



## Fact Sheet

### *Short Synopsis*

**Niko has never met his father – a celebrity in Santa’s Flying Reindeer Squad. Together with his best friend Julius, a flying squirrel, the young reindeer goes on a dangerous adventure through Lapland to find Santa and his dad.**

**Imagine a young reindeer boy knowing his Dad is a member of the legendary Santa’s Flying Forces – the coolest reindeers around! But this young boy has never met his real father and no one believes his stories about his famous Dad or his claim that he too will one day fly. They laugh at him - he just falls over all the time! Now he has to prove them wrong...**

**This adventure tale is about the reindeer boy Niko who yearns to fly just like his Dad. Following an attack by wolves on his herd’s peaceful home, something for which he takes responsibility, he heads off on a desperate, dangerous mission through icy blizzards and across wild terrain to find his father. He discovers a devious plan to destroy and replace the famous flying squadron by the evil Black Wolf and his gang. On his heroic journey to find his father and save Christmas Niko is accompanied by his constant friend and surrogate father Julius - a clumsy flying squirrel who has nurtured and indulged the boy’s dream. Julius knows he has to persuade Niko to return home to the safety of the herd but much to his annoyance they are then joined by a sassy young singing weasel called Wilma, who actually knows the way to Santa’s Fell. In the end though it is Niko who stands alone in front of the flying squadron when he asks, “Which one of you is my father?”**

**As the brave trio encounter many challenges on their hazardous expedition, Niko faces the biggest one when he must choose between a life he has dreamed about and a life with his family...**

## ***Technical facts***

**Format:** 35mm  
**Duration:** 80:14 min  
**Original Language:** English  
**Animation Software:** Maya  
**Aspect ratio:** 1:1,85  
**Countries:** Finland, Germany, Denmark, Ireland  
**Year of production:** 2008  
**Budget:** 6,1 Mio EUR  
**Sales Agent:** Telepool GmbH

## ***Main Credits***

**Directed by** MICHAEL HEGNER & KARI JUUSONEN

**Produced by** PETTERI PASANEN & HANNU TUOMAINEN

**Executive Producers** EMELY CHRISTIANS, ANDERS MASTRUP, RALPH CHRISTIANS

**Producers** JANA BOHL, IRENE SPARRE HJORTHØJ, MOE HONAN

**Production Supervisor** ANTTI HAIKALA

**Screenplay** HANNU TUOMAINEN & MARTEINN THORISSON

**Art Direction** MIKKO PITKÄNEN

**Music** STEPHEN MCKEON

**Editor** PER RISAGER

**An ANIMA VITAE, CINEMAKER, ULYSSES, A.FILM, MAGMA FILMS production**

**In co-production with TV2|DENMARK, EUROPOOL, UNIVERSUM**

**in collaboration with YLE, ZDF**

**supported by**

**EURIMAGES**

**FINNISH FILM FOUNDATION**

**THE DANISH FILM INSTITUTE AT THE 60/40 SCHEME**

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**NORDISK FILM & TV FOND**

**GERMAN FEDERAL FILM FUND**

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BORD SCANNÁN NA hÉIREANN/THE IRISH FILMBOARD

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### *The Beginning*

*Niko & the Way to the Stars* got started at the Anima Vitae animation studio in Helsinki, Finland. Founded in 2000, Anima Vitae before *Niko* was purely a sub-contractor studio that produced adverts, TV-films and TV-series.

In 2003 Anima Vitae made it their goal to produce their own animated feature film. Sceptics were not in short supply, as up to that point no animated feature films had been produced in Finland. The typical claim “yes you’ve done some good technological development work, but content is another matter in Finland” was heard from various sources.

*“Yet we knew that Anima Vitae as a studio already had solid, partly even world-class know-how. That knowledge, coupled with the right attitude – boldness when up against challenges and humility and patience when faced with hard work – acted as the foundation and got us to stick to our decision.”*

- Petteri Pasanen, producer

It was decided that the producer Petteri Pasanen started studying how other Europeans do feature-length animation at different European festivals and markets.

*“As far as organisations go, Cartoon proved to be active and glowing with an exceptionally warm sense of fellowship. It was something that I had not experienced before in my career with live action film.”*

- Petteri Pasanen, producer

Frequent travelling was not cheap, but fortunately Anima Vitae was doing well financially. The field was growing and the eight-member organisation performed minor miracles on an almost weekly basis. Cash flow and trust were in plentiful supply. The cash flow was needed for future investments and the trust for allowing people to work quite freely on their allotted corner of the ambitious project.

Fairly soon it became clear that the budget goal had to be six million euros to invest and that the genre needed to be family entertainment.

Six million was the average budget for a European animated feature, and *Niko* could not go lower than that without the danger of being rated a class B movie amongst the distributors. Six million was the average figure in Europe, but in Finnish reality it was a huge sum, the average feature film budget in Finland being 1,5 mio EUR. The six million budget meant that *Niko* would be the outstandingly most expensive Finnish film ever.

The genre needed to be family entertainment to enable wider distribution.

The risks were acknowledged, but Petteri Pasanen was convinced that they would be able to pull off the project. The only remaining obstacle was “just” convincing the Finnish financing system.

*“I had already been in the business for ten years and knew that without a Finnish co-partner Anima Vitae would not pass the street credibility test of the purse-string holders at home.”*

- Petteri Pasanen, producer

In October 2003 Petteri Pasanen called Hannu Tuomainen with a suggestion: let's make an animated feature film.

Petteri Pasanen had known Hannu Tuomainen for about ten years but had not been able to work with him yet. After recovering from the initial shock Hannu finally said yes. With Hannu Anima Vitae also gained a scriptwriter for the desired genre.

