

**PRESS MATERIAL:**



Bullitt Film presents

# LIFE

## and Other Problems

A Film by  
**MAX KESTNER**



Photo credit: Max Kestner

**Opening film at this year's CPH:DOX. The film's world premiere is on March 12th at the opening gala and it is in main competition for the DOX:AWARD. The film has several screenings during the festival.**

**Publicist: Line Bilenberg, Bilenberg PR – [line.bilenberg@gmail.com](mailto:line.bilenberg@gmail.com) - +45 20710494**

- Screener can be sent upon request. For interview requests please contact Line Bilenberg.

**Trailer: [https://youtu.be/A4CQdB3DC\\_Y](https://youtu.be/A4CQdB3DC_Y)**

**Press photos: <https://www.bullittfilm.dk/press>**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Giraffe-gate. Shitstorm. Death threats.*

Emotions ran high, and opinions were diverse both in Denmark and internationally when the Copenhagen Zoo chose to euthanize the young giraffe Marius a decade ago. The story of the beautiful animal with the gentle eyes is the starting point for Max Kestner's new film, "LIFE and Other Problems." But why did the life of one single giraffe become so crucial for so many people? While diving into the heated process of the Marius Case and revisiting people, who were deeply invested in rescuing his life, the film also embarks on a hunt for answers about existence, being human, and how everything is connected.

The question is; What is life as seen from a scientific perspective but also from any ordinary person's perspective? How does it emerge and does it have a direction? Does consciousness exist or are we to believe those who claim that it's just an illusion? Where does love come from? How is everything really connected?

With curiosity and an open mind, Kestner embarks on a philosophical voyage around the world to look for the answers. With contributions from scientists like Charles Foster and Eske Willerslev, every answer sparks three new questions. Yet, throughout the journey, we do gain insight into the great and small workings of the universe.

Kestner seeks out biologists, zoo directors, physicians, and animal activists in Japan, the USA, Chile, Denmark, the UK, Italy, France, and Sweden. What these scientists have in common is that they all contribute significant research and knowledge in their respective fields while also being willing to step beyond what they can prove and venture into the unknown. The result of these encounters is both interesting and humorous, pointing to the fact that we don't know as much as we might like to imagine.

Max Kestner writes in his director's statement (p. 3): *"I imagine that we can choose between two worldviews. One sees life as predictable and our actions as predetermined, while another views life as unpredictable precisely because our actions are not predetermined. The film is in pursuit of the latter. It is about what we all have in common: Life and death. I am not religious. But I think that the world is more exciting if we allow ourselves the possibility that it is not meaningless. That feels more right."*

## SYNOPSIS

What is the meaning of life, death and all the rest? Max Kestner gives an energetic and imaginative answer in his adventurous film *LIFE and other problems*.

Ten years ago, the news that Marius the giraffe was put down by the Copenhagen Zoo went viral, reaching everywhere from Hollywood to Chechnya. But it also served as the first domino to fall in the wild thicket of existential questions posed by Max Kestner in his new, joyously

adventurous film. What is life? Does consciousness exist? Where does love come from? And, not least: How is everything truly connected? With curiosity and an open mind, Kestner embarks on a philosophical voyage around the world, seeking answers to these questions. With contributions from scientists like Charles Foster and Eske Willerslev, each answer sparks three new questions. Yet, throughout the journey, we gain insight into the grand and subtle workings of the universe. What could have become the most self-important film of all time has instead transformed into a funny, creative, and entirely unpredictable experience.

The film asks important questions: Why does a single animal like Marius suddenly become so important to fight for? How do we humans perceive life, relationships, and our place in the ecosystem? Why do we connect so differently with various species and even with our own human race?

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

By Max Kestner

*"My children, by their mere presence, urge me to consider my impact on the world. Like most others, I don't eat a steak without thinking that it was once a living animal. I try to live responsibly in the hope that future generations can also inhabit our planet. But I am confused by the positions in the debate. Does humanity have a special responsibility for the planet? Does humanity have a special right to the planet? Aren't we just part of an unforgiving food chain, all engaged in consuming each other?"*

*I have experienced the death of my grandparents and a few friends. I have seen my children being born and growing. I am no longer fearless, and I feel time on my own body. Questions arise: Who am I, who are you, who are we?"*

*I imagine that we can choose between two worldviews. One views life as predictable and our actions as predetermined. The other views life as unpredictable precisely because our choices are not predetermined but influenced by our consciousness, our experience of being ourselves. The film is in pursuit of the latter. It's a treasure hunt, a search for hope that our actions are always meaningful.*

*I am not religious. But I find the world more intriguing if one allows for the possibility that it is not meaningless. Similarly, I like to imagine that I have free will and am not genetically predetermined to do what I do. It feels more right. Can life be recognised by having free will? In what ways are all the planet's free wills connected?"*

*Regarding life on the planet, I don't understand much, it seems. We exterminate small animals and protect the large ones, as if big is more valuable than small. We protect individual specimens and consume entire species. If plastic is bad because it breaks down slowly, what about stone? Is what is untouched by human hands better than what we have produced? Does evil lie in consciousness, and is there any thoughtless life at all? Are octopuses more valuable than sewer rats, than humans, than mountains?"*

*But about my own life, I know something. I bleed when I stab an oyster knife into my hand. I miss my kids when I am away, and only time will tell how old I will end up being. I believe most others can say the same, unless they don't have children, have very destructive thoughts, or don't eat oysters. We resemble each other. And, in fact, we also resemble the others – killer whales, tulips, oysters, and giraffes. The film is about what we have in common. Life. Death."*

## **ABOUT THE FILM'S PARTICIPANTS**

### **Bengt Holst**

Zoologist and biologist. Scientific director of Copenhagen Zoo until 2020. Bengt Holst has worked in nature conservation, animal welfare, and environmental perspectives for over 30 years, holding various international positions in the field. In 2014, he was awarded "Copenhagener of the Year" for his handling of the scandal that arose after the euthanasia of the giraffe in Copenhagen Zoo. He is the chairman of the Animal Ethics Council and the Danish Nature Fund.

### **Charles Foster**

Veterinarian and author employed at Oxford University. Charles Foster gained public acclaim with the bestselling book "Being a Beast" (2016), his intense exploration of the consciousness of various animals, which he approached by mimicking their lives and routines. Foster has garnered his experiences by living as, among other things, a fox and a beaver. He holds a Ph.D. in Law and Ethical Medicine.

### **Michael Levin**

Michael Levin is a Distinguished Professor in the Biology department at Tufts University, Boston, and director of the Allen Discovery Center. The focus of his lab's research is on understanding the biophysical mechanisms that implement decision-making on a cellular level. By manipulating cells with bioelectricity, they have been able to set them free from their instructions, making them free to do as they want. The research has been used for regenerative medicine purposes and even shown how to regrow limbs in frogs.

### **Karen Lloyd**

Marine biologist, TED talker, and researcher at the University of Tennessee, where Lloyd Lab focuses on researching relatively undescribed life forms with no access to sunlight deep below the ocean surface. The research revolves around microbes, and fieldwork takes place in locations such as Chile, Svalbard, and Siberia. She collaborates with Bo Barker Jørgensen, professor of microbiology at Aarhus University.

### **Eske Willerslev**

Biologist, professor at the University of Copenhagen, director of the Center for GeoGenetics, and professor at the University of Cambridge. Eske Willerslev is an internationally recognized DNA researcher and a strong communicator of knowledge about human evolution. As a fur hunter in Siberia, he has tangible experiences of depending on the lives of others to sustain his own, as well as personal experiences with animal consciousness. Willerslev's research on migration has rewritten human prehistory in Australia, the USA, and Greenland.

### **Ingrid Newkirk**

American activist and leader of the world's largest animal rights organisation, PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Established in 1980, PETA has over 9 million members worldwide. Newkirk has played a significant role in increasing political focus on animal rights in the USA, published several books on animal welfare, and is known for her impactful media presence.

### **Sam Wass**

Professor of Children's Psychology focusing on Infant Development and Neuroscience. He leads BabyDevLab at the University of East London, researching how emotional excitement and stress affect a child's focus and learning opportunities. He conducts studies on why empathy has such a significant impact on human consciousness and development by measuring the synchronisation of parent/child brain waves.

**Donato Giovannelli**

Professor of microbiology at the University of Naples in Italy and Head of the Giovannelli Lab, which investigates how life originated and evolved. His lab explores how the biosphere has co-evolved with the Earth's interior. He often collaborates with Karen Lloyd on field research.

**Claus Hjelmbak**

Celebrity broker based in Los Angeles where he works with famous individuals on their public identity. He is originally Danish and has collaborated with celebrities such as Britney Spears and LaToya Jackson. Hjelmbak attempted to negotiate with Bengt Holst to purchase Marius and bring the giraffe to Hollywood on behalf of a wealthy American family.

**Mads Frost Bertelsen**

Current scientific director of Copenhagen Zoo, responsible for the institution's research unit and veterinary department. He was the veterinarian who performed the euthanasia and autopsy of Marius at the time.

**THE CASE OF THE GIRAFFE MARIUS**

Marius was born in the Copenhagen Zoological Garden in 2012. When the giraffe reached sexual maturity, rivalry between males (Marius and his father) began, which in nature would have meant Marius venturing out to find his own new herd. In the limited space of the zoo, this leads to distress.

The zoo therefore investigated whether Marius could find a place in one of the other European zoos that they formally collaborate with, all of which are accredited zoos with clear ethical guidelines (EAZA). The request was handled by EAZA's giraffe coordinator Jörg Jebram, who could not find a taker for the giraffe among the association's members.

The Copenhagen Zoo then decided to euthanize the healthy male giraffe, as per custom, and chose not to hide it. After the euthanasia, zoo visitors could witness the autopsy, and subsequently the meat would be thrown to the zoo's predators.

The Danish newspaper Ekstra Bladet picked up the story of the planned euthanasia and featured it on the front page. A true media storm erupted as the story spread worldwide, and well-known personalities like Ricky Gervais and Kirstie Alley became furious. Bengt Holst received both death threats and offers from wealthy individuals and non-accredited zoos wishing to take the giraffe. At one point, the media storm and the outrage over Denmark's treatment of animals were on par with the Muhammad cartoon crisis.

Holst appeared in numerous TV interviews, explaining the rationale behind the decision, both regarding the euthanasia and, especially, the choice not to hide it. In EAZA, there was unrest about the legitimacy of zoos, and especially the French division wanted to exclude the Copenhagen Zoo, even though the method of euthanasia is approved, similar to other zoos using contraception to maintain an appropriate animal population.

**SHORT BIOGRAPHIES****Director of the film:**

Max Kestner is one of Denmark's most prominent documentary filmmakers, recognised for his visionary and personal narratives. His award-winning films have participated in various international festivals, and his production includes films such as "Dreams in Copenhagen," "Blue Collar White Christmas," "Max By Chance" and "Little Galaxies." He is a graduate film director from the National Film School of Denmark. Kestner often works in the borderlands between defined genres like documentary, fiction, and animation, and he has received the Dreyer Prize, the Roos Prize, and several Danish Academy Awards (Robert).

**Producer of the film:**

Vibeke Vogel is behind several award-winning documentaries including "Absolute Beginners" by Thora Lorentzen, "Love Bound" by Vibe Mogensen, and "Just Before Death" by Anne Wivel. She often works in international contexts, currently with Hind Bensari's new film "Out of School" in collaboration with Moroccan Le Moindre Geste and recently "Fantastic Machine" in collaboration with Swedish Plattform Produktion. She produced Max Kestner's "Max By Chance" in 2004, presented at IDFA that same year. Vogel graduated from the University of Copenhagen in Film and Media Studies and is originally from Sweden.

**Editor of the film:**

Michael Aaglund has gained international recognition as a film editor, especially within the documentary field. He holds a MA in Editing from the National Film and Television School, UK and is based in Denmark. Seven times BAFTA nominated and Oscar nominated for Best Feature Documentary with "A House Made of Splinters", 2023.

**ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANIES**

Bullitt Film was founded by Vibeke Vogel in 2007. The company is behind a number of notable documentaries, several of which have won awards. Films such as "We Could Be Heroes" (Hind Bensari, 2018), "The Agreement" (Karen Stokkendal Poulsen, 2017) and "Absolute Beginners" (Thora Lorentzen, 2021) have cemented the company as an important contributor of documentaries with a personal cinematic language. Their solid collaboration with local and international film distributors and providers offers Bullitt's titles wide distribution across platforms such as TV 2 / Denmark, Arte France, ZDF, Hot Docs, IDFA and One World.

Hopscotch Films is a Scottish company run by John Archer which works with both fiction and documentaries. Archer has been a crucial contributor to the development of film talent and the actively pursued film policy in Scotland. Among other contributions, Hopscotch Films is behind Mark Cousin's very successful "Story of film" series that offers eminent insights into film history from a perceptive and personal perspective.

With Ruben Östlund as its main force, Plattform Produktion has put Sweden on the cinematic map. The company has become an important platform for new talent. Axel Danielsson and Maximilien Van Aertryck work with hybrid documentaries at the company, and they have directed and produced the much loved and critically acclaimed 10 METER TOWER, which is one of the most watched short films at the New York Times: Op-Docs. In 2023 their feature documentary "And the King Said, What a Fantastic Machine", won the Special Jury Prize at Sundance.

**THE FILM IS SUPPORTED BY**

The film is a co-production between Bullitt Film, Plattform Produktion (SE), and Hopscotch Films (UK). It is supported by TV 2 Denmark, Danish Film Institute, Swedish Film Institute, UK Global Screen Fund, the Novo Nordisk Foundation, Nordisk Film & TV Fund, Creative Europe, Screen Scotland, SVT and NRK.



Photo credit: Jacob Sofussen