

WITHOUT A GOOD STORY YOU'RE NOWHERE

Adapting the classic comic *Asterix and the Vikings*, Stefan Fjeldmark and Jesper Møller made *Asterix and Obelix* less invincible, but more interesting as characters.

■ BY CHRISTIAN MONGGAARD

A Film's animated adventure *Help! I'm a Fish* (2000), which cost 13.5 million euros, caught the eye of M6. The French TV network was looking for an animation studio to do a new *Asterix* film. But first M6 had to persuade Asterix penman Uderzo to okay the project. Obviously, the studio had to deliver animation of the quality he required.

Uderzo gave the nod, and co-directors Stefan Fjeldmark and Jesper Møller picked *Asterix and the Vikings* as the title they wanted to work with. "One of our reasons for picking that album is that we're Norsemen," Fjeldmark says. "We thought it would be fun to reflect this Danish-French collaboration in the story, too."

Growing up, Fjeldmark was an avid reader of Asterix and making an Asterix film was a huge challenge to him. "On one hand, we get a lot free," he says. "There's an established universe whose treasures you can mine for characters, jokes and storylines. But there are limitations, too. You can only go so far and no longer. Certain invisible boundaries dictate what the characters can and cannot do - what the humour of this universe is."

As Fjeldmark sees it, Asterix and Obelix have problems as characters because they are superhuman. "It's not interesting with characters that can do anything and aren't vulnerable in any way," he says.

"People usually like to watch characters that are flawed and imperfect. That's one reason why we picked *Asterix and the Vikings*. There's a kid in the story, Justforkix, who's

rather delicate. He is a big scaredy-cat, and he likes to sleep in. He is more normal, easier to relate to. Meanwhile, we made Asterix and Obelix more vulnerable, because they almost become like parents to him. They may be supermen, but if he's screwed, they're screwed. That gives the story depth."

REASONABLE INPUT

In Fjeldmark's opinion, many of the early Asterix films are far too superficial, because they don't let us get inside the characters at all. "That's been one of the most important things for us," he says. "Jesper and I spent a lot of energy fleshing out the characters early on. We did everything we could to make *Asterix and the Vikings* not look like the previous films. Then again, we were okay with the film looking a little like an old Disney cartoon. We've made a big, lush 2D-film, while everyone else is doing 3D these days. It's a little old-fashioned and we don't mind people thinking *Pinocchio* or *Peter Pan*. The film uses many modern techniques and it has a lot of contemporary humour, in the vein of *Shrek*, but it's also a little bit old-fashioned."

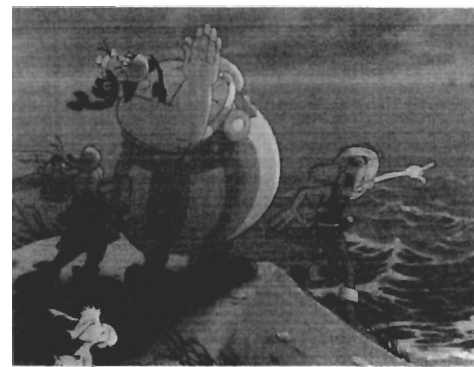
Uderzo had to approve everything under way, but he didn't interfere very much," says Fjeldmark, who has final cut on the film. "He provided some very reasonable input." *Asterix and the Vikings* is now in its final phase of production. "We've finished the visuals on two of four reels," Fjeldmark says. "We still need to colour the second half of the film. All the animation and inking is done. We also need to add a few effects and other minor details, but it's no big deal. The score has been composed and will soon be recorded at Abbey Road Studios. Then there's a month of sound mixing in France."

Fjeldmark and Møller split the work, with Fjeldmark handling development and post-

production, and Møller doing everything in between, namely animation and inking. "I've been through the whole process of sound mixing, postproduction and lab work on other films," Fjeldmark says. "It was easier for me to handle those aspects. Also, I'm really interested in story development and how to adapt this kind of story, a comic book, to moving pictures. In general, I tend to focus more and more on the characters and story. My years in the business have taught me that they are the only things that count. Without a good story you're nowhere."

A. Film will soon be screening the two finished reels to Uderzo. Anyone might be expected to be apprehensive, but Stefan Fjeldmark is taking things in stride. "We've already been showing him so much during the process," he says. "And we're happy enough with the result to expect Uderzo to be pleased, too. You never know, of course, but we certainly think *Asterix and the Vikings* is a whole lot better than anything that has been done in the past."

Asterix and the Vikings is a French-Danish coproduction.



Asterix and the Vikings