

The Little Boy and the Beast

Telling quality stories about hard topics like divorce

The Little Boy and the Beast (Studio Soi for ZDF, Germany) is a 6-minute animation program.

A dog in a sunny park (cf. screenshot 1) barks happily when a little boy comes to pet him. The dog growls when the shadow of a gigantic beast casts on the boy (cf. screenshot 2). The boy groans in exasperation, takes the beast by the hand and leads it away. His voice-over: "When your mother turns into a beast, many things are different." The boy leads the beast into a supermarket and takes cans from the shelves (cf. screenshot 3). He comments: "You have to take care of everything", and muses at the check-out: "Sometimes it's not so bad having a beast for a mum. They don't forbid you stuff all the time." He puts an armful of candy on the check-out counter (cf. screenshot 4). On their way out, the beast embarrasses the little boy by her rude behavior towards the cashier and other customers.

In the evening, the boy plays with a toy train in the living room: "And when the sun sets it's especially hard. Then, beasts get into such a bad mood that they tear apart photos of times when they were happy." (cf. screenshot 5) He gets up and pats his beastly mother consolingly. Later that night, the beast enters the boy's room and gets into bed with him.

The next day, the boy plays soccer in the yard, and the apathetic beast just stands there. A car arrives. The boy says goodbye to his mother who growls at the other beast sitting in the car. The boy comments, matter-of-factly: "Beasts are very beastly among each other." He hugs his mum: "Then you have to calm them down and tell them that everything is alright. Even if it is not true at all." (cf. screenshot 6)

"No one knows how long the beastliness will stay. It takes time and patience", the boy narrates a list of activities that help to "de-beast". Slowly, the beast transforms back into a woman. Now, the first scene recurs, it is wintertime. The boy pats the dog, this time the shadow is from his non-threatening mother (cf. screenshot 7). They play soccer in the yard with his mother's new partner, when his father's car arrives. He is still a full-blown beast. "Dad needs some more time", says the boy as he gets into the car (cf. screenshot 8), and concludes: "until then I play soccer, preferably with him."

The Little Boy and the Beast was the winner of the Up to 6 Fiction category at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONALE 2010 with the highest score a program ever received: 9.01 points out of 10.

International experts' opinions

International experts shared their opinions on *The Little Boy and the Beast* during the discussion sessions at the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONALE 2010.

Almost all the international experts loved the program as it handled the issue of divorce and a child's experience of witnessing a transformation in the behavior of his parents. "I have to say that *The Little Boy and the Beast* was my favorite thing. I think it is brilliant, and I loved every shot. I just thought it was a work of art." (male expert, USA)

They discussed the target audience of the program and the fact that it was well received by both children and adults. "I think this will work for over-preschool as well" (male expert, USA). The broadcaster of the program who was present among the audience affirmed this: "In ZDF, we have this structure that if employees go through divorce, they have some sort of social counseling. They are using that film as well for that purpose. It turns out that a lot of adults can relate to it." (female expert, Germany)



Ill. 1: In the park, a little boy sees a dog and wants to play with it



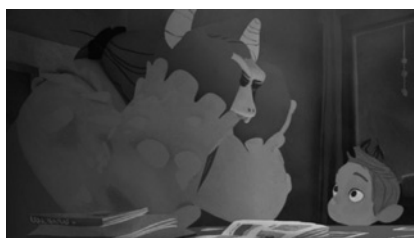
Ill. 2: The boy's mother is a beast and scares the dog away



Ill. 3: The boy has to take charge of his mother in the supermarket



Ill. 4: He buys candy, and his apathetic beast mum doesn't notice



Ill. 5: At night, the beast mother is in the worst mood



Ill. 6: Meeting the boy's beast father upsets the beast mum



Ill. 7: Finally, the mother has turned back into her own self



Ill. 8: The boy's beast father needs some more time to "de-beast"

Some were confident that the program had a universal appeal and should not be restricted to dealing with divorce alone. "I thought it was so real. I think you can relate it to other issues: alcoholism, dysfunctionality, depression, and even things that are not bad things that cause a transition." (female expert, USA)

However, there were concerns regarding the ability of a child to understand this program. "I think it is beautiful. But, do you know if children actually understand this: that the mother turns into a beast, because she is sad about her husband having left?" (female expert, Denmark)

All the experts praised the program for showing a frequent problem, i.e. parents going through a divorce, in a fresh and innovative style. They felt that this is something that children can relate to. The program was also a good example for a situation where parents and children can sit and watch together. It was regarded as an eye opener to both children and adults about the overwhelming emotions one goes through during these tough times. "It was just so refreshing ... the mom and dad – I have just never seen it done so. That is exactly how a kid would see these 2 parents acting like monsters." (male expert, Canada)

The program also emphasized the fact that children need to understand that people go through various emotions in life beyond just being happy and perfect. "It speaks to us for not acknowledging how big an emotional life preschoolers have, in general; but there are highs and lows, and happy and upset, and uncontrollable rage. All of these things happen, and we should be a little bit more genuine. You just really get that sense – and that parents have ups and downs too – and seeing that." (male expert, Canada)

The international experts really praised the program for the respecting the audience and mirroring back to them and letting them arrive at the conclusion. "I also thought that it didn't over-explain any of the moments. It just trusted the audience to put these pieces together in a really elegant, beautiful way. It was really outstanding." (male expert, USA)

The expert from Germany who was also the broadcaster of the program emphasized that observation. "We had ZDF screen it there, and during the screening the lady who was sitting next to me started crying, because she was just going through a divorce. There was one lady, the first thing she said was: 'well, I am a beast'." (female expert, Germany)

The experts were also impressed by the narrative and the production value of the program. "It was just a good storytelling. It just got you emotionally." (male expert, USA)

"Technically beautiful, and the care in framing, and the care into the boy's perspective. It shifted in visual perspective as it went from place to place. I just thought that was so intensely respectful of a kid's aesthetic position, which we're often not." (male expert, USA)

Prof. Dr. Dafna Lemish, Namrata Bansal and Hao Cao (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA)