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JUNE 2017



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UNDERPANTS**
THE FIRST EPIC
MOVIE ARRIVES

SAMURAI JACK
BACK FROM
THE PAST

LEGEND OF TOFU:
AN ANCIENT TALE
COMES TO LIFE

DESPICABLE ME 3

GRU AND CREW MAKE
A NEW DEBUT



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MAGAZINE

JUNE 2017 • SPECIAL ANNECY EDITION

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PUBLISHER'S LETTER



There's been a year's worth of creative excellence since we last gathered in Annecy, annual home of the world's largest and most prestigious film festival dedicated to the art of animation. Expertly shepherded and curated by the festival's creative director, Marcel Jean, working alongside MIFA market director Mickael Marin, Annecy continues to innovate, each year expanding its scope and vision to host a truly international celebration of everything animated in this uniquely beautiful lakeside town. And this year's program is bigger and more diverse than ever.

From Pixar's *Cars 3* to DreamWorks Animation's *Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie*, animated features are taking center stage at Annecy last year. And director Claude Barras provides a wealth of interesting background on his Oscar-nominated *My Life as a Zucchini*.

This year's guest country is China, whose animation industry continues to grow in size, technological sophistication and storytelling prowess. Annecy's celebration of China centers around a major month-long art exhibition presented at the Château d'Annecy Musée lacs et montagnes, with classic film materials from the famed Shanghai Animation Film Studio on display alongside a number of installations by artists and filmmakers, including Sun Xun, Haiyang Wang, Wu Chao and Weilun Xia, who are working at the frontiers of contemporary art and animation. The tribute to China also includes a dozen retrospective programs, including a screening of China's first animated feature *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), by brothers Laiming and Guchan Wan; three programs of historical short films; retrospectives of the work of Sun Xun, Xu An and Xi Chen; a program of short films from contemporary artists; and the best shorts from Chinese schools.

The past 12 months have seen a record number of high-quality animated shorts by filmmakers from around the globe, and we've spotlighted three of them here: U.K. director Daisy Jacobs' *The Full Story*, the follow-up to her Oscar-nominated *The Big-ger Picture*; Croatian animator Špela Čadež's stop-motion *Nighthawk*, produced by Bonobostudio; and Canadian animator Steven Woloshen's latest project, *Casino*.

We also take a look at the rise of independent animation distributor GKIDS, the return of Genndy Tartakovsky's gorgeously animated *Samurai Jack*, Oscar-winning director Patrick Osborne's new hybrid television series *Imaginary Mary*, Guillermo del Toro's *Trollhunters*, Amazon's stop-motion preschool series *Tumble Leaf*, and more.

So grab a tight-fitting café chair, order a double espresso and plat du jour brimming with cream, butter and something easily cut with a fork, and enjoyAWN.com's celebration of all things Annecy and the art, craft and industry of animation.

See you by the lake,
Dan Sarto

Co-Founder & Publisher, Animation World Network

ANIMATION WORLD®

MAGAZINE

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ANNECY SPOTLIGHT: A CHAT WITH MARCEL JEAN

Annecy's artistic director discusses the importance of providing a showcase for the entire landscape of animation.

After serving as a guest programmer at Annecy (and many other festivals) throughout the early 2000s, in June 2012,

Marcel Jean was appointed Annecy's artistic director, succeeding longtime director Serge Bromberg. From the start, Jean sought to shake things up, giving the festival a more international orientation, programming more live events, and hosting more world premieres. Jean spoke to AWN publisher and editor-in-chief Dan Sarto about his tenure, the state of world animation, and how the 2017 festival will offer yet more innovations.

Dan Sarto: So how are you enjoying being Annecy's artistic director?

Marcel Jean: I have a lot of fun. When I was appointed five years ago, the first thing that was important for me was to find a place for films that were at the edge of animation. So one of my first moves was to create the "Off-Limits" section. I'm very proud of that. I'm very happy that we will have this competitive category for our fourth year.

Another move that we made at the very beginning was to create an annual Honorary Cristal. I think it's important to give a recognition to important people in the world of animation that didn't have the opportunity to be in competition or to receive the Cristal.

This year we arrive with two big moves. I abolished the "Out-of-Competition" section for short films because I thought it was not prestigious enough. This allowed me to create two new categories. The first is a section of films for a young public. Festival programmers from the all over the world and people who work with young audiences wanted to see these films. We noticed that there were more and more films being produced for this kind of public, so we created this category.

The other section that we created for this year is the "Perspectives" section. "Perspectives" will give us the opportunity to show films from countries that don't have a professional production structure, where filmmakers are pioneering animation production. These films were very rarely selected in

"I think every film that is selected for Annecy must have a spotlight on it."



PHOTO BY LOU SCRAMBLE

competition before, so now they will have the opportunity to be awarded.

I think every film that is selected for Annecy must have a spotlight on it. We will continue to work this way.

DS: For me, one of the main focuses of Annecy has always been the incredible selection of short films. Yet there has been this growing emphasis, internationally as well as with the festival, on independent animated features. What are your thoughts on this?

MJ: As the artistic director of a festival like Annecy, I feel that I must try to see the complete landscape of animation and try to give the most accurate and the most inclusive portrait of the situation. The independent feature world is growing and every year we receive independent features from new countries. This year we received features from Venezuela and Algeria.

Fifteen years ago, the feature selection was maybe the poorest part of animation festivals because the big studios don't really need and don't really want to be in competition. What we realized recently is that there is important feature production in a lot of countries, including Korea, China, Spain, Scandinavia... What we also noticed recently is that, because of technological evolution, it's possible for a film-

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MIFA AT 31: A CHAT WITH MICKAEL MARIN

MIFA head Mickael Marin discusses the evolution of Annecy's animation marketplace and the big changes in store for 2017.

Since 2008, **Mickael Marin** has served as the head of MIFA, the European animation marketplace and pitching forum, which is celebrating its 31st anniversary this year. Under his direction, MIFA has seen ten years of uninterrupted growth and participation has doubled. AWN publisher and editor-in-chief **Dan Sarto** spoke to Marin about MIFA's development and what's new in 2017.

Dan Sarto: MIFA continues to grow every year, which is directly related to your exceptional efforts. It's become more and more apparent to people in the industry, especially on the business side, that MIFA is a place they need to be. Can you talk a little about how that came about?

Mickael Marin: Of course it isn't really just my efforts—it's very much about teamwork. But in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, MIFA was more a nice place where you could chat with people, but not really a marketplace. To make it a real market, we worked hard to attract buyers and we also worked to improve and expand the space and the programs we offered.

What is important in a market is to be able to have meetings and make it easy for different categories to meet. If you have people that have projects, you need to put producers and buyers in front of them, you need to create a time and place where producers will be able to meet the right buyers. Also, to help people see where the industry's going, you need to have the best speakers at your conferences.

So, year after year we've been trying to improve the quality of the program. We travel a lot. We visit many, many countries in order to listen, understand what people are expecting. Last year we welcomed around 69 countries.

DS: Are there things this year that are different from last year?

MM: This is a very important year for MIFA because we are making some big changes. The first change is that it's one day longer. Since the creation of the market, it was always three



days, and now it's four. So that's a very big change.

The second change is that, because we have more and more attendees and more and more demand for booths, we built a new 1,000-square-meter exhibition floor. It was kind of a gamble—we were confident we could fill the new space, but it's always a bet, and you never know for sure how it will work out. In the end, it paid off—MIFA is full this year.

The third change is that we moved the conferences to a different building, which means that everything will be in the same place. Now it will be very convenient to go to a conference, even if you don't have a lot of time.

DS: Are there any special highlights this year?

MM: On Tuesday, June 13, we're having have the MIFA Campus, which is a series of panel discussions, workshops and other events for students. In particular, we're trying to help students from emerging animation countries in South America, Africa and Asia. We will have some workshops about the industry, some workshops more about the arts, with famous artists. We will also have representatives from the studios, as well as workshops and presentations about artist residencies. The idea is to help them to enter the industry—to understand how to pitch, how to develop their projects, and so on.

Also, because China is the guest country, there will be a

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June 2017

MARCEL JEAN

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maker who was considered a short-film maker to arrive with a feature film. This is the reason why there is more and more place in a festival like Annecy for features.

At the same time, it's very important for me to preserve the place for shorts in Annecy. I'm proud of the fact that the big studios are here to premiere films or do special presentations or master classes. But we're also screening more experimental shorts than ever before. My first priority I would say is to keep a balance. I think it's important for us to be present where the animation is and to give the most complete portrait of the situation.

DS: With regard to the presence and participation of the big international studios, what do you think are the main reasons they feel they need to be in Annecy? What do they get from attending?

MJ: I don't think there is a simple answer to that. Some of the studios are present in Annecy because recruitment is crucial for them. Recently, we had 2,500 students in Annecy—not only French students, but students from all over the world. They can meet students from the Rhode Island School of Design or from UCLA. It's certainly an important reason.

I think the press is another reason. There are more and more journalists at Annecy. Every year the coverage is more important than it was the year before. And it is certainly linked to the fact that there is a real evolution and a real development in the independent feature world. The mainstream press is still totally involved in the feature industry, because it's the films that will be released theatrically. There is more and more coverage, and it's important.

Another factor is, I think, that when some important people are present, you want to be there, too. You want to be in the club, basically. And I would not underestimate the growing importance of the Conference and Work in Progress and Masterclass events. There are exclusive presentations in Annecy, and this exclusive content is very important.

DS: The last thing that I wanted to touch on is China. What's exciting to you about the focus this year? What are some of the highlights?

MJ: When we decided to put the focus on China this year, the most important thing for me was to show the variety and the complexity of production in China. Because for most of the people in the industry, when they think about China, they think about hands to work in a very efficient and economical way on 3D feature projects. But what I noticed, just regarding feature production in China, was a constant improvement every year.

The 3D animated film we received from China in 2013, my first year, was at a certain level. The year after, it was better. In 2015 it was even better, and last year it was better again. This year it is still better. It's important to show that films are being made that are very, very well crafted, well designed, and with very good storytelling. *Tea Pets* and *Little Door Gods* by Gary Wang are two examples of these.

Another important thing is that there are some very strong, very singular, very creative animators who work on the side of contemporary art. If you visit certain galleries and museums, you will see extraordinary animation films—very creative, very provocative sometimes—that were made by Chinese artists. Sun Xun, in my eyes, is as important as William Kentridge in South Africa. In the area of contemporary art, there are a lot of animators like him.

There are also more classical filmmakers who do excellent work—directors like Xi Chen and Xu Han, who will have retrospectives this year. And, historically, the Shanghai Studio was very, very important. What I wanted to present in the China focus is a sense of the diversity of Chinese animation, from the Shanghai Studio, to the development of the 3D industry in China, to the contemporary art world. This is what we are trying to do. 🇨🇳

MICKAEL MARIN

Continued from page 7

huge pavilion with around 15 Chinese studios and there will be a big Chinese party on Tuesday the 13th.

DS: From a strategic standpoint, what does MIFA offer people in the business? Why is it important for somebody to put in on their calendar to attend?

MM: I think that it gives an overview of the industry, and it gives you a kind of business energy that you don't find anywhere else. Thanks to the size of the event, you may encounter anyone or anything from a new director to a new distribution platform. If you have a new project, you can come to meet partners or to find financing. A studio can come to recruit talent. You can come to promote a show or to find a software company with a new tool that you or your head

of production will use for your next project. You can find out about trends and new directions that will help you to pilot your company, your project, and all your business.

DS: Anyone who has ever attended Annecy knows how special it is. Can you explain what makes it such a unique venue?

MM: When people come here, they discover an atmosphere that they won't find anywhere else in the world. Here, everybody speaks the same language—they understand the arts, and they understand how difficult it is to create and produce great animation. We feel that MIFA is the meeting point of the industry and the arts, and that we have a huge responsibility. That's why we always need to see what we can do to improve the market and find new ways in which we can help. 🇫🇷

GRU AND CREW

MAKE A NEW DEBUT AT ANNECY'S BONLIEU

The producers and directors of Despicable Me 3 talk about the joys of Anancy and the challenges of keeping a successful franchise fresh.



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BY DAN SARTO

Despicable Me 3, the third film in the wildly successful franchise from Universal Pictures and Illumination Entertainment, will have its premiere June 14 in Anancy's main theatre, the Bonlieu Grand Salle. Anancy attendees will have the pleasure of viewing one of the year's most highly anticipated films from Illumination Mac Guff, the French studio that, under Illumination Entertainment CEO Chris Meledandri and veteran producing partner Janet Healy, has been responsible for a string of animated hits, including 2015's *Minions* and last year's blockbuster duo, *The Secret Life of Pets* and *Sing*.

"Premiering in Anancy is extremely meaningful for two reasons," Meledandri explains. "One is because Anancy is comprised of people who love animation. To be able to premiere your film in front

"The pressure comes from trying to be as original as—or more original than—the previous movies."

of an audience of animation fanatics is extremely gratifying. There's also the aspect of the French perspective, which is such an important part of our films. The films are made largely by a crew comprised of French animators, and reflects a personality and artistry that I believe is very specific to France."

Healy is also looking forward to the premiere for similar reasons. "I've seen the film a million times, but Anancy will be the first time that I will see the completed film with an audience," she notes. "I'm so proud of this film. I love



In Despicable Me 3, the reformed villain Gru is tempted to return to a life of evil.

this one dearly. Anancy always has the best audience—everybody's so effusive, the reception's always so great."

