biggest horse race event and the betting center Washington's Tobacco looks like the ultimate hit for some fast cash. Mousse is a man of pride and principles and is fed up with living as a second-class citizen. But what happens when he faces principles different to his own?

About *The Movie*

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Mousse is a droll and blackly comic tale of an "honest criminal" and police ineptitude. Through the enigmatic but engaging lead character, Mousse, we are invited to empathies with his position of seeming desperation that leads him to a petty criminal act. In the face of his existential motivations, we see the real pettiness of contemporary society, where small-time gambling and scrambling for small financial rewards battle for supremacy against bigger, ethical issues; where the inanities of a police force that represent the state and authority demonstrate the ridiculous nature of order and control.

John Hellberg *Director's statement*

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Mousse has many dimensions but it's first and foremost a tribute to the saga. In particular, the joy of storytelling is something I often feel is lacking in the short film format. It's all too easy to get lost in the excitement and deliberation of pursuing of the 'perfect' story, losing sight of the value of entertainment as a means of capturing the attention of the audience. MOUSSE has many dimensions but the underlying driving force when working with this film has been to emphasize the value of storytelling, and of the story itself.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- *What was the impetus behind MOUSSE? Was there a particular incident that prompted you to make this film, and when did you begin working on it?*

JOHN HELLBERG (director)

- The initial idea came to me almost five years ago; I woke up at my friend's house with one of those "radiator slammed in the neck" hangovers and suddenly realised that we had trashed a good part of his apartment. While cleaning up we had the TV on and it showed an old episode of the famous Swedish television show "Släng dig i brunn-
nen". The show consists of a bunch of comedians standing in a bar and drinking beer while telling jokes to each other. The show was trying to capture the feeling of killing while telling a joke or two. Suddenly, I got a picture of a situation where a holdup with hostages turns out to be an episode of this television show. Five or six trashed apartments later, I had

myself a first draft of the story. I really like to stay open to script rewriting and story changes in the casting and rehearsal process so Mousse went through some dramatic script changes during the casting and pre-production, but the story's backbone came from that first idea.

- *What do you hope the audience will take with them from Mousse?*

JOHN HELLBERG (director)

- After almost two years of production, the film has taken a large chunk of my life. The good thing is that I'm really proud of the film and the balance between the kind of French noir "real" character of Mousse and the sociopathic situation he is in. When all is said and done, I would like the audience to feel some kind of empathy for my main character. Mousse is after all a good guy with broken dreams and a representative for "the bums will always lose". I feel with those bums.

Tell us about the first thoughts of the script and about the financing of the film?

KJELL ÅHLUND (producer)

- When I first read the script, I felt something different from what I'm used to when reading scripts. It wasn't so much the story that intrigued me, it was more the concept and the strange situation that really interested me. It was a piece of an art combined with a classic saga portrayed in a very tragicomic way, so unconventional and far away from most shorts I have ever read. Not a trace of "Swedish short film". Our first thought was; this could be a very different and funny movie to produce.

FREDRIK BJELKE (producer)

- When I read the script for the first time, I was laughing right out of the main character's hopeless situation and the dullness of the law. A battle of good and evil. But who is good and who is bad? When Hellberg ex-

plained how he visualised the film and we were discussing the fate of Mousse, I was stuck. From that point I wanted to finalize this movie. I wanted others to see what I saw. The surreal world of MOUSSE has of course grown throughout the process, but I'm very happy that we stand here today, distributing the film that I had in my mind.

KJELL ÅHLUND (producer)

- The financing of the film was a bit of a hitch to solve. In the mind of the Swedish Film Institute, we were "new" producers and John Hellberg's previous films didn't get any support from them. Nor did his short film *Galetten* get any screenings on Swedish film festivals. On the other hand, John got great response abroad with *Galetten*, winning prizes and getting screenings on a lot of festivals around the world. Applying for production funds with a script that doesn't fit the scope of the traditional Swedish short film and

our track record as rookie producers seemed far-fetched and we weren't sure if it was the right way to finance the movie. So, we turned to outside financiers who endorsed the production as they were supporting Swedish independent movie. In a month, we raised enough money to begin shooting the film.