At the beginning of 2004, soon after Hannu became involved in the project, *Niko* obtained a scriptwriting grant from the Finnish Film Foundation, and the project was under way.

### ***The Irish Co-producer***

As the Irish Co-producer Magma Films sought support from the Irish Film Board. They also had the Section 481 tax incentive scheme to access. The Irish Film Board were very supportive and keen on the project and so after a number of months - relatively quickly – Magma Films could close the financing and start the pre-production. The Irish work split would involve scripting, casting, voice recording, some animation, music and sound post- production.

Magma Films had also previously successfully co-produced the 3 D feature film “The Ugly Duckling and Me” with A.Film in Denmark and their daughter company Ulysses Film in Hamburg, so there were strong partnerships already in place historically. When the Finnish team from Anima Vitae came to visit they insisted that everyone should have a vodka before the work began and that was the start of a strong bond.

From the beginning, one of the aspects of wanting to co-produce this project in Magma Films was that like the other partners they loved the story.

*“We knew it had a universal appeal but it also had a contemporary feel in that it did not portray a typical traditional family unit.”*

Moe Honan, producer

*“Most kids today understand the idea of celebrity and many of them aspire to be famous. Niko is like any modern child in that respect and in his case he was telling people his Dad was this big famous guy it's like going in to the schoolyard and saying My Dad's Mick Jagger! No wonder no-one believed him”*

Ralph Christians, executive producer

Magma Films has a long established record in developing content and script writing. It was one of Magmas first tasks to work with the writer Marteinn Thorisson who is based in Ireland, Hannu and the directors Michael Hegner and Kari Jusonen to bring the very best out of the script. Long after it was decided that the script was completed they were still discussing it endlessly and fine tuning it so that the script ended up as polished and highly developed as they could make it before they started working on voice recordings and storyboarding.

Of course after these processes had begun there were additional dialogues to be written and scenes to be amended but the time it took to work on the script was time very well spent indeed. During this time Magma Films also recorded what they called the radio play and in fact they did this exercise twice before they recorded the master recordings with the cast several months later.

## ***The Story***

***“First we started looking for ideas in folk tales, but a certain spark was missing. After taking my time to muse over content definition, I ended up at my roots, at my closest possible topic: my own growth from childhood innocence towards youth and my own identity. How I became who I am.”***

**- Hannu Tuomainen, writer - producer**

**This fitted in well with the aims of the production. The film should speak to an international audience as well as the whole family, children and their parents. One can't think of a more universal theme than the basic experience of struggling through growing pains and building faith in the possibility of overcoming adversity. Personal is universal. This same topic has actually been covered in several of Hannu Tuomainen's earlier movies where he has shed light on private moments and insights to do with life's transition stages, and especially with the rough and meaningful in-between terrain of finding identity during childhood and adolescence.**

**At a certain age all children admire their parents above everything. Fathers and mothers are children's idols. That's what Niko also thinks at the start of the story. Especially the dad that Niko has never met gains superhero status in his imagination. Maybe this is a familiar situation these days in many families... The absence of parenthood can be physical but also psychological. Adults concentrate on their concerns; they can be equally marginalised with their own problems or busy creating a high-flying career like Niko's dad. Life for this flying hero is all about being one of the best in the world and receiving constant admiration all over the planet.**

**Niko's disobedience, an innocent little mistake fuelled by a heart-felt dream to be a hero like dad, causes the attack by the wolves that break the Home Valley tranquillity. Niko cannot return to innocence, he has to rediscover his world. Niko has to form his own concept of heroism, parenthood, of life's values. He goes through an adventure where he has to face challenges and difficulties to get to the core of his dreams, and after succeeding he finally becomes the hero of his own life. Niko becomes Niko and he redeems his place in the community.**

***“Ouch... putting it like this sounds rather heavy and profound. Personally I believe that the package called film has to contain both entertainment and drama, fun and serious stuff, for the viewer to receive a deep sub-conscious emotional experience.”***

**- Hannu Tuomainen, writer - producer**

**And that means that break-neck speed and dangerous situations must not be under-estimated. Hannu thought, writing for an animation film to be enjoyable because of the freedom that it entailed. As a small country scriptwriter for live-action he has always been forced to be aware of budget limitations. Combine that with break-neck speed. Animation, on the other hand, only has limitations set by one's imagination.**

**Being familiar with limitations, though, Petteri and Hannu decided at the start of the writing project that at a certain point it would good to look for a suitable writing partner. Two heads process more than one. Especially humour as an art form is so demanding that team writing was essential.**

***“One of the luckiest breaks in the Niko movie was that after the fifth draft of the script the Irish Marteinn Thorisson was found to be my writing partner. Marteinn's absolute eye and ear for character development brought depth to the story, and the shared view on the importance of the dramatic structure made the writing process an unforgettable joy.”***

**Hannu Tuomainen, writer – producer**

**Screening Venues:**

"NIKO AND THE WAY TO THE STARS"  
SITE LIST

PREVIEWS ON 22ND/23RD  
RELEASE DATE 28TH NOVEMBER

- 1 Movies at Dundrum
- 2 Movies at Swords
- 3 IMC Dun Laoghaire
- 4 Ormonde Stillorgan
- 5 IMC Dundalk
- 6 Santry Omniplex
- 7 Storm Cinema Waterford
- 8 Storm Cinema Limerick
- 9 Omniplex Limerick
- 10 Omniplex Mahon Point Cork
- 11 Gaiety Sligo
- 12 Carrick-on-Shannon Cineplex
- 13 Gaiety Arklow
- 14 Storm Naas
- 15 Galway Eye Cinema
- 16 Galway Omniplex
- 17 Vue at Liffey Valley
- 18 UCI Blanchardstown
- 19 UCI Coolock
- 20 UCI Tallaght