Her sentiments are echoed by director Pierre Coffin, who has been



coming to Annecy regularly since he was a student at Gobelins, the French animation and design school, more than two decades ago. “Each time I go to Annecy,” he says, “I discover all these wonderfully odd short films. I consider them little presents from the filmmaker to the audience. That’s what I always wish our movies to be. We’re making movies to try and please people, so that for a little while they forget all the problems in the world.”

And director Kyle Balda, also a long-time Annecy attendee, makes it unanimous. “I’ve been to Annecy so many times, even before I started directing. So, to share our film, to present something that I worked on, is very special. Maybe it’s because the animators in the audience can appreciate so strongly all the work that goes into a film like this. They’re so passionate about the craft themselves—there’s so much energy in the theatre. It’s incredibly exciting.”

Of course, a successful franchise means fan bases with expectations. With each new offering, studios must find ways to transfer the magic created in previous successes to new characters and storylines. For Meledandri, the key is continual evolution.

“To keep the film fresh,” he says,

The third iteration of the beloved franchise pushes into new storytelling terrain, while preserving the elements that audiences love.

“you must continue to evolve the stories of the characters, to evolve the visual expression of the film, while at the same time finding opportunities to discover new things creatively. You’re also protecting what the audience loves about the past movies. You’re looking to find that combination of nurturing and preserving the elements that audiences have consistently embraced, while at the same time pushing into new terrain in terms of storytelling, character development and visuals.”

“That’s the challenging part, for sure,” adds Balda. “Trying to take the entire story into a place that *Despicable Me* fans haven’t seen before, keeping things fresh while staying on the edge. This maybe sounds strange, but the characters sort of start to tell you where they want to go, in terms of driving the story, looking for different situations they haven’t been in before.”

For Coffin, it’s important not to be too analytical and to avoid trying to guess what audiences want. Which is not to



say that that makes it easy. “The pressure we put on ourselves is to say, ‘Okay, we’re not going to try and analyze what people liked in the first two movies. Let’s just make this thing evolve into something we still like that we haven’t done before.’ That’s our approach. It’s



the pressure of working hard at trying to be as original as—or more original than—the previous movies.”

Healy concurs, adding, “There is pressure. *Despicable Me* is such a beloved franchise. It’s our tent-pole franchise and so dear to our hearts.

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about these main characters. “The characters are very flawed and yet they are tremendously appealing. They’re very funny. They struggle with issues that audiences can relate to. They are highly nuanced. I look at these performances and I can honestly say I can’t think of


To keep being so fortunate and making films that people want to see, that do well at the box office worldwide, we can’t let up the pressure on ourselves. Ever. It’s a healthy thing that we keep so much pressure on all the time.”

Ultimately, the enormous success of the *Despicable Me* franchise, the essence of the films’ appeal, is based on the unlikely and often awkward relationship between Gru and the three orphaned girls he adopts. According to Meledandri, it’s all

“**T**he characters sort of start to tell you where they want to go...”

performances in animation coming from any other studio that I love as much as these.”

For Balda, it’s all about Gru. “One of our anchors in *Despicable Me 3* is trying to respect what Gru’s arc has been so far,” he says. “He started as a villain, very self-serving. Then he was transformed by his relationship with the girls. And then he met a woman and got married. For all of Gru’s skepticism, though he’s got a dark cloud over his head most of the time, he softens up when he’s with his daughters. But now, we’re taking away some of the things that he’s built his identity around, that make him feel confident, and we’re tempting him a little bit with returning to a life of villainy. We are challenging his character, making him more vulnerable, playing with temptation.”

“I think that these characters,” concludes Meledandri, “are just the best representation of what Illumination Mac Guff does so well.” 



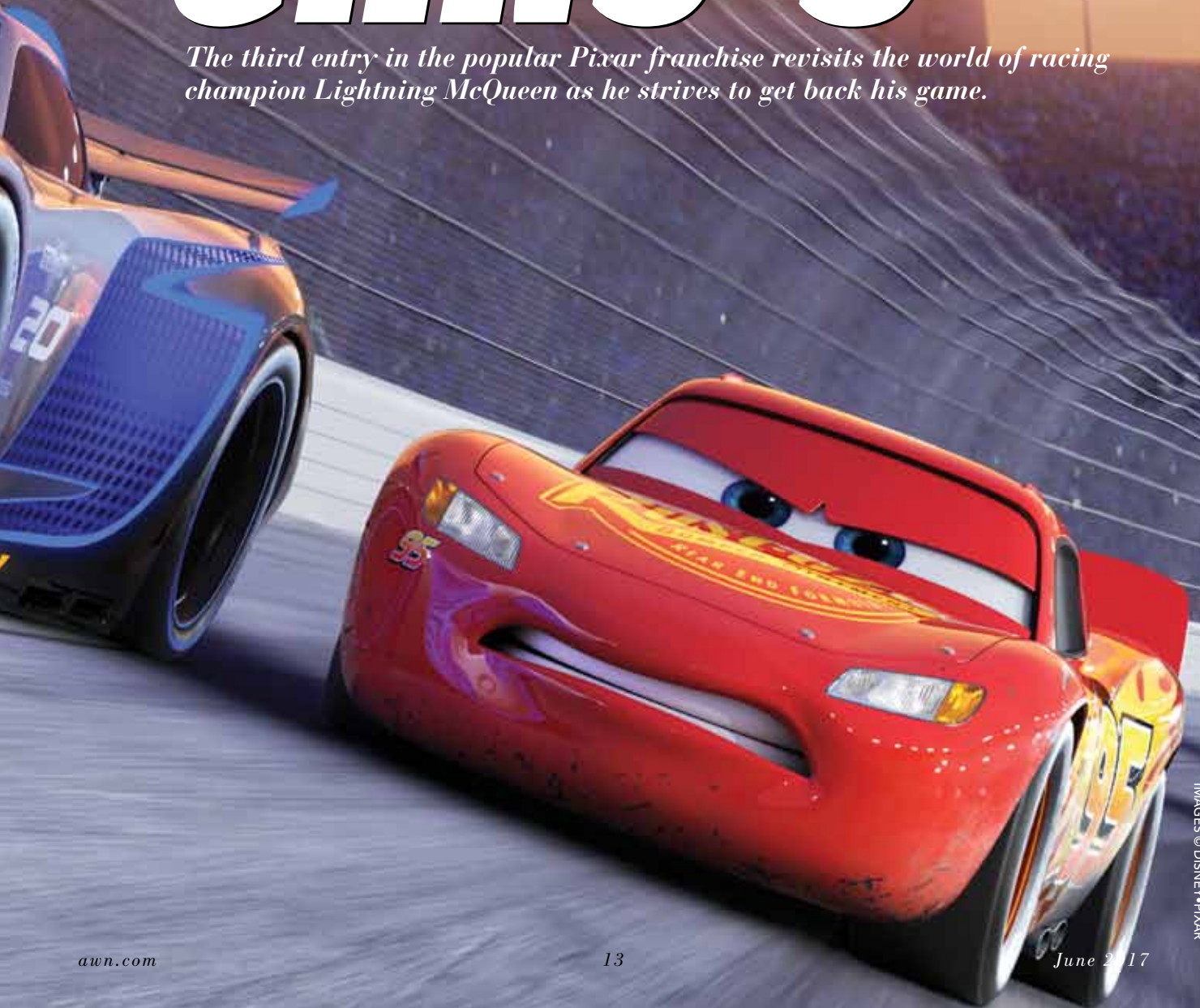
BY SCOTT LEHANE

It hasn't been a great year for racing superstar Lightning McQueen (Owen Wilson). Following a terrible crash, he's lost his confidence and the fact that he's no longer the new model he once was isn't making things any better. Yet, with help from race technician Cruz Ramirez (Cristela Alonzo) and some other friends, he's determined to make a comeback—an effort that will culminate with him going up against rookie sensation Jackson Storm (Armie Hammer) in the Florida 500.

Cars 3, which is screening at this year's Annecy Festival and opening in theaters on June 16, marks the directorial debut of Brian Fee, who worked in the art department for *Cars*, *Cars 2* and *Wall-E*. Reflecting on the evolution of the main character, Fee explains that, while Lightning is still the same confident, determined and fun-loving race car audiences fell in love with more than a decade ago, things have changed.

DIRECTOR BRIAN FEE LEADS A CRACK PIT CREW IN *CARS 3*

The third entry in the popular Pixar franchise revisits the world of racing champion Lightning McQueen as he strives to get back his game.



IMAGES © DISNEY • PIXAR



"When we first met Lightning McQueen, he was a young rookie," he says. "He had his whole life ahead of him. And while he's done really well since we last saw him—winning five Piston Cups—he's not a young hotshot racer anymore.... He feels frustrated and, after the crash, he's pretty vulnerable."

In keeping with this somewhat autumnal theme, the filmmakers infused *Cars 3* with a nostalgia for the early days of NASCAR racing. To really develop the characters, members of the story team went to NASCAR's Daytona 500 to soak up the atmosphere.

"We did a lot of research," says Fee. "We looked at athletes in other sports, but really focused on NASCAR drivers. They start at such an early age and their lives are centered around driving. We even talked to a sports psychologist who explained that many of these drivers don't know anything else. They can't imagine doing anything else."

While working to get the psychology right, though, Fee and his collaborators also faced a number of more down-to-earth problems that they needed to solve.

"One of the challenges we had on *Cars 3* was to respect the fact that they're 4,000-pound automobiles and when they're rendered, they're going to be photorealistic. We wanted to make sure the animation backed that up and didn't go away and do its own thing. We had to be as expressive as possible without actually pushing things further than what we expect to see in a 4,000-pound car. For the animators, I think they would tell you it was an interesting experience to realize what you can do when you really hold yourself back and think more subtly."

Technically, Fee explains, the film falls in a stylization zone known as "art-directed realism."

"It's not a painterly look. We're not controlling the land-

"One of the challenges we had on *Cars 3* was to respect the fact that they're 4,000-pound automobiles."

scape in a fantasy world or in painterly aspect. We are controlling the image. Everything you see was controlled. The light, the color of that light, was very controlled. That's what we don't want the audience to think about. We want the audience just to think, 'I have gone to this part of the country and it looks just like this.'"

Of course making this happen requires the efforts of a small army of artists working in unison, which is where the producers come in.

"We have limited resources we can use at any given moment from the studio, based on the other projects that are going on," explains co-producer Andrea Warren. "You want the director to get everything that he wants up on the screen. You're also advocating for the budget and the studio. I feel like, in some ways, the job is to always make sure that the director knows his options before it's too late."

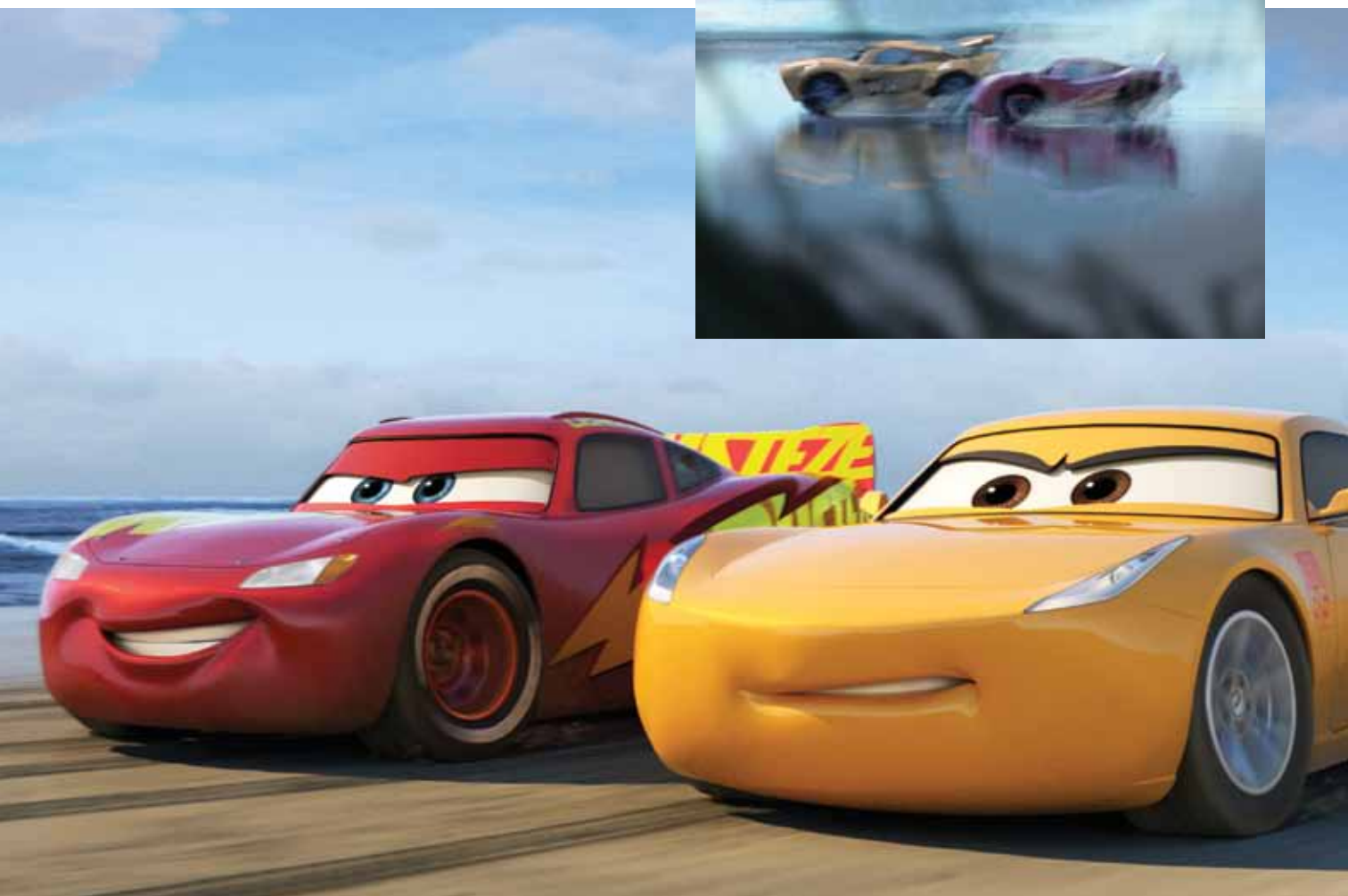
Producer Kevin Reher says that the producers would hold weekly meetings with the various department heads and animation teams, "so that we felt their pain or their happiness, or how they were doing. 'Is there a problem?' 'Are you getting what you need from Brian?' 'Are you getting what you need from your supervisor?'"

