



THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE LIFE OF

OLLI MAKI

A FILM BY **JUHO KUOSMANEN**

INTERNATIONAL SALES



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22 Avenue Pierre 1er de Serbie,
75116 Paris, France
+ 33 1 44 43 87 28
www.filmsdulosange.fr

PRODUCTION

Aamu Film Company Ltd.

Hiihtomäentie 34
00800 Helsinki, Finland
rantamaki@aamufilmcompany.fi
+ 35 8 40 73 55 977

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

WOLF Consultants

Gordon Spragg, Laurin Dietrich, Michael Arnon
T: +49 157 7474 9724
M: +33 7 60 21 57 76 (in Cannes)
hello@wolf-con.com
www.wolf-con.com

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OLLI MAKI

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FINLAND / 2016 / 5:1 / 1:85 / FINNISH / 92 MIN



Summer 1962, Olli Mäki has a shot at the world championship title in featherweight boxing. From the Finnish countryside to the bright lights of Helsinki, everything has been prepared for his fame and fortune. All Olli has to do is lose weight and concentrate. But there is a problem – he has fallen in love with Raija.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The basic mood in *THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE LIFE OF OLLI MÄKI* is light. Although it's a story about an existential crisis and finding oneself, it is crucial to the narrative that we don't wallow in the mud but instead, fly like a kite.

The prosperity of my graduation film, *THE PAINTING SELLERS*, put me in a rather distressing situation. After it had won the 1st prize in the Cinéfondation selection of Cannes Film Festival and I was promised, as part of the prize, that my first feature film would have its international premiere in the official selection of Cannes Film Festival. I was regarded as a "promising young director" in Finland. I remember sitting at my writing desk, mumbling and thinking about what exactly I had promised and whom. Of course, I also found it very flattering, but as the time went by, I started to feel more anxious about the fact that there were people out there, people I did not even know, expecting me to do things that I was not prepared to do. I had burdened myself with the idea of meeting the expectations, which I had started to feel under my skin. I was able to reason that the burden of keeping the customers satisfied was merely in my own head, but still, the truth was that my creativity and capacity to get excited about filmmaking had hit bottom.

The idea for *THE HAPPIEST DAY IN THE LIFE OF OLLI MÄKI* came along as a solace to this distressing situation. The film is inspired by a true story, and Olli Mäki is still a well-known Finnish boxer today. At the very beginning of his professional career, Olli got the chance to fight against the ruling featherweight world champion at the time, the American Davey Moore. And then, in front of a packed stadium, he lost the match humiliateingly in the second round.

Later on Olli Mäki would say it was the best day of his life.





IN CONVERSATION WITH JUHO KUOSMANEN

When did you learn of the story of Olli Mäki's championship bout and the romance he began with Raija while he trained for it? What made you want to make a film about it?

It was 2011, and I met Olli and Raija in Kokkola. Olli has severe Alzheimer's disease now, but he still remembers his old stories. He told me about this championship fight back in 1962, and when he ended his story by saying: "It was the happiest day of my life," he had this smile on his face that forced me to ask incredulously "How come?" That's when he told me about buying the engagement rings together with Raija that same day. Nice story I thought, but a bit too classic to be told again. But as the weeks passed, Olli's story stayed on my mind. Why did he buy those rings on that same day? I didn't know much about boxing myself, but it was still obvious to me that if you're preparing for a world championship fight, you should be 100% dedicated to the fight. Buying your engagement rings the very same day seemed like something that would be totally forbidden. Then, as I started to dig deeper into Olli's story, I realised that it was full of beautiful details and complexity which lifted it from the average into something unique. Art is in the details, I've heard.

I soon realised that Olli's story was not only about losing the fight and winning in love. In fact it wasn't about winning or losing at all, but about finding your own way to happiness regardless of outside expectations.

The fight and Olli's participation was in a sense a clash of worldviews - a small town communist from Finland under pressure to become a star in the American show business machine.

