



NEW RELEASES

Robot Dreams

Robot Dreams

Directed by: Pablo Berger

©: Arcadia Motion Pictures S.L., Lokiz Films A.I.E.,

Noodles Productions SARL,

Les Films du Worso SARL

An Arcadia production

A Lokizfilms production

In co-production with: Noodles Production,

Les Films du Worso

In association with: Elle Driver, Mama Films

With the participation of: RTVE, M+, Canal+, Ciné+

With finance from: The Government of Spain

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cinéma et de l'image animée

In association with: La Banque Postale Image 15

With the support of: Europa Creative Media

Executive Producer: Sandra Tapia Diaz

Produced by: Ibon Cormenzana, Ignasi Estapé,

Sandra Tapia Diaz, Pablo Berger, Ángel Durández

Co-producers: Sylvie Danton, Jérôme Vidal,

Benoît Quainon

Line Producer: Julián Larrauri

Associate Producer: Yuko Harami

Written by: Pablo Berger

Based on the Graphic Novel by: Sara Varon

Animation Director: Benoît Féroumont

Editor: Fernando Franco

Art Director: José Luis Ágreda

Character Designer: Daniel Fernández Casas

Music: Alfonso de Vilallonga

Sound Design: Fabiola Ordoyo

Supervising Sound Editor: Fabiola Ordoyo

Spain 2023

102 mins

Digital

Courtesy of Curzon Film

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Pablo Berger's *Robot Dreams* is an outlier. An adaptation of American illustrator Sara Varon's 2007 graphic novel about a dog who builds himself a robot friend, the film is released in cinemas in March. In a fractured theatrical landscape where films are designed and marketed to different groups, *Robot Dreams* is, in Berger's words, 'a film for everyone... Of all my films, this is the most open. I'm very happy that in the cinema, you have people from different backgrounds and ages, sharing the same experience.'

The Spanish director bought Varon's slender novel for his daughter before she could read. A decade ago, after finishing work on *Blancanieves* (2012), his silent, monochrome reimagining of *Snow White* in 1920s bullfighting Spain, he plucked it randomly from his bookshelf and was surprised by the grip its 82 pages still had on him.

The 'melancholy comedy' that Berger crafts from Varon's pictures, keeping her hand-drawn 2D style, is a perfect example of a film that is both simple and highly sophisticated. The film sticks to the book's straightforward, dialogue-free story about the dog and the robot's mutual joy in their new-found friendship, and subsequent sorrow at their accidental parting, but it adds deeper stabs of loneliness and despair. These are balanced by a delight in the capacity of music and dance to forge bonds, and the creation of a wondrous comic backdrop for this emotional epic that is both real and unreal – a grungy 1980s Manhattan, a fantasia filled with different animal citizens. 'The audience can project themselves,' Berger says. 'They don't really see the animals. It's like a fable.' Introducing the film to an audience of children, Berger asked them what their favourite animals were: his saga contains so many different species – including a drum-playing octopus – that he felt able to promise that, whatever they said, they would see up on screen.

Berger didn't intend the film for children ('I am selfish... I made it for myself and also for an imaginary cinema'), but he talks about its conception in the universal language of make-believe: 'I'm an old-school director; for me, the script is the treasure map.' He likes the idea of parents or guardians bringing youngsters to it: 'Parents who have suffered so much watching films that the kids have pushed them towards because they've seen commercials. And it's not the kids' fault that they see commercials everywhere. The fast-food chains are promoting them. *Robot Dreams* could be one of those rare times that the parent chooses the film and says, "Maybe you haven't seen the commercial. There's no toys of [the characters]"... and afterwards it could spark a conversation between the parent and the child about relationships, about loss and overcoming loss...'

Although *Robot Dreams* is suitable for any child who can sit through its 102 minutes, it's also demanding of its audience, little or large. It doesn't hurtle along, like so many children's films: 'Very few animation films deal with emotion. Most are comedies or action... with more fireworks and roller-coaster rides than storytelling. Drama needs a little more time. That's why Miyazaki's films are longer.' The sense of abandonment and cruelty in the film is acute, particularly when the forlorn, rusting robot endures a winter alone on a fenced-off beach, his parts gradually harvested by passers-by. 'We are treating children with

NEW RELEASES

Robot Dreams

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respect. We are treating them like adults. We know that they can relate to the characters and understand the story.'

The film offers plenty for adults to reflect on too: romantic disappointment looms large in films and our inner emotional lives but for Berger, 'We talk less about the break-ups between friends or best friends and the mourning of friends.' And yet, that is a universal emotional experience, from childhood onwards. What adults bring to the film are more of their own memories of faded relationships and Berger seems to deliberately draw on those, notably with his recurring use of Earth Wind and Fire's toe-tapping direct address to our hippocampus: 'Do you remember / The twenty-first night of September?' – the song tinged with sadness when rendered by the robot's metallic whistle. Perhaps, too, adults will bring an awareness of the situation in 1980s New York, of the relationships decimated by the Aids crisis. What appears a very simple story is actually emotionally and intellectually complex.

And at times eccentric. In one dazzling sequence, the snowy, beach-ridden robot dreams and climbs out of the film's frame, like Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), but is stopped short at the screen's edge; so he flips the action 180 degrees to reveal a radiant yellow brick road wonderland, into which he vaults. Here, a chorus field of giant daisies tap dances in geometric formation, as if growing in a Busby Berkeley musical. Following the rainbow, the robot comes to the dog's home – but when he presses the doorbell, the façade collapses on him like the house in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) and our hero is back on the snowy beach. 'This scene starts and ends with a homage to Buster Keaton,' Berger says. 'The film is always looking to silent cinema... the one that has probably most influenced it in terms of tone is Chaplin's *City Lights* [1931].' Berger reconnects the cinephile with their inner child – 'in this scene they can really grab a lot of Easter eggs' – and in doing so rekindles a sense of awe at cinema's magic powers, while reminding us that any great children's film stretches its audience's imagination.

Isabel Stevens, *Sight and Sound*, April 2024