Warren added that these meetings also helped ensure that everyone understood the priorities. "Everybody takes such pride and loves to make everything amazing, but we all have to always keep our focus on what really is going to be on the screen, what matters in every scene, and connecting that to what Brian sees as important, and not getting lost in the weeds on stuff."

"We got a lot of nice compliments about the fact that one of the things that we did as producers was let people do their job and not second-guess them," Reher says.

Fee's take on the director-producer relationship reflects a

Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson) rides again in the third installment of Pixar's wildly popular Cars franchise.



In some ways, the job is to always make sure that the director knows his options before it's too late."

do what they need to do. We don't overlap a lot. They don't tell me how I should be directing. When we have a problem, they understand. They're wonderful at saying, 'This is going to impact the schedule. I understand that.' Or if we discover that something is going to cost more, as long as it's right for

similar perspective. "As far as working with Kevin and Andrea, I think we have a good thing where they trust me," he says. "They trust that I'm going to tell the story, and I trust that they're going to

the movie, they'll find other places in the budget to pay for it. I feel honored to have such partners with me that give me that freedom."

Overall, Fee reports that the biggest challenge was the story. "I think that's always the hardest thing because that's the most important thing," says Fee. "As a first time director, I had all these other departments downstream in production. They're magicians. I don't know how they do what they do. They are better than I'll ever know. My job is not to make sure they do a good job. They'll do a good job. My job is just to make sure we're all doing the right thing to help tell the story."

Scott Lebane is a Toronto-based journalist who has covered the film and TV industry for over 25 years. 📺

PICTURE ME BIG TIME: DAISY JACOBS' THE FULL STORY

In her sophomore effort, Jacobs and co-director Chris Wilder incorporate live actors in their sometimes painful exploration of the ways in which the past is always with us.

BY CHRIS ROBINSON

I can vividly remember the last moments of the last day at my grandparents' home. Our family was there. It was empty. No one spoke. We were all gazing through the vacated rooms and the blank walls towards times, places, and people long gone. The house was empty, yet still carried the spots, streaks, stains and stench of the past.

In Daisy Jacobs and Chris Wilder's *The Full Story*, a vacated family home triggers an assortment of painful memories for a man (Toby) as he remembers the effects of his parents' divorce on his past and present. The film, produced by Elliot Tagg and Geoff Morgan, is a powerful follow-up to Jacobs and Wilder's multi-award-winning *The Bigger Picture* (2014), which won the BAFTA Award for Best British Short Animation and garnered an Oscar nomination, among other accolades.

Now, if one were to think that the success of *The Bigger Picture* would mean that Jacobs had an easy time producing and funding her next film, one would be wrong. While the prize money and crowdfunding (along with funding from Creative England) helped, Jacobs no longer had the technical and creative luxuries of the National Film and Television School (NFTS) to rely on.

BIG SETS, LITTLE ACTORS

"It was much, much harder to make *The Full Story* as it is far more complex in every way. For example, at the NFTS, we were given a large, fully equipped studio for six months; this time we had to make one ourselves in an empty ship-building shed on a for-

mer naval base. We did it entirely from scratch, from blacking out the massive windows (!) to putting in the lighting rig. Chris and I animated everything ourselves and I also painted all the sets myself, while Chris made all the props with only one assistant."

In *The Bigger Picture*, Jacobs and Wilder utilized an impressive hybrid of life-size wall paintings and stop-motion. For *The Full Story*, Jacobs added real actors to the mix. "I liked the challenge of blending people visually into an animated world. We used live actors primarily to suggest that Toby's memories are vividly real to him. In terms of mood, I think it also contributes a sense of unease, and practically it creates more depth. It means we can exploit the full space for animation and are no longer just working on the walls. I also liked the idea of having no rules and creating something different."

COMFORT IS OVERRATED

Working with actors—especially children—also created new challenges. "I will never write anything with children again, ever," says Jacobs. "All the children cried. At one point, mid-shot, a child smeared paint all over his face, hair and clothes, screaming 'I'm green!' I have absolutely no idea why I didn't realize children might be a challenge. I just assumed they would be like mini-adults, but they are not. They are mad little things and live in a different world from us."

Jacobs was initially attracted to the life-size technique because it liberated her creatively.

"When you make something in a 3D space," she notes, "there is an added layer of cinematography which brings atmosphere to the storytelling. Working



"Working life-size allows me to use large and expressive brush strokes and so 'become' the characters far more intensely."

life-size also allows me to use large and expressive brush strokes and so 'become' the characters far more intensely. When I draw or paint a character, I do actually become them in that moment. I work well standing up, using my whole



*Life-sized painted images and live actors create a powerful and evocative environment in *The Full Story*.*



IMAGES © LIFE-SIZE FILMS LTD.

physicality to act out what I'm painting, gesticulating and pulling peculiar faces."

In both *Bigger Picture* and *Full Story*, Jacobs draws on painful and confusing personal experiences, but her aim is to make films for other people: "I want to share difficult events with a wide audience in order to present a (hopefully) cathartic and uplifting experience. In this film, the idea of letting go despite past traumas is meant to inspire people to live their lives to the full and not be burdened by the past."

Many talented animators produce amazing student work and then just

vanish, often getting lured in by a steady commercial studio paycheck. Given the painstaking work, along with the headaches of financing, I ask Jacobs what drives young artists like her to take on the challenge.

NEW CHALLENGES

"I can see why you'd not make a second film," she admits. "Isolation, anxiety, stress and mania often accompany each day. It took us two years, unpaid, isolated, and working to the point of exhaustion, to make this film. I had to leave London, my husband, friends and

any sense of reality to move back into my childhood bedroom, working in a blacked-out space that was sweltering in summer and freezing in winter to the point where I had on seven layers and had to put carpet down on the floor where I was animating. I would never have swapped that experience for anything."

A well-known figure in the world of independent animation, writer, author & curator Chris Robinson is the Artistic Director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival. 🐾

STEVEN WOLOSHEN'S *CASINO* GAMBLES WITH FLUX AND FEELING



The latest short by the renowned hands-on animator is inspired by his father's obsessions and the work of legendary director Norman McLaren.

BY SHARON KATZ

It's not possible to sit quietly while watching a Steven Woloshen film. Feet tapping, fingers snapping, hands waving to the beat. That's just how it goes.

Woloshen's latest is *Casino*, an ode to his dad or, to quote him directly, "A film for my Father, who gambled with love."

Brightly colored, the images fly by, leaving a palpable trace of excitement in their wake. A master of the art of drawing directly onto celluloid in an absolutely straight-ahead fashion—no cuts, no edits—Woloshen takes huge risks and is as surprised with the outcome as anyone. "I want to be the first audience member to be surprised when I view the final film," he once said. I'll bet real money that Len Lye, Norman McLaren and Harry Smith—Woloshen's heroes—felt the same way about their films.

While the title and dedication of *Casino* allude to Woloshen's father and his gambling history, there isn't a specific storyline built into the progression of the film. The animation and music track—Oscar Peterson's *Something Coming*—generate a powerful sensory and emotional experience. I asked him what the relationship was for him between the dedication and the film itself.

"There is no actual storyline in *Casino*. When I set out to make the film, I didn't want to bash his obsessions and fascinations with gambling. Regardless of my personal opinion on the subject, I didn't think it was fair to attack his beliefs. On the contrary, making this film was good therapy—to honor someone that I hardly knew.

"I wouldn't have made this film while he was still alive," he continues. "In 2016, I had a long list of personal films that I was hoping to finish. When the Cinémathèque québécoise told me that I was to receive a lifetime achievement award at the 2016 *Sommets du cinéma d'animation* later in the year, I put all the other projects aside. I vowed to make *Casino* for my father, sitting in the empty seat next to me."

In terms of visual style, *Casino* finds its source material in a 1942 classic film by pioneering animator Norman McLaren. While reviewing prints for a 2014 National Film Board of Canada tribute to McLaren, Woloshen became fascinated with the film *Hen Hop* and in particular its striking visuals. "I became convinced, without any real proof, that *Hen Hop* was created strictly with black India ink and that the color had been created in an optical printer. I was intrigued by this idea and swore I would try to mimic this visual style."

Because American casinos have a complex and unique

Steven Woloshen brings his unique sensibility to iconic gambling images in *Casino*, distributed by Montreal-based Videographe.



IMAGES © STEVEN WOLOSHEEN



color scheme for such things as cards, roulette wheels and slot machines, getting the right feel for *Casino*'s color was a challenge. Woloshen first created the graphics and gambling icons directly on the surface of the film as monochromatic images. He then scanned the colors from old optical printer slides. (These slides were inserted into the optical printer to change the tonal values of an image as it was recopied onto raw stock). He then made an eight-step cycle from each slide and composited the loop into the project.

Throughout his career, Woloshen has worked with distressed footage, and has even penned several books on the process—the most recent of which is *Scratch, Crackle & Pop!: A whole grains approach to making films without a camera*. His work in this area is so highly regarded that distressed film animation and Steven Woloshen have become virtually synonymous. I asked him if he used distressed film in *Casino*.

"Many times, I thought of using live-action film footage to accent the film, but I couldn't fit it into the color scheme. But I deliberately left the dust and dirt on my slides, which made the film feel more alive."

What's up next from Steven Woloshen's studio? A film

Woloshen takes huge risks and is as surprised with the outcome as anyone.

on protests and uprisings is in the works. Interestingly, Woloshen considers experimental filmmaking to be this generation's folk music. "Found images, like melodies and lyrics, are readapted from older versions. Many groups and communities are using film (and music) to convey messages of

social inequality. This new film will combine previously shot film and found footage with traditional scratch techniques."

He's also putting together a proposal for a new book on the art of combining handmade filmmaking practices with found footage. The working title is *20/20: Clear Visions in Handmade Filmmaking*.

As for the current film, *Casino* is a small masterwork in the Woloshen tradition. If you're looking for dark existential truths or a reflection on growth through suffering, you won't find them here. The depth is there but the entry and exit points are pure joy. 🎲

Author of the Ambling Around blog on Animation World Network, Sharon Katz is an Ottawa-based visual artist working in animation.

CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS: THE FIRST EPIC MOVIE

DreamWorks Animation's zany new CG feature brings Dav Pilkey's beloved children's book series to glorious life.

BY SCOTT LEHANE

What happens when two imaginative elementary school students, George Beard (Kevin Hart) and Harold Hutchins (Thomas Middleditch), hypnotize their school principal, Mr. Krupp (Ed Helms), into thinking he is the dim-witted superhero known as Captain Underpants? Why, the three of them set out to stop mad scientist Professor Poopypants (Nick Kroll), the Turbo Toilet 2000 and tattletale Melvin Sneedly (Jordan Peele) from taking over the world, of course.

Directed by David Soren and in theaters starting June 2, DreamWorks Animation's *Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie* brings to life the beloved children's book series by American author and illustrator Dav Pilkey. Soren explains that *Captain Underpants* was a hot property in L.A. for years, but Pilkey wasn't quite ready to make a deal.

"So when DreamWorks finally managed to team up with him, it was a major coup and the studio was incredibly excited," he says. "When they approached me, I had just finished directing *Turbo*, and I was also developing an original idea. But I had been very aware of the books for a long time, so I jumped at the chance."

Soren, a DreamWorks veteran who directed two "Madagascar" shorts, *Merry Madagascar* and *Madly Madagascar*, in addition to the 2013 *Turbo* (2013), and served as a story artist on *Shrek*, *Shark Tale* and *Over the Hedge*, has fond memories of the first time he came across Pilkey's books. "It was 20 years ago. I had just moved to Los Angeles, and I discovered the first *Captain Underpants* book at a local bookstore. I picked it up and read half



of it right there in the aisle," he recalls. "Years later, once I had kids of my own, we read it again together, then the next book, and the next, until we'd devoured the entire series and were sore from laughter."

THE FRENCH-CANADIAN CONNECTION

While DreamWorks was eager to get going on a film, the company already had *Boss Baby* and *Trollhunters* in the pipeline for 2017 and lacked the in-house resources to take on another movie.

"After searching around for a little bit, they came across Mikros Image in Montreal, which was making *Little*

Prince, and had done *Asterix: The Land of the Gods*," says Soren. "They submitted an animation test as part of their bid, and everybody was blown away."