In the popular imagination, is Olli Mäki seen as a national hero or a national failure?

If he's not a national hero, he's at least a working class hero. Generally speaking he is definitely considered to be one of the best boxers to ever come out of Finland. After his defeat to Davey Moore, Olli Mäki continued boxing until 1973, won the European Championship in 1964 so he had good fights and left a legacy that partly wiped away the memory of this great loss in 1962 in the national consciousness.

There are some people who say that Olli Mäki wasn't ambitious enough and didn't have the right personality to ever become a great boxer, that he was too kind of a person and too much of a 'good guy.' One example of what led to that reputation is Olli never wanting to knock out his opponents. He thought there was no reason to if the fight already seemed to be won. So sometimes the same things that make you a better person aren't the ones that will take you to the top of your sport.

What is your relationship to the real Olli Mäki now, and was he involved in the film?

We've met a few times with Olli and Raija since. Unfortunately Olli is quite seriously ill, enough that he's not fully aware of the film. Raija is such a beautiful person, and she has been a great help for us. They visited a few times during the shoot, and they are actually seen in the film, in the very last shot. The real Olli and Raija pass our characters, and then our fictional Raija asks "-Do you think we'll become like them? -You mean old? -Yes, and happy. -Of course we will", says Olli, played by Jarkko Lahti.





How did you put the cast together, and were there any specific techniques you used on set?

Casting is for me the core of directors' work. We did a huge casting for this film, but finally, for the three main characters, we ended up using the ones I had in mind from the beginning. I think this group has the same kind of dynamic as the people in the film, or at least it was very easy to see them becoming that way.

Eero Milonoff, (as Elis Ask, Olli Mäki's trainer) is a well-known Finnish actor. I didn't know him personally before this film, but I'm very happy we worked together. He's from Helsinki, and more experienced than Oona or Jarkko, who play Raija and Olli. Eero is an extremely dedicated actor, he would phone me about twice a day and want to talk about this and that. And when we were in the final days of location scouting, he was there hanging out with us all the time. Eero is smart enough to understand that the time you spend with the crew also helps you to do your job well later on. It's not just about rehearsing your own part. Little by little you also get to know what kind of humour or worldview is behind the camera, and it's easier to serve it when you know it.

Oona Airola (Raija Jänkä) is starring in her first film role. She has a great sense of humour and she's a very charismatic performer. She used to sell tickets at the box office for theatre, and I think she was more interesting than the plays that they had there. Oona did a huge amount of work to achieve the kind of presence that makes it feel like she's not acting at all. Too often in film reviews male performances are considered as a result of dedication and hard work, and female performances are perceived as a gift of nature, that the actresses are not doing anything, they just happen to have a nice presence. But I can assure you, that Oona's role was built up with intelligence and hard work. It wasn't easy for her to have such a natural presence as a first timer, but she did a great job.

Jarkko Lahti (Olli Mäki) has been acting a lot in the theatre, but this is his first big role in a feature film. Jarkko is from Kokkola, the same place as Olli Mäki. He is also, like Oona and Eero, a very dedicated actor. He started boxing as soon as I told him that I was considering making a film about Olli Mäki and he could be in it. He had two amateur fights on top of that, and during the shoot he lost a lot of weight. It's of course very important to have these experiences when preparing this kind of very physical role, but I think just as important as losing weight is the ability to lose the shield separating you and the camera. When you're on stage your position as an actor is different, you can control the whole stage, but in film it's the opposite. Jarkko had a few years of preparation for this role, and I think he prepared it perfectly.

Jarkko and I are from the same street, and we used to walk to school together. Once I threw a snowball at him and he hit me in the head with a metal bike pump. 20 years later I asked him to play a role in my short film *The Citizens*, and it included a scene where he has to get into a fight with a much bigger guy. And a few more years after that, I asked him to play this role as boxer who gets beaten up. So I think I've now taken my revenge.

