

Artist Talk mit Mads Mikkelsen



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For almost a decade Mads Mikkelsen has worked as a dancer before he started his acting career. His first job has prepared him well for roles that demanded a lot of physicality, but also for more delicate and subtle characters. His turn as Bond villain Le Chiffre in „Casino Royale“ and the title role in the „Hannibal“ series made him world-famous. But his career has much more to offer than just striking bad guys, which he has shown in films like „Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky“, „Michael Kohlhaas“ and „The Hunt“.

There is something that is a bit unfair when you talk about the Mikkelsen family: That we don't speak enough about your brother. Let's start with him. You have a brother, Lars, who is also an actor. He is older than you. Did he infect you to become an actor or the other way round?

I think we were doing it simultaneously. I was a pronounced dancer for almost ten years, and he was touring in Europe, juggling and doing street artist stuff. I taught him how to juggle with three balls, and after a week he could do five ... So then he was slowly fascinated with acting and he bumped into a theatre group and started going to a drama school. I had the same ideas at that point. But we didn't really talk about it when it happened. So he was first, I think.

You didn't meet a lot on screen. I think you were in one film together.

We are in a couple, actually. He was supposed to play my brother in a western and we've done a TV show and a film together.

You started with a Danish film and your latest one is also a Danish film. It seems that you have a strong bond with Denmark, because you are also an internationally famous actor and you are working anywhere now but you use to come back to Denmark – why?

Because I'm Danish! It is where I grew up and this is where my stories are, it's my language. It's a different approach. The work is the same, but when it's your own language and your own story it just feels like home - so yes, I will return as often as they want me back.

Now that you are internationally famous, do you still audition for roles?

It's been a while since that happened. The thing about auditions is that it's not always to see if you're right for the part, sometimes it's also a constellation. You know, you might want to see Brad Pitt and Viggo Mortensen together and see if the chemistry works. That might be the case. They are both great actors, but the director might want to see them working together to see if he can do this for three months and bring something genius out of it. So that's sometimes the case when I do auditions.

And speaking of auditions, is there a part you auditioned for that you didn't get and that you miss because you wanted to have it? Or the other way round?

There's a few. But it's almost never the case that I regret that I didn't get it. There was one case though where I didn't get it and where I was pretty happy about that: „Fantastic Four“ was the only one. You don't mind as an actor coming into a room, having to play a scene, well written, a little drama and doing so in a small office or so. You can pretend! But with the audition for „Fantastic Four“ that was not the case. I think my character had only two lines – one was: „Stop“ and one was: „Go“ – and the rest of it was just being a supervillain with extremely long arms and catching things. How do you want me to act that shit? That

was a really, really weird experience and I just went out and was like: „I won't audition again, this is so embarrassing! Everything we learned was just thrown out in the bin.“ And I didn't get it – luckily! I didn't have long enough arms ...

But you still ended up being in a Marvel film, „Doctor Strange“, and I heard you are a comic book fan.

Are you a Marvel fan as well?

I am a Marvel fan to a certain degree. I mean, I do remember Spiderman and Hulk when I was a kid, but I am more like a Graphic Novel guy. There are quite a few adaptations. I mean, „Blueberry“ has been tried and they should give it a retry because I think it's a fantastic Graphic Novel. „Corto Maltese“ would be also very interesting to see on the big screen. It's somebody with long arms and legs – could be me!



Bild aus: „Doctor Strange“



Bild aus: „Blueberry und der Fluch der Dämonen“

Are you watching the films you were playing in? Are your kids watching your films?

I often watch them before the premiere because the director shows it to you and you might have the chance to comment on a couple of things regarding editing stuff. So maybe twice I watch my films and that's it. My kids don't give a lot of critic. They either look happy or bored. There was a really nice example with the French film „Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky“ and we had an opening in Cannes and my son was there and he was very unimpressed by the whole red carpet stuff and we were sitting on the fancy seats and, I mean, of course he was eight years old and it was French and he had no idea what was going on up there so after five minutes he was sleeping so heavily and he was snoring – and it was just fantastic! That was his reaction to his dad on the big screen.

You did films, you did TV and you recently also did video games, at least one. You provided the English voice, appearance, and motion capture for Hideo Kojima's game „Death Stranding“. Can you tell us what the challenge in acting was in such a high-level video game?

Well, the challenge was that we got dressed up in a green suit, very athletic tight, and you have a camera that is filming you with a billion dots in your face and you just basically look like an idiot. And then you had to pretend that you were in a coat and sitting in a chair. We had to simulate everything, but we were actually acting and interacting with each other. It was very interesting because with those cameras it was tricky to work around them. There were a couple of scenes where you had to hug, and the camera just got tangled up. Normally I would say: „Ok, let's do it again. We want to do that better.“ And then Hideo Kojima said: „No, no problem. I just fix it.“ Obviously, we kept forgetting that this was a computer game, and he could do anything with us. But we also did some scenes with no additional lighting, and we were all crossing fingers that he would do something magical later.

You did voice for animated films, at least once. Considering the context with COVID and the fact that not so many films are going to be shot in the next few months, are you considering going back to animation?

I did couple of animation films, for example „Monsters Inc.“ and „Cars“. I wouldn't mind going back. The thing is, I don't get to choose. They ask me and if they don't ask me, I can't go back to them. If there's something that comes in my way by chance, yes, obviously. So in „Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them“ Part 3 I will take on the role of „Grindelwald“, who was previously played by Johnny Depp. Especially the Pixar and the Disney films are fantastic productions and very fun to work on – and wonderful to watch, even for grownups.