Soren visited the studio in Montreal frequently and was in constant contact with them, but in the interests of efficiency, he mostly worked remotely from L.A.

"I really had to spend the bulk of my time here," he says. "All of the front-end of the movie was made here. That means all of the designs, all the art, the storyboarding, the editing process and layout was all handled in L.A. The recording of the actors was primarily done here, too."

BRINGS WACKY HIJINKS TO THE BIG SCREEN



"The artists dug through classic cartoons for inspiration, but ultimately Pilkey's original artwork drove the animation style."

"But our production designer, Nate Wragg, and co-head of animation Rune Bennicke spent many months up there with them, making sure that we were making the movie in the best possible way."

For inspiration, the artists dug through classic Warner Bros and Hanna-Barbera cartoons, including works by Chuck Jones and Tex Avery, but ultimately Pilkey's original artwork drove the animation style.

"The books are so fun and so lively, it really seemed like a given that it should be a very cartoony look and animation style," he says. "Rune Bennicke, who's a terrific 2D animator, designed the characters, based on the drawings in the books. Some of his early line tests really were instrumental in defining what the animation style would be. So he worked very closely with the animators at Mikros, and the other co-head of animation, Sebastien Bruneau, to translate that style to CG."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

While Soren acknowledges that any animated movie depends on the cumulative contributions of the entire crew, he singles out Wragg, Bennicke, and head of layout Damon O'Beirne as being primarily responsible for the film's level of quality, as well as the sheer fun involved in making it.

"Nate was on right at the beginning of the development process, and had such a passion for finding the best way to adapt Pilkey's work," he says. "He analyzed almost every drawing and did a lot of experimenting to find the right look. The movie had a ton of different

Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie captures the wacky humor and bonhomie of Dav Pilkey's popular children's book series.



IMAGES © DREAMWORKS ANIMATION/20TH CENTURY FOX

“It’s just so lovely to see a creative friendship being celebrated in a movie.”

mixed-media elements in it, and Nate was great at finding a style that made it feel cohesive, and also made it feel like it was created by the two boys who created Captain Underpants.”

Soren credits Bennicke with helping the animators understand the principles of classical animation and how to translate that into CG by thinking more graphically and considering elements that are not inherent in typical CG processes.

Finally, about Damon O’Beirne, Soren says, “He was just a huge asset to the movie. He’s a DreamWorks veteran who was head of layout on all the *Kung Fu Panda* movies. He’s both creatively brilliant and also technically savvy, and he was able to help us combine the pipelines at DreamWorks and Mikros into one seamless system. He also helped simplify the layout process, putting the emphasis on the things that layout really should be doing, which is composition and camera.”



Overall, Soren stressed that the biggest creative and technical challenge was the time constraint. “It was a lot like driving a car that’s going above capacity, and it’s shaking like crazy and the doors seem like they’re going to go fly off, and you’re just trying to hold everything together and arrive at your destination safely.”

Not surprisingly, Soren is eager for people to see the movie, as much for the

relationships as the humor and technical accomplishments. “The protagonists are two very creative boys, and there’s a really warm friendship between them. It’s just so lovely to see a creative friendship being celebrated in a movie, whether it be animated or otherwise. And that allowed us to really lens the movie through their eyes, and have it feel like it was their movie and their creativity behind every choice that we made.”

DREAMWORKS ANNECY 2017

ANIMATION SKG



THURSDAY, JUNE 15
16:00 – 17:30

Bonlieu Grande Salle
(followed by a filmmaker Q&A)

18:00 – 19:00
Signing Session

David Soren, Mark Swift, Nate Wragg
Bonlieu Boutique Festival
@bdfugue



TUESDAY, JUNE 13
Guillermo del Toro
MIFA Campus Conversation
14:00 – 15:30
Impérial Palace

THURSDAY, JUNE 15
10:30 – 12:00
Signing Session

Guillermo del Toro, Rodrigo Blaas,
Marc Guggenheim, Chad Hammes
Bonlieu Boutique Festival
@bdfugue

Screening

TROLLHUNTERS “Becoming, Part 1”
TV Films in Competition 4
(Please check festival guide for details.)



THURSDAY, JUNE 15
22:15 – 23:59

Open-air Screening
La Pâquier

MICHAEL DUDOK DE WIT EXPANDS HIS HORIZONS WITH *THE RED TURTLE*

The Oscar-winning director teams with Japan's Studio Ghibli on his first feature film—an exploration of humans' relationship with nature.



IMAGES © SONY PICTURES

BY DAN SARTO

An animator from Holland living in England is approached by a Japanese animation studio about making a feature film in France... In November 2006, Oscar-winning animator Michael Dudok de Wit received a note from Studio Ghibli suggesting they team up to make a feature film. He was surprised.

"They wrote to me out of the blue, literally saying, 'Have you thought of making a feature film? Because we like your short film *Father and Daughter* a lot,'" he recalls. And I immediately thought, 'This is too good to be true. This is my chance.'"

Even more surprising, Studio Ghibli had no desire to impose stylistic or narrative guidelines and was happy to

"I immediately thought, 'This is too good to be true. This is my chance.'"

have him make the film in Europe.

It's probably not too much of a spoiler to reveal that, ten years later, *The Red Turtle* premiered to wide critical acclaim, winning a Special Jury Prize at Cannes, as well as a cornucopia of other awards and nominations, including Oscar and Cesar nominations for Best Animated Feature.

A PERFECT MATCH

Which is not to say that there weren't some serious challenges.

"On one hand, I was developing a feature for the first time," Dudok de

Wit explains. "And on the other hand, I was learning how to work with a major studio at the other side of the world."

However, since Studio Ghibli isn't just any studio and since Dudok de Wit is a pretty nice guy, they quickly overcame any cultural differences, and found it easy to collaborate.

"They were strikingly modest, friendly and polite," Dudok de Wit recalls.

"I'm pretty much like that as well, so we got on really well from the beginning. I actually asked them for more feedback than they expected, because I wanted to learn from their know-how. It was my first feature and there were a lot of things I very quickly had to learn.

"I also wanted to learn what the Japanese perspective was—not to make a Japanese film, but to see how the Japanese would react to certain symbols and details and emotions and metaphors in the film."



Michael Dudok de Wit's The Red Turtle is a silent meditation on humankind and nature. Produced by Studio Ghibli in association with Why Not Productions. Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics.

As far as the story, Dudok de Wit says it "just came."

"As a child, I read a lot of fairy tales; not just the famous European ones, but also from other continents. Later I read about Greek and Roman mythology, as well as tales from other civilizations. When I wrote the story, it became quite natural for me to go in that direction.

"There was also one book that really impressed me, *Kwaidan* by Lafcadio Hearn. Studio Ghibli gave me a copy. It's basically a collection of Japanese fairy tales. They're very emotional and intense, very close to nature. I didn't use any of the stories, but they inspired me."

While being part of a big team wasn't a new experience for Dudok de Wit, his new role took some getting used to.

"I'd worked on larger teams in the past as an animator, but not as a director. What I had to learn was to



stop drawing, stand back, discuss all the details and guide my fellow artists. As a director, you have to show them what the real focus is of the graphic style and the kind of acting you expect in the characters, and gradually get everyone going towards the same goal.

"That was a big challenge, but also a very exciting challenge. But it was relentless. All day long, every day. When you're not used to that, when you're mostly an animator sitting alone, sometimes in silence, for long periods, just animating by yourself... to go from that to talking nonstop

with the team, that was a big jump for me."

THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION

All of the producers agreed, Dudok de Wit notes, that it was better for the project to have a smaller team and a longer production period, rather than a huge team and a tighter schedule.

"Most of the time," he says, "we had around 12 character animators and about the same number of special effect animators. We had quite a small background team, about five people on average. We had more assistant ani-



“I felt very strongly about the quality of silence and thought that would be most beautiful for this film.”

maters than animators, maybe 30 or 40. All together, from animators to the editor to the sound crew, about 150 creative people worked on the film.”

While the animatic was done with pencil on paper, scanned into the computer, and edited with Final Cut, the film was made using Cintiq tablets and TVPaint animation software, which was another first for Dudok de Wit.


“I was a bit hesitant, because it’s less intuitive, or at least initially it was for me, but many of the animators and assistants were already used to it. It seemed more efficient too, giving us greater freedom and

opportunities to make changes, especially for me as a director. And ultimately, we could not have made a film of this quality by sticking to pencil and paper.”

Like Dudok de Wit’s previous films, *The Red Turtle* contains no dialogue, which is one thing in a 10-minute short, but quite another in an 80-minute feature. In fact, the original script contained a small amount of dialogue, but ultimately the director chose to delete it.

“I felt very strongly about the quality of silence and thought that would be most beautiful for this film. At the same time, I knew this would be tricky with present-

day audiences, who are used to fast speeds and witty dialog. In the animatic, the dialogue seemed to fit intellectually, but the feeling was not right. It just felt unnatural. We experimented with different solutions, and finally we just dropped it.

“I thought, ‘Oh damn, this is exciting’—not like, ‘Hey guys, a film without dialogue,’ but that a story can be told in a simple way. We know people can talk, but we don’t have to see them talk. We see them at moments where they are quiet because they know each other so well, they can communicate just with their behavior and with the expressions on their faces.” 

HIGH PRAISE FROM HAUTE-SAVOIE

PROUD TO SEE THESE FOUR GEMS IN THE OFFICIAL SELECTION
AT ANNECY



HEDGEHOG'S HOME by Eva Cvijanović



MANIVALD by Chintis Lundgren



I LIKE GIRLS by Diane Obomsawin



THE TESLA WORLD LIGHT by Matthew Rankin

ANIMATION WORLD

A S P E C I A L S E C T I O N



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

In a year when China's burgeoning animation industry is enjoying unprecedented creative and financial success, it's only fitting that the Annecy International Animated Film Festival should select the world's most populous nation as its guest country.

While Hollywood blockbusters continue to have great success in China, domestically produced films are starting to challenge them for dominance, with animated and VFX-driven hits such as *Monster Hunt* (2015) and 2014's *The Monkey King* and its 2016 follow-up, *The Monkey King: Hero is Back*, driving a growing number of ticket sales. Moreover, smaller movies, such as *Little Door Gods* and *Big Fish & Begonia*, which hearken back to the artistry and mythology of the Middle Kingdom, are also finding audiences.

The celebration of Chinese animation at Annecy 2017 is centered around a major month-long art exhibition at the Château d'Annecy, which includes classic film materials from the famed Shanghai Animation Film Studio, as well as a selection of innovative and provocative installations by contemporary artists and filmmakers.

In this special section dedicated to animation in China, *Animation World* provides an up-close look at the exhibition, explores the diversity of Chinese short films and features screening in and out of competition, and takes a peek at some of the television and feature projects to be presented at this year's MIFA marketplace. Enjoy! 🇨🇳



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

CHINESE SHORTS HIGHLIGHT SEVEN DECADES OF ARTISTRY AND EXPERIMENTATION

From vintage films of the golden era to the latest student works, Annecy 2017 presents a unique opportunity to view the full spectrum of Chinese animation.



© LEI LEI/THOMAS SAUVIN



© SHEN JIE

BY CHRIS COLMAN

In Xue Yanping's 2014 animated documentary *Silent within Noise*, she asks Chinese artists what is most lacking in the domestic independent animation scene. Depending on who you believe, the biggest problem could be anything from nonexistent government support, inadequate equipment and audience indifference, to insufficient passion, creativity and talent. As filmmaker Lei Lei explained, "In China there is no independent animation, so when I stay here for a long time, I don't know who I am." Those who survive are a special breed, possessing the



tenacity, skill and vision to build an independent artistic career.

In selecting China as its country of honor this year, Annecy has provided the growing movement with its biggest endorsement yet. Aided

by advice from China aficionados like Holland Animation Film Festival director Gerben Schermer and historian Marie-Claire Kuo Quiquémelle, Annecy has assembled 12 special programs that illuminate 70 years of Chinese animation.

Three programs of vintage shorts will shine a light on China's golden era of animation in the 1950s and 1960s, a period little known outside the country, during which the Shanghai Animation Film Studio produced scores of virtuosic films.

Part of that snapshot will be a special screening of the Wan Brothers' *Princess Iron Fan* (1940), the first animated feature film to be made in China. Brothers Wan Gu-



© WOLFESMOKE



© LIU SHA

Clockwise, from previous page, top left: *Hand Colored No. 2* (2016), *PANDA* (2016), *Valley of White Birds* (2017), *It Is Not My Fault* (2016), *Princess Iron Fan* (1940).

chan and Laiming's film is based on an episode of the novel *Journey to the West*, and supposedly set *Snow White* and the *Seven Dwarfs* as its quality benchmark—an influence that is clearly reflected in the char-

acter design and animation. To save money, the film made extensive use of rotoscoping (watch out for live actors' eyes in the faces of the animated characters). Made in Shanghai over three years in the midst of the Japanese occupation during World War II, the film made its way back to Japan, where it is said to have inspired 16-year-old Tezuka Osamu and served as a model for the country's first animated feature, *Divine Sea Warriors* (1945).

Fast forwarding to the early 2000s, retrospective programs of pioneer Sun Xun and short film directors Chen Xi and Xu An offer insights into the origins of the contemporary generation of Chinese independent animators. Complementing these, the "China New Generation" programs provide examples of artists, including Ding Shiwei, Wang Haiyang and festival juror Wu Chao, who started out making films, but have since found their home in the contemporary art world.