It's a film that's very character based. We started by developing the *mise en scène* with the actors, and then we thought about the motives and possibilities for moving the camera and changing something if necessary. We shot the scenes using long takes, from the beginning to the end and a bit more, and we did that few times with different lenses. We don't usually do pick-ups at all. And we don't worry too much about mistakes, it's essential that you don't work in fear of mistakes, otherwise you end up making boring decisions.

I don't have strong directions for the actors, it's more about tuning the mood on the whole set in the right direction. By losing a bit of the controlled side, you get nice details and surprises and it helps to keep the scene alive.



Why and at what point did you decide to shoot the film, set in 1962, in black and white and on 16mm?

Two months before the shoot. We tested a lot of different materials, film and digital, but it was this one, Kodak Tri-X, that had the right texture. It's black and white reversal, very characteristic material. It was not just the way it looks, but the way it feels. Everything shot on this film takes on an early sixties vibe. After looking at the tests, it was an easy decision. We felt that with this material, the film would take the audience back to the sixties, and we wouldn't need to underline the period with close-ups of characteristic objects, cars or hairdos on the set.

We had to order all the stock there was in Europe, then everything they had in the States, and then Kodak had to produce some more. I think it's not meant to be a film stock for feature films. It was used in the news in the 60's and 70's.

Why make the actual championship fight, and boxing overall, occupy such a small space in the film?

We wanted to concentrate on the things that are hidden. The film is more about the backstage than the stage. I wanted to show Boxing just as part of everyday life, and not hold it above into as something symbolic or greater than the other scenes. That goes hand in hand with what the film is about.

And also, when you know that Rocky 7 is being made at the same time, you can be sure that they are going to focus on the fight scenes, so you're free to focus on the eye contact and the kite flying scenes.

I watched many, many boxing films, and some of them almost made me want to change the subject of my movie, but there were good ones too. Together with my cinematographer we watched cinema vérité classics from the 60's, and those pretty much became our visual reference.

Do you think the film business at times resembles the one of professional boxing?

Definitely. The more money you need, the more hands you need to shake. I think one of the reasons there are so many boxing films is that the two resemble each other. Of course boxing is a very cinematic sport, but as a director it's also easy to put yourself in the shoes of the protagonist. In the end you're alone in the ring and there is always the possibility of getting badly beaten.

It's impossible to direct something you don't understand. And I don't know that much about boxing, but it was easy for me to understand our protagonist in the situations he was in. I've been there myself, shaking hands and promising things that I shouldn't promise.

In my personal view, this film is as much about filmmaking as it is about boxing. I felt that with this kind of a setup, it would be easy to work through the same emotions that I was going through as a filmmaker. And I could take a wider shot and gently smile at my own existential crisis. But that's just my personal view, it's not something encrypted in the film that the audience is supposed to find out. I hope everybody has their own reflections.





Your film vividly recreates the feel of the early 60's, but over the nostalgia, there is a modern vibrancy and point of view. How did you navigate between period piece and contemporary filmmaking?

I never wanted to make a period piece, and we weren't tempted by nostalgia too much. The idea was always to make a contemporary film that feels like an old film. The film stock was a great help. We could rely on it feeling like the sixties without having to point it out too much ourselves. We shot as much as possible on location, and the fun fair was our only studio scene.

Production design, costume design and make-up were all authentic 60's, but we were very careful not to underline anything too much. The extras were dressed closer to actual sixties style, and our main characters were a bit more timeless. Once the set was ready and cameras were rolling, we were shooting a contemporary film. Our references were more documentary than fiction.

Did Olli Mäki interest you as a figure who doesn't neatly fit into the macho stereotype of a boxer?

Contradictions are always interesting. Joyce Carol Oates wrote in her essays On Boxing, that "Boxing is a celebration of the lost religion of masculinity all the more trenchant for its being lost." We played with this fact quite a lot.

I liked the idea that they have the wrong main character in the documentary they are making in the film. It's funny that they are trying to make a traditional boxing hero out of this small, sensitive man who is uncomfortable being filmed.