The production of Mousse was a guerrilla operation with minimal use of technology and smallest crew possible on set. The crew consisted of two producers, director, a photographer, sound technician, electrician, production designer and help from family to serve lunch and breakfast. The movie was shot in six packed days with different locations in and around the city of Stockholm. The most difficult part of the schedule was that we had two different locations for our main set. These two locations were later supposed to become one in the post production.

- Tell us about the working flow on set?

JOHAN HELMER (DOP)

- We didn't have the luxury of removing cars, stopping traffic and putting the lights or the camera wherever I wanted. We had to compromise occasionally and we were always running out of time, but compromise can be a good thing because it forces you to be innovative.

- What was it like to work with a tight budget and a small team?

JOHN HELLBERG (director)

- I have always preferred to work with a small and intimate crew. When you are getting yourself out on thin ice, a small crew is easier to maneuver. We did know that we had to keep total control of the costs throughout the shooting of the film and all the funds were going straight into the production without no detours.

FREDRIK BJELKE (producer)

- A lot of the production consisted of, what do we want and how do we get it without any money. Thanks to the dedicated production designer and art director Åsa, we could fulfill most of our needs. The mission to find three similar Lada Niva cars to convert to cop cars, was a tough nut to crack. To accomplish that vision, we drove down to some of Sweden's smaller cities and borrowed them for a week on the set.

ÅSA WÆRNÉR (production designer)

- Mousse is set in an undefined city in an undefined time. This may seem like a paradise for a production and on-set designer but the actual span of "undefined" was quite narrow in Mousse. I worked very closely with Hellberg to avoid getting stuck in a particular decade when creating details on set. The police force seems to come straight from the seventies and the squat cars from Italy in the eighties. Other things on set is clearly much more

up to date. At a first glimpse this pot-pourri of things can seem crazy, but it's all there to serve an important purpose: to set the audience preconceptions free when approaching the actual story. At times when I was crying over the extreme budget situation this was my strongest motivation.

The time pressure was also exceptional. Everything in the kiosk was changed - from candy papers, newspaper covers, basically the whole interior - to all the signs, flags and stickers outside, and there was a minimum of time because we couldn't disturb the kiosk's customers or interfere with the regular opening hours. At eleven o'clock PM on the last day of shooting, I found myself standing at the roof of "Washingtons Tobacco", trying to warm up the frozen adhesive of the fake signs with a hair dryer.

- How did you find the characters for Mousse?

JOHN HELLBERG (director)

- One thing I did know from scratch was the fact that the cast in Mousse would consist of actors with widely different acting skills and backgrounds. The major part of the actors are actually extras. I knew that we had to get the chemistry going between the cops in the police force, and with that in consideration we casted the old police men together to get a better feeling of how they were working as a unit. Old folks are better story tellers by definition and during the process of casting we found that feeling of a bunch of police colleagues with thirty years of service together. I also wanted the police crew to be really tired and close to retirement in there minds. I had worked with Gunnar Ernblad back at my years at Stockholm Film school and I knew I could get that blasé and casual kind of cynical style in his acting. He got the hang of it when I found his perfect side-

kick Sigge in Jonas Ahlgren. The character of Mousse himself was a hard nut to crack; in Sweden there's not many French speaking actors around. Stéphane Bertola had the perfect looks and a linguists touch when approaching the French language. He has helped me more than I can thank him for when it comes to the film's French dialogue. His knowledge in French music and poetry created the perfect background to his character as well as his dedication to the role.

KJELL ÅHLUND (producer)

- Together, we sat down to find the characters and since we didn't had any budget for casting directors or more seasoned actors, we turned to home pages for actors and extras. We were looking for characters with strong, interesting and personal features. Some of these actors turned up to have many years behind the camera.

- Stéphane, how did you end up playing Mousse?

STÉPHANE BERTOLA (actor)

- In June 2010 I had a telephone call from John Hellberg offering me the lead role in his short film MOUSSE. He said: "I am standing on the corner of your street and would like to meet you".

He sounded open and amicable, so I suggested we meet at the Katarina Cemetary because in my imagination Mousse was a modern day Quai des Brumes.

John, being no ordinary Swedish Marcel Carné, gave me the freedom to interpret my own lines. And Mousse being written by a kind of Prevert (John Hellberg), I enjoyed translating the script. During the weeks I became friends with the part of me named Mousse and we merged.

I was happy to participate in this short interesting film as all the characters in my view are outstanding.