Ding also appears in the Commissioned Film category with the Festival Leader for the 2017 Holland Animation Film Festival, co-directed with Lu Chen. Ding explains that, while smoking cannabis in Holland last year, he began hallucinating and “wanted to recreate my anxious hallucinations via frame-by-frame animation, and then study the meaning of the hallucination in relation to my psychological state.”

The “China Best Student Shorts” program takes us back to early work from the likes of Lei Lei (*Pear or Alien*, 2010), a highly regarded figure on the international circuit who has forged a career creating eclectic, mixed-media work, including animated shorts, commercial illustration and a recent collaboration with the band Shanghai Restoration Project.

Lei Lei is also represented by the official selection *Hand Colored No. 2*, a second collaboration with French archivist Thomas Sauvin after their exceptional *Recycled* (2013). Inspired by an old photograph that was annotated “shot in 1955, colored in 1965,” the pair scoured Sauvin’s archives in search of black-and-white images from

Independent Chinese animators are a special breed, possessing the tenacity, skill and vision to build a career.

China and, over two years, re-colored 1168 random photographs to create what appeared to be a coherent life story. While the project has been previously exhibited in Europe and Asia, this will mark its first outing packaged as an animated short. “Watching the film in the cinema is a different experience to the ‘white box’ people see in art museums,” says Lei Lei. “It will be amusing for us to see how the audience reacts.”

Shen Jie’s dreamy strobe-effect graduate film *RUN*, which played at Annecy in 2013, returns this year as part of “Best Student Shorts.” He is also represented by a new three-minute piece, *PANDA*, an official selection that continues his

recent interest in animal themes. Influenced by the novels of Yukio Mishima, the film, according to Shen varies a lot from his previous work. “I’d become sick of that style. I wanted to make a change.”

Annecy will also present the festival debut of renegade duo Wolf-smoke (aka Clover Xie and Cloud Yang), animation devotees who have been making manga-inspired, samurai-sharp hand-drawn shorts in Shanghai for the past decade. Their dialogue-free, 14-minute *Valley of White Birds* took a team of seven one year to complete. Telling the story of a hero battling a giant black bird, it marks a departure from their usual martial arts-heavy work, imitating the techniques of traditional Chinese paintings.

Four Chinese works are also included in the official “Graduation Films” selection. Peking University’s Xing Quan Luan’s 2D hand-drawn effort *A Daybreak* explores the emotional fallout from his father’s disappearance and the mysterious letter he received years later. Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing) master student Liu Gaoxiang is represented by *The Psychedelic Rope*, while his undergrad



© DING SHAWI

Clockwise, from left: *Yummy* (2015), *Meteor Sonata* (2015), *Once a Hero* (2016), *A Daybreak* (2016).

piece *Get a Lift* (2011) is included in the “Best Student Shorts” program.

Two of the selected Chinese graduate films are from artists educated overseas. Wen Fan (*Yummy*) studied for her masters at Angoulême’s EMCA, while Beijing native Li Xia (*Once a Hero*) graduated from the University of Southern California.

Finally, for Hebei native Liu Sha, being selected for the short films competition is the “realization of a dream.” Her film *It Is My Fault* is an 8-bit experimental solo effort with a score recorded directly from a Game Boy. Citing German director Viking Eggeling’s 1924 film *Symphonie Diagonale* as an inspiration, she says her film “has no clear narrative timeline, but there exists some sort of logical relationship between the dreamlike illusions.”

All of the Chinese filmmakers will be appearing at the Breakfast Club Q&A sessions, beginning at 9:00 am daily throughout the festival. 📍

Chris Colman is a writer and producer based in Shanghai. He’s the founder of the China Animation & Game Network, encouraging communication in the industry via live creative networking events.



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MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

PLAYFUN BLENDS VIRTUAL AND ACTUAL IN THEMED ATTRACTIONS

The high-tech entertainment enterprise contractor creates magical experiences throughout the Middle Kingdom.

BY WILLIAM WELTE

Established in 2007, Shenzhen Playfun Culture & Technology Co., Ltd. is a high-tech entertainment enterprise contractor that services theme park attractions and creates and operates a chain of proprietary technological entertainment attractions.

In 2014, Playfun converted some of their large amusement facilities into smaller, indoor attractions. Playfun has built strategic partnerships with several renowned cartoon, film, and intellectual property producers.

Playfun has since developed and launched their brand-new experience platform, the Playfun Magic Museum. The Playfun Magic Museum was developed as a distribution point for their own and third-party media properties, advertisements, and merchandise. In November 2015, Playfun was officially listed on the Chinese “New Third Board” stock market.

That same year, Playfun created several immersive media experiences, including *Macross* and *Iron Rod*, among others. Alternating between live-action and computer generated scenes, both experiences were created for the Rongsheng Group, and embody what Playfun calls “dark rides,” large indoor amusement vehicles travel through specially lit scenes that typically contain anima-



Playfun is busy as a you-know-what creating and operating themed attractions throughout China.

Playfun aims to become the major offline experience network and social-sharing platform.

tion, sound, music and visual effects.

The company will continue to develop its network of technological entertainment outlets, with plans to expand to 1,000 Magic Museums in key commercial complexes in China over the next three years. Playfun sees its primary business develop-

ment via cooperation with recognized animation, film, game and intellectual property producers at home and abroad, and the subsequent deployment of properties using the latest virtual and augmented reality technologies.

Playfun aims to build a creative business culture and develop into the major offline experience network and social-sharing platform.

Visit www.playfun.net for more information. 🌐

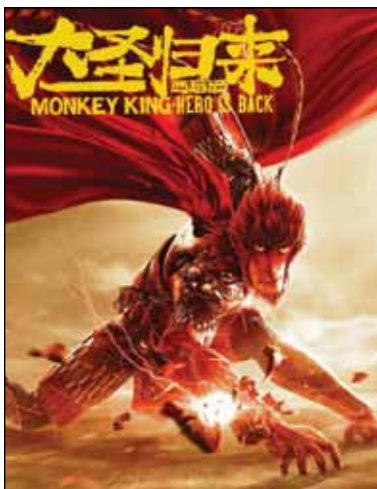
Originally from Mid-coast Maine, William Welte is a writer and creative executive living in Hollywood.



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

BIGBIGSUN HAS BIG, BIG PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The Chinese production company known for Monkey King: Hero is Back looks toward new partnerships and more blockbuster features.



BY WILLIAM WELTE

BigBigSun is a Beijing-based animation production company dedicated to providing the world with “happiness, warmth and power through the creation of outstanding animated film and television.” Their most recent productions include *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) and *Mr. Nian* (2016).

BigBigSun’s core team members, including senior producers, directors, art leads, research and development managers, and financial and legal talents, average 17 years experience in the animation industry.

Providing a complete animation production pipeline for in-house and client productions, BigBigSun is dedicated to safeguarding their clients’ intellectual properties, and takes special steps to protect the integrity and the security of copyright owners.

BigBigSun director and co-found-

Co-founder Zhou Xun sees BigBigSun as a “proactive and enthusiastic” incubator of animated films and television series.

er Zhou Xun has worked on numerous high-profile projects, including one of China’s first computer-generated animation films, *Thru the Meobius Strip*, and *How to Train Your Dragon*. He also served as an animation supervisor and executive director for *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, one of China’s highest-grossing animated feature films.

Since the company’s founding, Zhou has grown BigBigSun from a startup with a handful of people to a major studio with over 200 employees. The company has

Three BigBigSun projects (left to right): Monkey King: Hero is Back; The Phantom Soul (game); Mr. Nian.

garnered several Chinese industry awards, including the National Animated Production Enterprises, Zhongguancun High-tech Enterprises, and the National High-tech Enterprises awards.

With his deep understanding of the animation industry, Zhou has a clear perspective on BigBigSun’s role as a “proactive and enthusiastic” incubator of a diverse range of animated films and television series, and he looks forward to cooperating with industry partners who share his belief that only persistence can lead to success. BigBigSun is especially dedicated to producing more high-quality, animated feature films and is eager to forge partnerships with foreign animation companies. Visit www.bigbigsun.com for more information. 🌐

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MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

HONGYAO BRINGS POWER OF THE BAMBOO SPIRIT TO *PANGE AND PAKUN*

The Chengdu-based branding and animation company sees its pilot feature as the first step on the road to expanded opportunities.



BY RAYMOND D. NEOH

Founded in 2012 in Chengdu—hometown of the panda and the land of abundance—Sichuan Hongyao Culture Communication Co., Ltd. is dedicated to creating high-quality original animation. Hongyao's founders, who formerly worked as senior executives and key artists in a number of well-known animation production companies, were the first group of 3D artists in China's animation industry. Among them, they have more than 16 years of practical experience in animation design, production, pipeline management, staff allocation and company operation, among other services. Hongyao's current mission is to integrate high-quality animation with its branding operations in order to become a leading provider of original animation content, as well as to set up a world-class animation brand.

Hongyao's most recent animation project is *Pange and Pakun*, a charming comedy about dreams, growth, and the power of the "bamboo spirit"—an attitude based

"Pange and Pakun is a charming comedy about dreams, growth, and the power of the "bamboo spirit."

on respect, giving up arrogance, and achievement through sustained effort. Pange is smart and studious, but also greedy and wordy, while Pakun is friendly and sincere, but ineffective. Yet, despite having totally different personalities and backgrounds, the two are able to appreciate each other.

The two characters in *Pange and Pakun* represent the conflicting cultures of East and West, and the story is based on the current realities arising from the impact of Western culture on Chinese native culture. Hongyao hopes that the movie will inspire love, hope and belief in its audience, encouraging them to accept setbacks, face up to troubles, and find meaning in their lives through faith and perseverance.



The two characters in Pange and Pakun represent the conflicting cultures of East and West.

Pange and Pakun is currently in its early stages and is seeking investors. For more information about the project, including investment opportunities, email Mr. Fish Wu at 21667919@qq.com. 🐼

Raymond D. Neoh, President of CG Entertainment Co., Ltd. and the founder of GDC/IDMT, has devoted his life to the Chinese animation industry and his students are working in CG companies all over China.

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MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

JOEY ZOU AND WEYING TECHNOLOGY REALIZE A DREAM

*The director's Legend of Tofu: A Bean from Ancient China
breathes new life into an ancient tale.*



BY RAYMOND D. NEOH

Beijing-based Weying Technology Co. Ltd. and its animation distribution arm, Dreamers Studio, is a hot topic in the Chinese animation world right now. Their animated feature film *Legend of Tofu: A Bean from Ancient China* debuts in China on July 7 and, based on the success of a series of online shorts that have been viewed over one billion times on Chinese video sites, expectations are understandably high.

The story derives from the legend of Liu An, the King of Huainan in Han dynasty China, who invented tofu. Apparently, King Liu was obsessed with magic and immortality and, in one of his experiments, he accidentally breathed life into a group of beans, one of whom was named Tofu. Tofu became a disciple of King Liu and was eager to become immortal himself. To achieve immortality, Tofu endures many hardships and difficulties and even discovers a major conspiracy along the way.

"A series of online shorts have been viewed over one billion times on Chinese video sites."

Director Joey Zou says it took ten years of his life to bring *Tofu* to the big screen. "*Tofu* is like a portrayal of my life," he says. "The theme of persistence in following your dreams mirrors my persistence to create animation."

In order to guarantee the best visual effects possible for the film, Weying brought together a powerhouse team in China, with added technical support from artists at DreamWorks and Pixar.

"We had a lot of breakthroughs within the limited time," says Ray Guo, the director of visual effects. "For example, we developed a depth simulation system that makes the movie simulate the natural depth of field. *Tofu* has very rich details, no

matter whether it's the fur, hair, water or cloth, they appear very real."

Zou and Guo, along with Lawrence Meng, the film's director of animation, are former classmates and buddies who all know each other from the Institute of Digital Media Technology (IDMT) in Shenzhen, China, where they studied together seventeen years ago.

"We had a lot of arguments during the production," says Zou. "And I'm grateful for that. They gave me a lot of valuable ideas and suggestions. They really helped to transform the story from words into life."

Director Joey Zou spent ten years working on Legend of Tofu, which celebrates persistence in the face of adversity.

AWN was fortunate to sit down with Zou to chat with him in more detail about *Tofu*, as well as about some of the specifics of his journey.

AWN: What made you decide to devote yourself to the animation industry?

Zou: I've always liked animation, but I became even more fascinated by it after watching *A Bug's Life* and *Antz*. Isn't it amazing that CG can create such life-like productions? That's when I decided I wanted to be part of this great art.

AWN: Why choose this legend as your source material?

Zou: Tofu—the bean curd—is a food that originated in China and has now spread throughout the world. That's exactly what I want my production to be too—a Chinese feature film that goes out to the world. Also, the making of tofu is very much like the making of a film—it's an extended transformation process that results in something brand new and great.

AWN: What difficulties did you encounter during production?

Zou: A lot! (laughs) Well, first is the story itself—you have to keep revising it to reach the best version. It involves tremendous work by the scriptwriters and storyboarding. Then when it goes into production, you have to manage the workflow for efficiency, while ensuring the effect you want doesn't get lost. And of course you have to get financing for a high-quality production, so apart from being an artist, I also had to be a businessman.

AWN: Can you talk a little about the international team that came together to help make your dream a reality?