Tell us a little bit about the preparation process of contributing to a role and the story that is written on paper.

Do you have the opportunity to change it a bit to your needs and skills?

It was like that in the very beginning. The first one I did, you mentioned it, was the „Pusher“ film and by the way it's not a Neo-Nazi, it's just an idiot. That was a script, but Nicolas was very open to: „You can learn the lines, but in the end of the day this is how I want to feel after I've seen the scene, so make me feel like this.“ He was obviously open to a lot of interpretation and improvisation in that film. And that was my first. That was very much the way we worked together. I mean, if you have a strong and good idea that helps the script it's something you should bring up. But it can also go in the complete opposite direction, so you must have good sense for that.

Is it more difficult in big Hollywood productions?

Yeah. But I think we had a certain amount of liberty when we did the „James Bond“ film, and it was Daniel Craigs first one. For him it was also very enormous, just like it was for me. But we did sit down and talked about things. For the torture scene for example we had a lot of ideas. And Daniel and me would just go back and forth, and the director was listening and nodding and eventually he said: „Boys, come back, it's a Bond film.“ So that's the thing, you CAN. You can improvise and come up with ideas, even in a Bond film – as long as you understand it's a Bond film.



Bild aus: „Casino Royale“



Bild aus: „Another Round“

How did you step into the project „Another Round“? Was it a call from Thomas Vinterberg?

Right after „The Hunt“ Thomas already had an idea about this film. It was under the level of the alcohol level and people working in different works, they were not high school teachers they were working in different jobs. My character was the boss of the control tower at the airport, which is obviously super cool, when you're drunk. There were a lot of crazy ideas coming out of there. What it did lack was a story and I knew that this story was eventually more important than the idea of using alcohol. And so, when I saw the script, I was really happy because it was a story about embracing life, picking up that phone, make that call that you didn't do for 20 years and then just do it. Thomas makes stories about that and I thought this was really funny and worth doing. It's fantastic to work with him. He's a wonderful director and he makes beautiful stories. He's absolutely generous with his actors either, even with the ones that are only there for one day.

You did TV at the beginning of your career in Denmark and then you did this kind of TV afterwards.

What's the difference between those two worlds?

When I did the first TV thing it was kind of ground-breaking what we did. I would still say, compared to what we did in film, TV was much more in the middle of the road. It would have literally everyone watching it. Four years old, 95 years old – everybody should be pleased. And we tried to please everyone, and it becomes a little: „You're not pleasing anyone by trying to please everyone.“ But still, it was popular, and we didn't offend anyone, but that is not always a good thing, you know? We offended a lot of people and that is sometimes a good idea. I loved the first things I did on TV, but for me, coming from the world of „Pusher“ films, it was absolutely nothing like that, as ironical as „Pusher“ films for example. And I missed that. Also the craziness and being more radical and of course you couldn't do the same things on television at eight o'clock in the evening that worked so well in „Pusher“. But 20 years later, you could do that on American television at eight o'clock in the evening. And that is a big change, I mean look at what they do at Netflix and HBO. Some of that stuff is extreme and very interesting, as if they are almost taking over what films used to do.

These last years danish cinema exploded and a lot of the directors became very famous and you've worked with almost all of them. With some internationally famous you didn't work. Is it

because you weren't contacted or because you don't have personal affinities with them or is there a reason why you are not working with Lars von Trier or people like that?

Let's start with Nicolas Winding Refn doing the „Pusher“ films, he had his own group doing his own films with his people and so had others and so had Lars von Trier. That was like groups and none of these groups had any hopes or dreams of working with each other. It was a battle, and we were defining ourselves with what we did, and we did not want to look like the others. This is what you do when you're young, right? And only later you eventually figure out: Oh, this guy is nice or she's really sweet, he or she has got some good ideas and eventually people started working criss-cross a bit more. But Lars von Trier never gave me a call and I think he also disappeared when he started working with an American accent so that was my excuse, but I met him a few times. I know him and I like him a lot. It might be difficult for me to work with him and I think he has a hunch as well, but it would be interesting.

We are now in this wave of cancel culture and political correctness is everywhere, social network is also used in artist work, criticising everything from the choice of gender in every film etc. Is that something that bothers you or do you feel the freedom to do what you want?

You have an endless amount of people that can be offended, and they will be today and of course it's insane! You don't like it? Don't watch it! It is the way it is. Don't try to cancel it. So of course, it's a scary thing and we hope it will pass. It's a long discussion but obviously it's something I didn't have to face 20 years ago and all of a sudden it just exploded. And I dare to say that these people are so much in worries about fighting for the right causes, that it might be better to not watch any films and it might be better to not read any books. So obviously freedom of speech is obviously freedom of speech and the freedom to do narcissistic things has to be there. That's not the case. So yeah, it is concerning but so far, we are still doing films and hopefully it's not going to feed so much in how people want to express themselves.



Bild aus: „Pusher“



Bild aus: „Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky“

Thank you very much for the interview.

Castings: „Casino Royale“: Debbie McWilliams | „Hannibal“: Marc Hirschfeld, Robin D. Cook u. a. | „Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky“: Gigi Akoka, Natalya Krimenskaya | „Michael Kohlhaas“: Leila Fournier, Sarah Teper | „The Hunt“: Terri Taylor | „Doctor Strange“: Sarah Finn, Reg Poerscout-Edgerton | „Blueberry“: Louis DiGiaimo | „Corto Maltese“: in eigener Regie | „Pusher“: in eigener Regie | „Another Round“: Tanja Grunwald, Kinder: Jette Termann

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