

Best of both worlds

“My heart is definitely a Finnish blue and white heart,” says award-winning actor Peter Franzén in this exclusive interview. He lives in Los Angeles but revisits his childhood in Lapland for his latest project, *Above Dark Waters*, in which he makes his debut as a director

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Peter Franzén was 20 when he began to realise that something about his childhood had not been quite right. Franzén, now one of Finland's most respected actors, was studying at the Theatre Academy of Finland when it struck him that what he had thought at the time was a happy childhood, growing up in a small village in southern Lapland in the 1970s, was actually far from idyllic.

"When I got into the Theatre Academy right after my military service, the first year they take you apart and make you see what's in you, what has touched you the most and what kind of a life you've lived, in order to use it in the art that you're preparing for," he reveals. "I started to understand that there had been something out of the ordinary, that I had been in a situation at home where it had been violent and dangerous."

Childhood memories

The violent force at home was Franzén's stepfather, an alcoholic, whose outbursts the family escaped by fleeing to his grandparents' house, a nearby safe haven. Moments of his childhood influenced his acclaimed, largely autobiographical 2010 novel *Above Dark Waters* (*Tumman veden päällä*) which became a play at the Finnish National Theatre two years later and is now a film, set for release in cinemas on 6th September.

"The novel is quite a big chunk out of my childhood," says Franzén, 42, who makes his debut as a director with this project. "Some of the things in it are real and really happened. It's all through the little boy's eyes, the lead in the novel and the movie. It's about domestic violence because of alcohol disease; I just wanted to give people who have experienced a similar kind of childhood or who are in a similar situation in their lives a possibility to lean onto something and have an idea that there are many of us. It's just that we don't talk about these issues."

Although the subject matter is dark, Franzén points out that, in anyone's life, there are lighter moments. "I tried to make it a warm film with comic things in it – life is not just darkness all

the time. I felt that my childhood was good – I still do – even though I truly understand what was going on there now. I just didn't know any better back then."

In the film, we see seven-year-old Pete playing with a sister, swimming, enjoying meal times and watching TV with the family – a normal life. With the project, Franzén was given a rare opportunity to visually recreate his 1970s childhood and journeyed back to his village, Keminmaa, situated on the Bothnian Bay, less than 20 kilometres from the Swedish border.

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"It was wonderful to be able to bring the whole 'caravan' up there and make the film in the village," he says. "The location scouting was rather easy; I knew a lot of the places beforehand. They had always been in my mind and my heart."

He also knew exactly who should play his beloved grandparents. "That was really quite clear to me. They even look a little bit like them. I'd worked with both of the actors, Ismo (Kallio) and Marja (Packalén), in a previous production, as an actor"

The movie stars Olavi Angervo as Pete,

Matleena Kuusniemi as Pete's mother, and, playing his stepfather, Samuli Edelmann who has co-starred with Franzén in a few projects including last year's *Road North* and 2010's *Princess*. Franzén spent five days of the shoot playing Pete's biological father in scenes where father and son briefly bond.

"After the first day as an actor in my own film I sort of got the hang of it," he laughs. "It was interesting to jump back in the director's seat and view the monitor and check out the shot and the scene."

Wearing different hats – screenwriter, director and actor on this occasion – comes naturally to Franzén. "I've been practising that for quite some time as an author and sometimes having multiple jobs on top of one another. When you're an actor in Finland you sometimes work as a theatre actor on stage and maybe do a little TV within a couple of days of each other or even on the same day – it's sort of multi-tasking. So it was a normal transition for me to direct, and hopefully the audience will think that way too!"

Many talents

Although he has been based in Los Angeles for over 13 years, as an actor in a career spanning 20 years and over 40 movies, Franzén's biggest successes by far have been in Finnish cinema. He also met his Swedish-born wife, actress Irina Björklund, in Finland.

A woman of many talents, Björklund composed some of the music for *Above Dark Waters* and is an award-winning performer, having won a Jussi Award (a Finnish Oscar) for *Me and Morrison* in 2002. The couple first met at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki almost 20 years ago, wed in 1996 and have a six-year-old son, Diego.

Before attending the academy at the age of 19, Franzén's only professional paid work as an actor was at the age of 11 or 12, playing Kurt in *The Sound of Music* on stage in Kemi, the closest city to his home. "That was my first part," he recalls. "It was great – singing and dancing and a couple of lines of dialogue. Those were fun experiences." ➔

After the academy, he was quick to develop his acting career, winning a Jussi Award for 1998's *A Summer by the River*. He has been nominated for seven Jussis Awards in all, winning a further two – for 2004's *Dog Nail Clipper* and 2009's *Hellsinki*. A versatile actor, Franzén is also known for playing a shirtless, idiotic criminal in *Bad Boys*, and for delivering a scene-stealing performance in the Dogma-style musical comedy *On the Road to Emmaus*, as well as appearing in the literary adaptation, *Purge*, and Second World War drama, *Ambush*, one of several films in which he has co-starred with his wife.