Zou: I'd like to thank my investor Mr. Chen Hua, the CEO of Kingkey Group. A production like this requires significant funding and Mr. Chen and his management team were very supportive during the making of the film. I invited many of my classmates from IDMT, like Ray Guo (FX director of *The Monkey King*) and Lawrence Meng, as well as friends from overseas who are senior artists in major animation studios in the US. My friend Bob Koch helped put together a team of high-caliber talents from these studios to be part of our storyboarding.

We also had Carl Fornander (previs and rough layout for *Avatar*), Chuck Comisky (visual effects supervisor for *Avatar*) and Emmy Award winner Tom Disher did the music. These great talents virtually guaranteed that the film would be world-class quality.

Finally, but not least, I'd like to thank all the members of the studio for trying their best to help make my dream—this film—come true.

AWN: How would you compare the level of animation in China to that of Western productions?

Zou: Animation in China is comparatively quite young and of course has a lot to learn from the

giants. But with a huge market demand and great support from the government, it is developing very fast and eventually will catch up with, and even surpass, the big names.

AWN: What directors do you dream of collaborating with on a feature film?

Zou: I'd be very honored if I could work with Hayao Miyazaki, John Lasseter, or some of the other great directors from the

world-famous studios.

AWN: What advice would you give to those who want to get into the animation industry?

Zou: Don't get into it unless you truly love it!

AWN: Now that you've finished *Tofu*, what's next?

Zou: I have spent the last ten years preparing for and making this film. So, after this, I will take a rest. Then continue to make more films! 🍌



"We had a lot of arguments during the production. And I'm grateful for that."



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2017.7.7

BEAN BEING IMMORTAL



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

'CHINA, ART IN MOTION' SHOWCASES PIONEERING NEW CHINESE ANIMATION ART

First-of-its-kind exhibition in Europe surveys the groundbreaking work of contemporary mainland artists.



© WU CHAO/XIA WEILUN

BY CHRIS COLMAN

Annecy's celebration of Chinese animation in 2017 will be supported by a major exhibition of Chinese artists at the Château d'Annecy, an event that represents a significant moment for both the country's animation and contemporary art movements.

Opening on June 1 and running for four months, "China, Art In Motion" will comprise five rooms of retrospective work from eleven mainland Chinese artists, the first show to feature such depth and breadth of Chinese animation talent under one roof.

The show is co-curated by

"The artists in this show are reinventing animation, creating work informed by dissent and inquiry."

Château d'Annecy's Lucie Cabanes (Head of Contemporary Art Collections) and Maurice Corbet (Head of Animated Film Collections), Holland Animation Film Festival (HAFF) Programmer Anet ter Horst and HAFF Festival Director Gerben Schermer.

Schermer, a China art aficionado under whose guidance HAFF has become a leading platform for Chinese work on the global stage, notes that



Above, left: Wu Chao/Xia Weilun, Happen (2007-2011).

Above: Château d'Annecy.

animation in China is divided into two distinct worlds: the industry and a thriving contemporary arts scene. He first encountered the latter while visiting the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou about ten years ago. There he met Sun Xun, a printmaking major and pioneer among a new wave of Chinese fine artists who were using animation as a medium, but studying outside of the commercially focused animation departments.



© DU ZHEN-JUN

Clockwise from above: Du Zhen-Jun, Tower of Babel: Old Europe (2010); Haiyang Wang, Freud Fish and Butterfly (2012); Yang Yongliang, Before the Rain (2010).

Sun is a leading representative of what Schermer refers to as the third generation of modern Chinese animators. The first came to an end at the beginning of the 1990s, when an older generation of filmmakers gave way to a new breed that was, he says, “more interested in money than art.” This led to the creation of “artificial” entertainment-driven work. That generation, he believes, “destroyed the knowledge of its own history.”

Lacking knowledge of older filmmakers, the artists in “China, Art In Motion” are reinventing animation, creating work informed by dissent and inquiry, traits that were absent throughout the sterile work of the 90s. “They are looking for their own history,” says Schermer, “They are searching for their values. They are asking how this boom of wealth has affected young people and if we really want this Coca-Cola culture.”

This general migration toward the art



COURTESY GALERIE PARIS BEIJING



world is born as much out of necessity as ideology. With no government subsidies, Chinese filmmakers are forced to find alternative means for producing work and making a living. The booming private art scene, in which pieces command high prices from an abundance of collectors, provides an obvious solution. Organizations like the K11 Art Foundation, meanwhile, drive the creation and promotion of work, sponsoring artists and providing



COURTESY GALERIE PARIS BEIJING



© CHEN SHAOXIONG



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COURTESY GALERIE PARIS BEIJING

Clockwise, from upper left: Miao Xiaochun, Restart (2008-2010); Chen Shaoxiong, Ink City (2005); Lei Lei/Thomas Sawin, Hand-Colored (2016).

their own malls, museums and galleries as showcase platforms.

It would perhaps be natural to assume that China is being honored at Annecy as a result of its money-soaked movie business. On the contrary, Schermer believes the decision in fact represents Annecy's latest effort to redress a growing drift toward commercial animation, which started with the appointment of Marcel Jean, a known proponent of experimental work, to the role of artistic director in

2012. To this end, China's animation-contemporary art fusion offered a unique opportunity that no other territory could match.

Sun Xun thinks that shift has been vital. "Commercial films will ruin our world," he says. "They offer no space for the audience to think or reflect... I think animation festivals should take measures to address this situation."

"China, Art In Motion" aims not only to challenge assumptions about the nature of animation, but also to posi-

tion its participants firmly as artists. Schermer explains that traditionally it has been virtually impossible for any artist working in animation to achieve this status. "I told Sun Xun to stay out of the animation world for as long as possible, because once you have entered it, people don't see you as a contemporary artist anymore."

Indeed, for Sun and many of his contemporaries, animation is merely a tool to express their ideas. "I don't



© DING SHIWEI

think animation is special as a means of creation,” he says. “To me, animation is worth discussing only in the field of art, where the pursuing of metaphysics, the meaning of time and life, should be the necessary precondition.”

As the most prominent international artist in the show, Sun has a room dedicated to his work. In addition, for one week starting on June 10, he will create huge drawings in front of an audience to complement four video installations. In an adjacent room, “Ink City,” a slideshow of ink drawings by the late Chen Shaoxiong, will also explore the art of drawing.

The “Movement & Tradition” room features installation work exploring the clashes between history and the ravages of urbanization present in the China of today. Wu Chao, also a festival juror, and her creative partner Xia Weilun, will display “Nothing,” a 32-minute looped installation, while ceramist Geng Xue employs her sculpture and engraving skills to manipulate porcelain puppets and light in “Mr Sea.”

Among the immersive works, Ding Shiwei’s “Meteor Sonata” is an animated heartbeat comprising layered photographs of 10,000 slices



© YE LINGHAN

Top: Ding Shiwei, Meteor Sonata (2015). Bottom: Ye Linghan, Last experimental flying object (2008).

of a 17-year-old tree, projected on six screens spanning twelve meters.

To provide context, the exhibition will also include a showcase of the work of the Shanghai Art Studio, which takes audiences back through the golden age of Chinese animation in the 1950s and 1960s and culminates in Ye Linghan’s ink-wash

animation that questions the role of these classics today.

Schermer believes that, as a first-of-its-kind exhibition in Europe, “China, Art In Motion” may surprise a few people. “What’s happening in China is a step ahead of what is happening in the rest of the world. What you don’t know, you reinvent, and when you reinvent, you try new things. I believe that this exhibition will really open people’s minds.” 🇨🇳



MADE IN CHINA: ANECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

FOXRENDERFARM PROVIDES EXCEPTIONAL SUPPORT TO PRODUCTIONS AROUND THE GLOBE

The Shenzhen-based rendering company leads the way in cloud-based services for CG shorts and features.



BY WILLIAM WELTE

Since 2009, FoxRenderfarm has offered cloud rendering services for clients all over the world, specializing in 3D animation rendering for the entertainment industry. They are a paradigmatic example of the ways in which the technology involved in the animation and video production pipeline is forever evolving. The use of such high-powered render farms by overseas studios also reflects the international cooperation and technological resource-sharing demanded by the animation industry.

The flexible pricing plans they offer scale with every “core-hour” of rendering performed, a measurement of how many hours you make use of the core processors they provide. The company is also dedicated to making their hardware and the FoxRenderfarm GoCloud software accessible to educational facilities, students and creative teams by offering flexible service plans and a sixty percent.

“If you have big dreams, great ideas for a story, excellent animation skills, a deep passion for film, but have only a limited budget, FoxRenderfarm is the right place

“If you have big dreams, but a limited budget, FoxRenderfarm is the right place to help you render your work.”

Of the 27 animated features submitted for Academy Award consideration in 2016, three were rendered by FoxRenderfarm.

to help you render your work,” explained a company representative.

The promise of easier, cheaper, faster rendering, independent of

the geographical location of the hardware, has drawn interest from production companies all over the world. FoxRenderfarm has worked with animation studios from over 50 countries, including rendering the Academy Award-winning short film *Mr. Hublot*. In fact, of the record 27 animated feature films submitted for consideration in the 89th Academy Awards, three were rendered by FoxRenderfarm: *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (China), *Kingsglaive: Final Fantasy XV* (Japan) and *Bilal: A New Breed of Hero* (Saudi Arabia).

In 2015, FoxRenderfarm formed a global strategic partnership with Alibaba Cloud to provide global visual cloud computing services. And further exciting developments are on the horizon for the company, which just released a new rendering application, which has more advanced rendering features and a new user interface. 🤖



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

CHINESE FEATURES AT ANNECY REFLECT DIVERSE TAKES ON CULTURE, NARRATIVE AND STYLE

Screening both in and out of competition, the three films feature characters ranging from porcelain figurines to Tarantino-esque mobsters.



© LIGHT CHASER ANIMATION

BY CHRIS COLMAN

In early 2016, when the Annecy International Animated Film Festival announced its intention to honor China as the guest country at the 2017 festival, there was some concern about which, if any, features would warrant selection. In the event, it turned out not to be a problem, as three excellent and diverse Chinese films will be taking their place in the world's foremost animation showcase.

Tea Pets (2017), being screened in the Out-of-Competition category, is the sophomore effort of Light Chaser Animation, one of the few Chinese studios to have established an international reputation. This is largely attributable to the profile of its tech entrepreneur founder, Gary Wang, who, after selling video-streaming site Tudou for over \$1 billion in 2012, re-emerged in March 2013 to launch Light Chaser. By employing cutting-edge production technology, the studio hoped to be able to produce Hollywood-quality films at a fraction of the cost.

Their debut feature *Little Door Gods* (2106) cost just

Tea Pets is the first-ever buddy/adventure movie with a main character made of porcelain.

“We hope the global community will gain an appreciation of Chinese culture.”

\$12 million, with a further \$12 million being spent on a long-running marketing campaign to get the word out that Chinese animation was emerging from the doldrums. Wang assumed writing and directing duties, despite never previously having written or directed an animated film. Disappointing box office returns upon its Chinese New Year release in 2016 signaled a challenging journey ahead.

Tea Pets, for which Wang returns as writer and director, is a buddy/adventure film produced in-house over four years at Light Chaser's Beijing studio. Like the first film, the focus is on traditional Chinese elements, this time the porcelain figurines found in Chinese tea culture.

“*Tea Pets* is the first-ever animation film with a main character made of porcelain,” says producer and co-founder Zhou Yu. “We had to develop a number of unique styles, techniques and systems to bring the characters to life and make them appealing.”



Light Chaser believes the universal theme of friendship will help *Tea Pets* transcend borders. “We hope the global community will gain an appreciation of some Chinese culture,” says Zhou. “We hope there will be some level of surprise, either from the production quality or by the fascinating world that our team has created.”

Light Chaser will surely be happy if it can emulate the success of *Big Fish & Begonia*, a feature 12 years in the making that is screening in competition. Produced by Beijing’s B&T Studio with South Korean animation house Studio Mir, the film had its origin in 2003, when Liang Xuan, a hydraulic engineering student at Tsinghua University, had two dreams. These formed the basis of a seven-minute flash animation that he made with art school student Zhang Chun.

“Big Fish remains a testament to the value of vision, patience and endurance.”

When the film became an online sensation in 2004, the pair were inspired to develop the concept into a feature-length film.

For nine years, the on-and-off project was plagued with money problems.

Then, in 2013,

Liang made an online appeal, prompting fans to donate CNY1.58 million (\$226,000). China’s largest private film company, Enlight Media, subsequently put up the financing to push *Big Fish* over the line.

Upon its release in July 2016, the film grossed CNY565 million (\$82 million), the second-highest total for a homegrown animated feature. It not only represented a massive profit on a production expense of just CNY30 million (\$4.48 million), but further demonstrated that a domestic audience existed for more adventurous content.

Though not explicitly stated by the directors, many commentators regard *Big Fish* as a showcase of Chinese culture, history and mythology. It’s an ethereal fantasy, set in a dreamlike wonderland, in which the human soul is a



IMAGES © BEIJING ENLIGHT MEDIA

Twelve years in the making, Big Fish & Begonia was one of the most successful Chinese animated features ever.

fish whose journey across the ocean represents the different stages of life. While inevitable comparisons were made with Miyazaki, the film also drew criticism from some critics for its flat dialogue and confusing plotlines. Possibly, twelve years of hype had built expectations unrealistically high. Yet *Big Fish* remains a testament to the value of vision, patience and endurance, qualities that have often been lacking in China’s animated feature gold rush.