A lot of the comedy comes out of this 'wrong man in the wrong place' situation, and it was fun to play with the usual image of a boxer in opposition to Olli's private emotions. Olli is a character who was perfect for that. It was also challenging to write a main character who really just wants to be left alone. But in the end, we are not following how Olli is going to change, but instead hoping that he will remain as he is.

In your eyes, what can the film and the story of Olli Mäki tell us about today's life, culture, or society?

It's always good to stop thinking that what counts is the end goal. We are surrounded by advertisements promoting success, but first we should find out what we're talking about when we talk about success.

I think that things that were exceptional in the sixties have now become everyday issues. The urge to attain 'success', to get publicity and issues around people's public image aren't things that are reserved just for celebrities these days.

We are living in very competitive world. At least in Finland people seem to be very concerned about what other people think, and it's always in the headlines if we've done well in whatever statistics.

Competition is essential in sports, I love it, but when it becomes the everyday, it's destroying the beauty of life.



BIO JUHO KUOSMANEN

Juho Kuosmanen (b. 1979) is a Helsinki based filmmaker. His previous short films have won several prizes in prominent festivals including Cannes' Cinéfondation and Locarno.

He graduated from the ELO Helsinki Film School of Aalto University in 2014. Along with his studies Kuosmanen has also acted and directed for the stage and worked closely with the avant-garde opera ensemble West Coast Kokkola Opera. The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki is Juho Kuosmanen's first feature length film.



FILMOGRAPHY

TAULUKAUPPIAAT (The Painting Sellers) 2010 - 60 min

Cannes Cinéfondation, 1st prize 2010

Nominated for 5 Finnish Film Academy Awards.

Torino Film Festival, Italy, 2010

Premiers Plans, Angers, France 2011

Leeds International Film Festival, UK, 2010

KAUPUNKILAISIA (Citizens) 2008 - 28 min

Film Festival Locarno, Switzerland 2008. Second Prize Leopards of Tomorrow.

21st Premiers Plans Festival, Angers, France 2009. Winner of Prix Arte

Tampere Film Festival 2009, Finland. Prize of the Youth Jury

Sao Paulo International Short Film Festival, Brazil 2009

KESTOMERKITSIJÄT (Roadmarkers) 2007 - 18 min

Cannes Cinéfondation 3rd Prize 2008

VII Open St. Petersburg Student Film Festival, 2008, Award for the best director



CAST

OLLI MÄKI
RAIJA JÄNKÄ
ELIS ASK

LAILA ASK
SNADI
EVI
TUULA
ANNELI

BOXERS

Jarkko Lahti
Oona Airola
Eero Milonoff

Joanna Haartti
Esko Barquero
Elma Milonoff
Leimu Leisti
Hilma Milonoff

Olli Rahkonen
Joonas Saartamo
Henrik Palosaari
Sam-Peter Hirvikangas
Antti Naakka
Niklas Hyvärinen

CREW

Director
Producer
Co-Producers

Juho Kuosmanen
Jussi Rantamäki
Jamila Wenske
Sol Bondy
Nicklas Wikström Nicastro
Simon Perry
Katarina Krave

Editor
Sound Designer
Make Up Designer
Costume Designer
Production Designer
Cinematographer
Screenwriters

Jussi Rautaniemi
Pietu Korhonen
Salla Yli-Luopa
Sari Suominen
Kari Kankaanpää
J-P Passi
Mikko Myllylahti
Juho Kuosmanen

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Bérénice VINCENT

Head of Sales

+ 33 6 63 74 69 10

b.vincent@filmsdulosange.fr

Marine GOULOIS

Sales & Festivals

+ 33 6 84 21 74 53

m.goulois@filmsdulosange.fr

Lise ZIPCI

Library Sales & Servicing

+ 33 6 75 13 05 75

l.zipci@filmsdulosange.fr

Jules CHEVALIER

Administration & Finance

+ 33 6 26 15 66 22

j.chevalier@filmsdulosange.fr