In America, Franzén's roles have included a very brief appearance in *CSI: Miami* in 2004, and in 2009, he played a Viking, speaking Swedish with Alexander Skarsgård in *True Blood*. He also played a corrupt police officer opposite Samuel L Jackson and Eva Mendes in 2007's *Cleaner*, directed by fellow Finn, Renny Harlin. These were very minor roles compared to his work in Finland.

Busy life

"People say there's no such thing as a small part but of course there is," he laughs. "They don't necessarily lead to anything bigger but they might be interesting to casting people or directors and producers in some shape or form if you have a special talent, let's say, speaking Finnish or something like that..."

Hollywood hasn't yet woken up to his talents, so much of Franzén's time is spent working in Finland. He's on the phone today from a village just outside Helsinki as he prepares for the release of *Above Dark Waters*.

The movie was shot in August last year and there was a break before the shoot resumed earlier this year. During that time, Franzén couldn't resist a choice role, shaving his head to play a tattooed neo-Nazi in *Heart of a Lion* (*Leijonasydän*). It's another paternal role.

"My character, the lead character, is in transition," explains Franzén. "He's trying to morph himself back into a more humane and regular guy. He meets a woman and he falls in love with her but the woman has a black child and that persuades him to try really hard to be a father. In a weird way he tries to be a role model and starts standing up for the kid. I was directing half of my own film – we had stopped shooting a couple of days before – and then I jumped into this neo-Nazi's shoes!"

A few days before the interview, Franzén was in Barcelona rehearsing scenes for *The Gunman*, a spy thriller starring Sean Penn and Javier Bardem. He's also promoting a follow-up novel to *Above Dark Waters*

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coming out in September, called *With The Same Eyes* (*Samoilla silmillä*), with Pete now aged 14. Clearly, Franzén is a very busy man and with his own movie coming out, his career has never been so good.

"Without a doubt, this is always what I've dreamed of. There's a lot of work and at least some of it is my own; some of it is me creating my own worlds, my own stories and making them happen on a bigger scale and not just in my desk drawer. It's definitely one of the weirdest and one of the most wonderful periods of my life and I enjoy every stressful and every little happy, joyous moment of seeing it come together."

The only downside is that his work in Europe often keeps him away from his family in California, particularly when he was making *Above Dark Waters*. "They weren't there when we were shooting, unfortunately, so I've been missing them a lot for the past year," he admits. "That's the hard part of this profession, being away from your family for months sometimes, especially when they are in California and you can't just pop by at weekends."

His son is too young to see *Above Dark Waters* but he is familiar with his father's home village, Keminmaa. "My family has visited and my son and I have been to my grandmother's place a number of times. My grandmother was alive until last year," he reveals. "I think it's important for my son to understand my roots and where part of his life and bloodline comes from."

Back in California, Diego is being raised to speak Finnish and Swedish at home as well as

English around family friends and at school. "It's a French school, so he speaks French, too, as my wife did – she went to school in Paris. He speaks four languages," he says proudly, determined that his son should have a genuinely happy childhood. "I didn't have anything to compare my childhood and my life with so I was happy with what I had and I was living a lovely childhood in my mind. I hope that my kid is enjoying his."

Franzén says he misses the Finnish landscape when he's away. "My heart is definitely a Finnish blue and white heart. It's very important for me to come back to Finland periodically and see the nature. We have a lot of water here, it's really beautiful. I love the winters, too, because they are real winters, with lots of snow. Snow is a basic element to me, and we have the sea and all the rivers and lakes which make it a special place."

The great outdoors

It's no surprise that he devotes time to the outdoors when in America. "Outdoors activities have always been a big chunk of our lives," he says. "I love fishing, so we do that in California in the ocean, and during the spring I can drive 45 minutes to the mountains, to the Angeles Crest, a national forest. You can easily hike into the canyons and after an hour and a half you're by a stream that has really big trout in it. The United States is a beautiful country and I love the outdoors – the possibilities are endless in California. It's a beautiful, beautiful state."

Occasionally, Europeans living in America find themselves reminded that they are most definitely European and not American. Has he ever felt at odds with attitudes there or been jolted by a culture shock? "Yeah, there are some things that make you want to move to Europe immediately," he laughs, "like when you come face-to-face with some of the things that happen there, like people over-reacting. It's a place where I've sometimes felt uncomfortable but I never felt it was a culture shock. The transition was easy."

With success in Europe and a life on another continent to return to, Franzén is living out his own version of the American Dream. "Los Angeles, where we live, is a place where anything can happen – good things can happen for people who drive towards something and have a goal – somewhere along the line it can happen. Yes, you can get lost in it and never come out as the same person that went in. But I think I've managed, with my wife and my son, to be quite a normal family there," he laughs. "If that's possible."