The third film, also screening in competition, is a very rare independent animated feature from China—although *Have a Nice Day* is in fact director Liu Jian's second feature-length animation, following his *Piercing I* (2010).

"At its core, film art is the same as fine art, so what it expresses should be the same."

Liu studied Chinese landscape painting and initially pursued a career as a painter and photographer before starting to make animation and establishing the Lejoy Animation Studio in 2017. Like many of his Chinese contemporaries, Liu sees film art as only one part of his artistic creation, "albeit the most enjoyable, challenging and worthwhile part," as he told the Goethe Institut. "At its core, film art is the same as contemporary art and painting, so what it expresses should also be the same."

Have a Nice Day, a hand-drawn 2D animation, took Liu and a team of young Chinese animators around three years to finish, with Liu sketching most of the frames himself. It tells the stories of people living on the periphery of a big city in the south of China, offering a glimpse of the more squalid elements of modern urban Chinese life.

The film won widespread praise at the 2017 Berlinale for its design, black humor, and Tarantino-esque multiple-narrative structure, although there was disagreement about whether it was intended as a criticism of modern Chinese commercial culture, or was simply paying homage to the crime-thriller genre. Liu alleges that he simply wanted to create "a pure and funny film" and that he produced it "with no special purpose, other than the mere desire to



IMAGES © LEJOY ANIMATION STUDIO

Liu Jian's independent feature uses a multi-narrative structure to tell the stories of characters living on the edge.

create something I myself like." The terrific soundtrack features Shanghai Restoration Project, Beijing punk band New Pants, and singers Zhang Qiang, Zhu Hong and Wang Da.

Have a Nice Day is Lejoy Animation Studio's first collaboration with Nezha Films, and the Annecy screening will provide a launching pad for a planned global and Chinese theatrical release. 🌐



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

ICE ORANGE OFFERS EXCEPTIONAL PRODUCTION SUPPORT

Established by graduates of Shenzhen's Institute of Digital Media Technology, CG production studio helps clients manage global outsourcing.

BY WILLIAM WELTE

Ice Orange Studio was established in 2013 with the objective of providing world-class, professional animation production management in the form of a control system and production pipeline to the Chinese animation industry.

The founders of Ice Orange Studio have years of experience working in computer-generated animation, and many of them worked on the first major Chinese computer-animated feature, *Thru the Moebius Strip*. They all are graduates of the Institute of Digital Media Technology (IDMT) in Shenzhen.

After working on a variety of animation projects since the early 2000s, they gradually began to pivot toward production control and support, with an emphasis on creating a system that can provide their clients with cloud-based, up-to-the minute, real-time production information anywhere on the globe.

Today, Ice Orange continues to provide CG production services, in addition to helping clients manage their production and pipeline for outsourcing their works to studios throughout the world. Ice Orange clients have included many Chinese studios, producers and filmmakers. For more information visit www.iceora.com. 

The friendly and highly experienced Ice Orange team provides CG production and production management services.



IMAGES © ICE ORANGE



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

XANTHUS BREAKS NEW GROUND IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATION

With their Pokémon-inspired Dragmon, Shanghai's Xanthus Animation Studio fuses classic Chinese design with coming-of-age adventures.

BY WILLIAM WELTE

Founded in 2011, Shanghai-based Xanthus Animation Studio is a development and production company involved in original animation development, distribution and promotion, and commercial production and licensing for television, film, and interactive media.

With a highly experienced staff drawn from studios like The Walt Disney Company, Oriental DreamWorks and Lucasfilm, and a growing resume of Chinese culture-inspired projects, Xanthus is one of the companies at the forefront of a passionate new wave of Chinese animation production.

The studio is behind the action-adventure IP Dragmon, which follows the descendants of the Dragon King and his mythological creature friends in the world of mankind, with plans to build a multi-platform franchise spanning film and television.

Animation World had the opportunity to sit down with Xanthus Animation Studio's co-founders, President Liu Chang and Executive Director Chen Jiong, to discuss their animated franchise Dragmon, their biggest influences, and future direction.

AWN: Can you tell us a bit about the conceptual and design influences on Dragmon?

Chen Jiong: Dragmon is an adventure story about the descendants of the dragon king and his ninety-nine mythological creature friends in the world of mankind. It creatively depicts the concept of the dragon totem. These fantastic beasts each have various fighting techniques and a modern design aesthetic that draws heavily on the various mythological creatures found in the traditional Chinese fairy tale *Shan Hai Jing*.

Liu Chang: For example, we added design references to the mythological nine sons of the dragon and use traditional Chinese patterns, like the taotie motif or that found on the Eaves Tile with Rolling Cloud Design, an excavated artifact.

"We wanted to convey the passion and excitement of friends having adventures together."



Chen: In this way, the characters and story are quintessentially an expression of Chinese culture. For us, it is a way to preserve and respect these traditions.

Liu: My partner and I both studied in Japan, where we developed a deep fondness for Japanese animation. We were inspired by Pokémon and, with Dragmon, we wanted to create a story with similar friendship and coming-of-age themes. We wanted to express the sort of passion and excitement found when friends have adventures together and fight alongside one another, the kinds of situations that cause the bonds of friendship to grow stronger.

AWN: You've stated that Dragmon is not a one-off production, but is actually a multi-platform franchise. What formats will you be using to tell the story?

Chen: The Dragmon franchise includes an animated television series and four theatrical features, and we are also



The Dragmon franchise will include a TV series, four theatrical features, and licensed works.

preparing our intellectual property for licensed works. We are working with Yamato Works of Japan on IP incubation. We will also work with teams in Japan and Taiwan to exchange culture and technology.

AWN: Tell us a little more about Xanthus. What do you see as your overall influences and advantages?

Liu: Xanthus is focused on content development and production. We have a complete pipeline, from pre-production, to production, to IP development, to marketing and distribution. We integrated resources and staff from the previous children's animated television series *Bodhi and Friends*, which we consider a great advantage for the production of *Dragmon*.

Chen: Our team and company are still very young. We are very inspired by Japanese and American animation. Our specific influences include *Doraemon*, *Chibi Maruko-chan*, *Superman*, and *Spider-man*. We believe that *Dragmon*, and Chinese animation in general, will be major players in the future animation market.

AWN: There seems to be a preference in the Chinese market for older-skewing entertainment. Why did you decide to focus on children's entertainment?



Liu: We believe that a good product does not only provide personal value, but also has a mission to achieve. Our goal is to affect the broader Chinese animation market. Currently, the Chinese children's animation market lacks high-quality content. Xanthus wants to fill that space.

Chen: I'd like to add that, although *Dragmon* is for children, we hope that—like *Pokémon*—it will be a product that transcends age boundaries. We are devising a merchandising strategy incorporating products for a variety of age groups. 🐉



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

CGGE BRINGS CHINA TO THE WORLD AND THE WORLD TO CHINA

With a global perspective, the visionary Chinese digital media company seeks to connect the Middle Kingdom and the West.

BY RAYMOND D. NEOH

As China's animation, visual effects and digital content industries continue to expand, bridging the communication and information gap between the Middle Kingdom and West has never been more critical. CG Global Entertainment Ltd. (CGGE) is focused on just that mission—building a global ecosystem centered around information research, technology, publishing, education, consulting, content development and investment in order to foster cooperative digital entertainment development around the world, and to nurture, support and connect the next generation of international storytellers.

CGGE was founded by Chinese computer graphics visionary Raymond D. Neoh, who, along with his brother Francis F. Neoh, founded the production house GDC, as well as the IDMT training center in Shenzhen, China. Raymond brings to CGGE a vast working knowledge of China's CG and entertainment industries, as well as relationships with a host of animation creators, executives and financiers who share not only his passion for the medium, but also a strong desire to nurture and support China's ever-growing community of digital content creators.

That passion led Raymond to Dan Sarto and Animation World Network (AWN.com). Friends since the early days of IDMT, Raymond and Dan are now working together to promote China's digital media industry on the world stage, bringing together people, projects and companies from around the globe that share a desire to work hard, tackle challenges and make a difference in an often fractured and always tricky global entertainment business.

CGGE has also aligned with China GIMC (Guangdong Advertising Group Co., Ltd.), the largest advertising company and biggest integrated marketing communications group in China, with annual sales of more than US\$1.5 billion. GIMC provides established marketing channels and advertising resources across all of China.

CGGE'S MISSION

CGGE's global perspective and slate of focused international business initiatives will support China's national policy of building up the digital creative industry as part of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. The company's



CGGE'S *initiatives to build up the digital creative industry support China's "One Belt, One Road" policy.*

stated mission is to bring two giant forces together by providing a business and communication conduit for bringing China's digital media industry to the rest of the world, while simultaneously bringing the world of digital media content creators to China.

BUILDING A WORLD-CLASS GLOBAL DIGITAL MEDIA INDUSTRY

- Provide credible, professional and valuable services for our global network of member artists, companies and organizations.
- Provide a useful and easily accessible online community environment that supports the exchange of important, helpful, inspiring, interesting and entertaining information resources.
- Lead by example—invest in people, technology, media infrastructure and creative projects that support Chinese-international cooperation through co-productions, joint ventures and partnerships.
- Constantly innovate through bringing together the world's best creative, technical and management resources into key teams of strategists, advisors, architects, teachers and builders.
- Support extensive educational outreach across platforms, mediums and disciplines to nurture and train future industry leaders.
- Foster continued research and development to push the convergence of technology and creativity to new heights.





IMAGE © CGGE/PLAYFUN

CGGE is partnering with Playfun to deploy Family Entertainment Centers (FECs) in shopping malls in China.

CGGE GLOBAL DIGITAL MEDIA INDUSTRY DIRECTORY

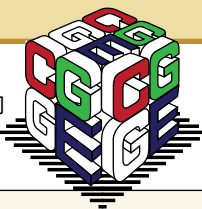


One of the most exciting new CGGE-AWN projects is the Global Digital Media Directory. In the West, something as simple as finding basic contact information for Chinese animation companies is an impossible task—between significant language barriers and no developed communication platforms focused on digital content resources, Western companies are routinely at a loss when trying to determine “what’s what” in China.

CGGE and AWN are teaming up to introduce the Global Digital Media Directory, a comprehensive printed directory supported by a membership-based online system, that provides access to reliable and credible information everyone can use to find collaborators on projects, customers for products and services and resources for co-productions, project financing and distribution within China, and more.

Published in both English and Chinese, the first of four annual directories, focusing on connecting China’s digital content resources to the rest of the world, is slated for release later in 2017. Additional directories will follow: The America Edition (North and South) in 2018, European Edition in 2019, and Pan-Asia Edition in 2020 (covering India, the ASEAN countries, Korea and Japan). 🌐

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CGGE Global Entertainment Co., Ltd.



CGGE BUSINESS PROFILE

Currently, CGGE’s business covers the five following areas:

1. PUBLISHING: NEWS, EDUCATION AND INFORMATION RESOURCES

Working closely with AWN, CGGE will help the industry-leading portal expand into China, through a Chinese-language website and mobile app growth, as well as special print editions of Animation World Magazine at key Chinese and international industry events such as the Annecy Animation Festival, CCG Expo, CICAFA, MIPCOM and SIGGRAPH. In addition, later in 2017, CGGE will publish the first annual Global Digital Media Industry Directory.

2. BUSINESS AND CREATIVE CONSULTING

CGGE and AWN will provide consulting services for companies looking to enter and find success doing business in the largely uncharted and difficult-to-navigate waters of China, as well as Chinese companies looking to find International partners, financing, production or creative services, as well as distribution and promotional support to reach highly competitive and complex global markets.

3. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Slated to launch later in 2017, CGGE will offer a 6-month previsualization course, in Shenzhen, for students interested in ground-floor opportunities in the fledgling previs / techvis / postvis business in China. The course will be designed and taught by top personnel from major Hollywood visualization studios, who will not only teach but also mentor students through hands-on project-based experiences.

4. FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

CGGE is teaming with several major Chinese children’s entertainment companies to provide musically centered, real-time interactive animated experiences called Family Entertainment Centers (FEC) in shopping malls across China.

5. CONTENT CREATION

CGGE has invested with U.S. and Chinese partners in the production of *Dreamers*, an animated feature film set for a 2020 global release. *Dreamers* will also serve as a pilot project in the use of exciting new cloud-based production technologies, methodologies and practices designed to pave the way for geographically dispersed creative teams to collaborate in the production of high-quality digital entertainment content.

WWW.CGGE MEDIA.COM



MADE IN CHINA: ANNECY 2017 SPOTLIGHTS CHINESE ANIMATION

DONGFANG JUCHENG EXCELS IN CHILDREN'S AND FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

With an unparalleled team of theatrical and live-event professionals, the company is the go-to producer in China.



The Little Mermaid: The Bell of Dawn has had over 100 performances.

BY WILLIAM WELTE

Dongfang Jucheng (DFJC) is an investor in, and producer of, live children's musicals and family entertainment.

The company also actively develops drama education content and children's variety shows, seeking to position itself as a major provider of comprehensive family content.

China International Broadcasting Network (CIBN) is a key investor in the company and a strategic partner. DFJC relies on CIBN's internet television platform, which covers horizontal and vertical markets, domestic and overseas, including North America, Europe and Southeast Asia. One of seven internet television license holders, CIBN has 68.19 million users from all over the world.

"DFJC has unrivalled experience producing theatrical entertainment in China."