The movie was recorded in Vinsta, a suburb of Stockholm, during the

coldest December in 200 years. The temperature was 24 °C below zero. But the wonderful producers wives kept the crew going with warm hearty soups, which I relished and perhaps gratefully over indulged in.

- John, how did it go on set?

JOHN HELLBERG (director)

- The lack of experience among quite a few of the actors put us in some funny situations during the shooting. When it came to the intersection where the holdup takes place in the film, we had to merge two different locations together to get the whole surroundings right. Some of the policemen were questioning my authority when they were told to act in front of an abandoned parking lot as if it was a tobacco shop. Later, I got one of the policemen upset when I prompted him to do his funny joke all over again and he replied: "Why? Nobody will laugh now when the punch line is revealed". I was starting to question my choice of working with amateur actors.

- *Any thoughts about the post production?*

STÉPHANE BERTOLA (actor)

- In August 2011 during the last day of recording, John asked me if I could sing a French song because he knew about my background as a pianist. Perfect for the moment, sprang from my subconscious a few verses of Brassens /Paul Fort "La Marine". On the Internet, I then found several different versions of "La Marine" and sent them to the director and the producers. Immediately, they were in love with "Oncle Georges". The struggle to then get the rights for the music took three months of negotiation.

FREDRIK BJELKE (producer)

- *Mousse* took two years from the moment production planning began until final cut. The production went smoothly until post-production when a series of bad events took us on a far longer journey than expected. First blow put us back in time when someone broke into the post-

production company and stole all servers. Well, what can you say, the first version of the film went down the drain. It took us six months before we were back on track again. Then later that year, the company went down during the financial crisis and all our sweet deals of finalizing the film to the set budget was torn to pieces.

When we were discussing the script among us in pre-production, we decided to enhance the surreal environment in the film, making it feel more like a saga and putting the audience's references out of play. We wanted to realize John's imaginary world. When we took the decision, we knew the film would need an effort in production design and in post-production. But we didn't know it would take us 8 months to do the work in post-production.

DAVID ENBOM (VFX)

- The work with the effect shoots for *Mousse* turned out to be somewhat of a roller coaster for everyone one in VFX. During the director's close

supervision, we put as much effort as we could do in making the background plates to fit his vision. I am glad that we made that effort of a thorough groundwork. It gave us the tools to use during the whole project to be efficient in solving shoots fast.

John slept, ate and breathed *Mousse* during this period. It was very inspiring to work with him and to hear his visions about the movie. On the other side, when the film was re-edited from the initial thirty minutes and I realized that we needed to complete twice as many shoots as we originally had planned on our to-do-list, it was very difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. It wasn't easy to motivate the artists to work under those circumstances, but the engagement I could see in John to tell the story was what motivated me the most.

In the end, we had moved a film recorded in two industrial areas in Stockholm to the outskirts of an Asian city where sky scrapes had been carefully placed on green slopes. After the first screening I got

the question: Where the hell was the film recorded? and that made me feel proud of being involved in this roller coaster.

MATTIAS EKLUND (sound re-recording mix)

- Mixing *Mousse* was a big challenge and great experience. To tell a story with such integrity and great humor is all about timing and tone when it comes to the sound. To push the storytelling forward with all the elements of drama without making it into a complete mess of lines from the characters, information from the television, jokes from the megaphone and the outstanding music was hard because there is so much different types of sound going on in the film from start to finish. To blend the sounds in a perfect way is the way to guide the viewer through the story consciously and subconsciously.

- So, what happens now?

FREDRIK BJELKE (producer)

- Our main goal is to show the film on as many festivals as possible since the audience loves the film. From the beginning, we believed that we had a better chance of screening the film on international film festivals rather than on domestic ones. So far, we stand correct. Still, we are hoping that the Swedish audience will get a chance to see our film. But so far, we haven't got any opportunity to show it on a Swedish film festival. I really don't know why, maybe they lack humor? But what to tell, it's a huge difference in attitude against medium length films (or Novellas) in Sweden and abroad. We'll see which one is first.

We begun with an awesome premiere in Milano with around a thousand people watching the big screen and we have started 2013 in best way possible. We will compete against fantastic shorts in the Narrative Shorts Competition on SXSW and we will also compete against the

Oscar-winning short film on Febio Fest in Prague. We have now begun the journey we started two years ago.