



Hippy Shakes – The cast of *186 Kilometres* improvise for a laugh

## 186 Kilometres – How TV punks made Estonian laugh at itself

186 kilometres is the exact distance between Estonia's capital Tallin and the Bohemian capital, Tartu. That Estonia is not a big country is common knowledge. A little less well known is the fact that *186 Kilometres* is also the title of one of the biggest cinema box office successes in Estonian history. Coming out in 2007, it beat Hollywood juggernauts like *Spiderman III* hands down. What's more, it also had the entire Estonian nation laughing at itself.

Not a bad score for the young filmmakers behind this popular phenomenon; Rain Tolk and Andres Maimik. "I was working as a journalist until the end of the nineties, mostly celebrity magazines. It was very boring," Rain recalls. The break came when a friend ask the disaffected hack to put together a youth magazine programme for television. The British comic Dennis Pennis was the avowed inspiration; with a riveting mix of aggression and self-deprecation, the Dennis character walks up to celebrities and humours them in a hit-and-miss attempt to reveal the fake personalities and the hollow media circus surrounding them. "I had a friend who collaborated with me to create some zany new approach. We staged fake blackmails of local politicians, wrote a neo-punk manifesto and treated every subject satirically." The show was immediately popular with Estonian youth which may have had something to do with the fact that it was also immediately controversial with the grown ups. "It became difficult to continue. Some politicians were very upset, asking why the public purse should pay for us to ridicule the country's institutions," Rain recalls with a chuckle.

It was at that time that the journalist-turned-popular-broadcaster met up with Andres, who was busying himself making 'mockumentaries' for television. Rain remembers this transition with excitement." Suddenly, there were four of us. Myself, Andres, my friend from the TV show and another young television talent. We wanted to make something

together but we were not directors in the classical sense. We were more like a rock band looking for its own particular sound.”

Looking for its sound the group made a few mockumentaries which had some success on TV and drew the attention of advertising agencies and the Estonian Film Foundation (EFF). “The adverts became our bread and butter,” Rain recalls, “but this is the time when the EFF gave us financial support to go and make a feature film and so we went on the road and did it.”

Well, not quite. Before doing so, they first sat down with Estonia’s most popular young actor Jaan Uuspold and worked out a loose story structure and script for a crazy, satirical road movie which became *186 Kilometres*.

The film, a largely improvised affair, was based on real stories borrowed from the young star’s life. From that narrative base, the film makers weaved a canvas of situations designed to show up and satirise contemporary Estonian life and politics. Armed with a script written in three days, the ‘band’ went out and shot 30 hours of material. Rain sums up the recipe in his own quirky way. “In *186 Kilometres*, we mixed fantasy with reality all the time; those were the basics of our approach. We also mixed expectations all the time: we had celebrities appearing as themselves, well known actors playing other well known actors, or celebrities appearing as other celebrities, etc. It was all about irreverence and punk.” In a scene which especially delighted local audiences, a prominent politician who was shortly to become the President of Estonia appears in a largely unplanned cameo.



Milking it for gags

What could possibly be the relevance to cultural diversity of a micro-budget neo-punk satirical film made by Estonians, only for Estonians? Estonian Film Foundation executive Tristan Primagii has a robust answer to that question. “The film did more to raise the profile of our national cinema than any other before it and helped focus minds on the importance of maintaining our own cultural voice in this medium. After the end of Soviet rule, we almost lost any cinema production and that part of our cultural heritage was about to disappear.”

When the gales of self-deprecating laughter finally subside, Estonians will for a long time remember – and be grateful for – the more far-reaching impact of *186 Kilometres* as a statement of cultural vibrancy.