DFJC has unrivalled experience producing theatrical entertainment in China. Among the many productions in which key team members have been involved are *The Voice of China* final competition, *Goddess's New Clothes* (OTV Show), television series *Song Cheng Eternal Love*, *Tianmen Fox Spirit*, *Dream of Tao*, *The Road to Recovery*; the grand music and dance drama epic for the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, "Day of Retreat" for Overseas Chinese

Town East (OCT East), "Oriental Neri-issa" for Splendid China Folk Village, Shenzhen Joy Coast, Wanda Theme Park, Guangzhou Long Lung, Huayi Brothers Movie World, and the Tianyang Dream Oriental Theme Park.

DFJC's professional children's drama production team—Jucheng Children Arts Troupe—has had great success recently. Their Chinese-Danish musical coproduction, *The Little Mermaid: The Bell of Dawn*, which premiered in Beijing in 2016, was so popular that encore performances were scheduled in 2017. The show has had over one hundred performances, and was seen in China as the dark horse of the children's musical drama market. It was also the first children's musical broadcast live online through CIBN, where it was watched by over 200,000 viewers. 🌐

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RAISING THE BAR: GKIDS AIMS HIGH WITH A PASSION FOR INDIE ANIMATED FEATURE DISTRIBUTION



BY DAN SARTO

The basic M.O. is simple: “What we do is find films we like and then try to share what we like about the films with people in North America,” says GKIDS CEO Eric Beckman. Those films have included *The Secret of Kells*, *A Cat in Paris*, *Ernest & Celestine*, the recently released *My Entire High School Sinking Into the Sea*, and the 2017 Oscar nominee *My Life as a Zucchini*. In fact, since 2009, films distributed by GKIDS, the New York-based company led by Beckman and partner and president Dave Jesteadt, have been nominated for the Best Animated Feature Oscar an astonishing nine times.

It all started “many, many, many moons ago” when Beckman founded the nonprofit New York International Children’s Film Festival. Eventually, he split off GKIDS as a for-profit distribution company and soon thereafter, joined by Jesteadt, started bringing an eclectic and well-regarded selection of top independent animated features, including many Studio Ghibli titles, to North America.

“GKIDS was actually launched initially as a digital platform in 2007,” says Beckman, “but theatrical was always a part of our game plan. We did *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008), but the first animated film that we really bought and owned

all the rights to was *The Secret of Kells* (2009). That got an Oscar nomination. After that, we decided to focus on animation, instead of solely children’s films.

“There’s a hole in the U.S. market that wasn’t really being filled anywhere,” he continues. “You have economies of scale that support 3,500- and 4,000-screen releases, where films are measured in billion-dollar worldwide box office. That’s a great business and some wonderful product comes out of that. But where is the indie film world for animation? There really wasn’t one. It just felt like trying to help establish that...”

FILMS TO BELIEVE IN

As far as deciding which films to acquire, both Beckman and Jesteadt clearly put passion above commercial calculation. “If there’s anything we’ve learned,” says Beckman, “it’s to follow the films we love, the films that we really believe in.”

Adds Jesteadt: “It’s hard to be passionate if you’re just looking toward having some kind of check to cash a year in the future. It’s much more fun if you can also enjoy putting together what are often guerilla-style marketing campaigns.

“Some of our smaller films have been the most satisfying... pitching *Boy and the World* (2013) and watching people’s faces narrow as they hear that it’s non-dialogue with an anti-capitalism message. Then they watch it and they’re like, ‘Oh, okay!’ They become converts.”

GKIDS executives Eric Beckman and Dave Jesteadt feed a growing North American appetite for independent animation.



Facing page: Ernest & Celestine (2014, France), Les Armateurs in association with StudioCanal, Maybe Movies, La Parti Productions, Mélusine Productions, France 3 Cinéma. This page, from top: Miss Hokusai (2016, Japan), Production I.G.; Boy and the World (2013, Brazil), Filme de Papel; A Cat in Paris (2010, France), Folimage, co-produced with Digít Anima, France 3 Cinéma, Lumière, Lunanime, Radio Télévision Belge Francophone, Rhône-Alpes Cinéma.

“It was hugely gratifying because this was a film that wasn’t on people’s radar and we were sort of blown away by it,” Beckman enthuses. “The deal was done in literally five minutes. Two emails going back and forth. This is a film that we really love and probably other people really love and it’s that sort of sharing that works at all levels.”

While in the beginning Beckman and Jesteadt would often wait to acquire films, they’ve gradually begun to get involved earlier and earlier in the process.

“I think more and more we’re looking to help introduce



the film,” Jesteadt says. “Whether that’s on a festival stage or acquiring it very shortly after so that we can help get it into theaters sooner. And now we are taking tentative steps to get involved very early in projects. We recently did *The Breadwinner* with Cartoon Saloon [producers of *The Secret of Kells* and *The Song of the Sea*], which is our first entry on a film when it basically just started production.”

ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF GKIDS



Continued from page 90



“We’re exec producers on that film,” says Beckman. “We were involved in script comments and stuff like that. Both for business reasons and creative fulfillment, we’re wanting to get more involved in the creative process.”

While the rewards of contributing to a film’s development have been considerable, the revised time frame has taken some getting used to.

“It’s very different than buying a film in March and releasing it in October,” Beckman explains. “We had a conversation today where delivery is 2019 and it’s like ‘We’re all going to be dead in 2019.’ I’m mostly on the three-month time-line for planning my life and so the idea that we are going to be planning things multiple years down the line is a little hypothetical.”

“If there’s anything we’ve learned, it’s to follow the films we love.”

With regard to their strategy for getting films into theaters, Beckman and Jestead have been working primarily with art-house cinemas, which provide a natural venue for the kind of independent films they champion. However, their distribution model is a continuous work-in-progress.

“It’s a little bit of a fine path that we travel,” says Beckman. “Ultimately, we want to get the film into as many theaters as possible. We also want to do that without hurting the overall profitability of the film. There tends to be a general amount that the film will play without totally cratering, where you spend ten million dollars on marketing and then have to make it up on home video. You need sort of a week-



Clockwise, from above: Sita Sings the Blues (2008, U.S.), Nina Paley Productions; The Secret of Kells (2009, France/Ireland), Cartoon Saloon, Les Armateurs; The Breadwinner (2017, Canada/Ireland/Luxembourg), Cartoon Saloon, Mélusine Productions, Aircraft Pictures, GKIDS, Guru Animation Studio, Jolie Pas Productions; Song of the Sea (2014, Ireland/Denmark/Belgium/Luxembourg/France), Cartoon Saloon; Chico and Rita (2010, Spain/U.K.), Fernando Trueba Producciones, Estudio Mariscal, Magic Light Pictures.


by-week economic analysis of how the release is going and how the film is playing to determine how much it makes sense to keep on pushing.

“We’ve done pretty well on home video, both DVDs and Blu-rays. Our films also tend to do really well on streaming platforms.”

Looking ahead to the (more manageable) immediate future, beginning this summer, GKIDS will be partnering with Fathom Events to present a traveling festival featuring six anime classics from Studio Ghibli, as well as the U.S. theatrical premiere of *Mune: Guardian of the Moon*.

And as for the more distant future?

“I don’t think we’ve anywhere near tapped the size of the audience for indie animation,” says Beckman.

“More and more, we want to reach people directly using internet-mediated communication. Overall, I’d say it’s a happy market for animation. More films are going to get made by people who really have something important to say... more people who have real talent can create films.” 



MY LIFE AS A ZUCCHINI CELEBRATES LOVE AND RESILIENCE

Claude Barras' multi-award-winning feature tackles complex emotional issues through the deceptively simple magic of stop-motion animation.

BY SCOTT LEHANE

Claude Barras' acclaimed stop-motion animated film *My Life as a Zucchini* (*"Ma vie de courgette"*) has captured hearts around the world, garnering five awards for Best Feature, including the Annecy Cristal and a Lumiere Award, as well as an Oscar nomination and a Cesar Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. The French-Swiss production, which opened the Fantoche Festival and is distributed in the U.S. by GKIDS, proves once again—if such proof is needed—that animation has the power to plumb the depths of the human experience, whether through CG-mediated processes or the illusory motion of simple plasticine figures.

My Life as a Zucchini is the story of a nine-year-old boy nicknamed "Courgette" (French for "zucchini"), who is befriended by a police officer named Raymond after his mother's disappearance. Raymond accompanies Courgette to his new foster home filled with other orphans his age. At first, Courgette struggles to find his place in this strange, at times, hostile environment. Yet with Raymond's help and the support of his newfound friends, Courgette eventually learns to trust and, perhaps, find love.

The 66-minute film is based on the 2002 novel *Autobiographie d'une courgette* by Gilles Paris. Barras explains that he first read the book about 10 years ago and secured permission to adapt it from the author. "Over the years, while I was working on other projects, whenever I had the time, I was working on the story and also on the design of the characters," he says. "The challenge in adapting the script was that there are a lot of characters in the novel. There are about 20 kids and each has their own little story. So, the chal-



lenge was to write a script where you had enough kids in the story that it would be credible, but also not so many that you couldn't meet each character separately."

Barras notes that perhaps the biggest challenge he faced was "to find producers who believed in this very unusual film that I wanted to make—a realistic melodrama for ages 8-12 in stop-motion! It took me six years to find them in the persons of Max Karli and Pauline Gyax."

THE VIRTUES OF SIMPLICITY

In 2009, Barras was able to really start production of the film, although it took about a year to get financing in place. In the meantime, he worked with writer Céline Sciamma to finish the script.

"Then it took us about a year to build the sets and the puppets," says Barras. "We had about 52 puppets and 40 or more sets."

During that year, the director came

up with a unique approach for his production—he shot a live-action version of the film with a group of child actors, just to get the dialogue recorded. "We did that before we did the storyboard, which is a little bit different from the way it's usually done," he explains. "Then we did the editing of the storyboard and all of the voices. So, by that point we were ready to start the main shoot because we had the film, we had the puppets, we had the sets and the animators. It took us about a year shooting with about ten animators. Then it took about another year to do post-production, sounds and the music."

Barras has learned from experience that the simpler the design of the puppets, the more emotions the animators can elicit. "We did a lot of tests and we realized that because the faces were pretty big, it allowed the animators to work with their faces and their fingers.



IMAGES COURTESY OF GRIDS

"The simpler the design of the puppets, the more emotions the animators can elicit."



That gave them access to the emotions of the characters. Even in large shots, you can see what's going on with them and that's what was most important for me."

Barras says that, in animation, there is often too much going on at the same time on the screen. As a committed minimalist, he believes that "simplifying is not making it poorer, it's just making it more essential."

SMALL BUDGET, BIG THEMES

A limited budget of about \$8 million also served to constrain them. "Shooting with so many sets and some fifty people is rather complex to manage, especially with a very small budget. There was very little preparation time for each shot to be filmed," notes the director. "It was necessary to constantly hurry each artist so that they would do what was most important and leave the place to the next person, without

anyone being frustrated."

In keeping with his minimalist philosophy, he also relied on silence to help emphasize emotional moments. "One has a tendency to forget that silence creates a contrast," he says. "Because it was a story with a lot of emotion, you needed to leave time for the emotion to come out."

Barras admits that he relied on CG extensions for some of the background shots. "We didn't have much space, so whatever you see outside of the windows, they built it at a smaller scale and then used some green screen and CGI."

From a technical standpoint, the production relied on DZED Systems' popular stop-motion animation software Dragonframe as its main backbone. Canon 5D cameras with Leica lenses were used to capture the frames. Toon-Boom Storyboard Pro was used for the animatic, while editing was done on Apple's FinalCut, and sound editing in Avid Protools. Additional 3D set extensions were done in Autodesk's Maya and composited in The Foundry's Nuke.

Barras concludes that, overall, he wanted to convey a message of hope. "I made this film realistic in order to speak to children about our complex and sometimes violent world, to show them how to react positively and with solidarity to the difficulties of life, how to break the chain of violence



A labor of love: Produced by RITA Productions, Blue Spirit Productions, Gebeka Films and KNM, in co-production with Radio Télévision Suisse, SRG-SSR, France 3 Cinéma, Rhône Alpes Cinéma and Helium Films. International sales handled by Indie Sales.

when they are faced with it. It's a film that speaks of hope, of forgiveness, of reconciliation—a film that unites and consoles and reaches out a hand to the weakest. I sincerely hope that these values will cause some seeds to germinate in the hearts of those who see it." 🌱

ABC'S HYBRID SERIES *IMAGINARY MARY* UNLEASHES MAXIMUM CUTENESS

Oscar-winning director Patrick Osborne's inventive new comedy series, produced by Vancouver's Zoic Studios, re-imagines the idea of imaginary friends.

BY SCOTT LEHANE

What happens when a childhood imaginary friend suddenly reappears in the life of a high-powered public relations executive?

That's the question answered by Patrick Osborne's new ABC series *Imaginary Mary*. Osborne, who won an Academy Award for his 2014 animated short *Feast* and received a nomination this year for the Google Spotlight Stories short *Pearl*, co-created and co-executive produced the mid-season entry.

However, nothing in his past, including his work as an animator on the Disney films *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Bolt* (2008), prepared him for the challenge of shepherding a TV series to air. "When I left Disney, I didn't know what the world of being a freelance writer, director, creative person and all of that really was," he says. "I had a lot of lunches for a year and a half, like three or four a week, with different people. That's how I met Doug Robinson, who produced with *The Goldbergs* and knows how to balance creativity with getting things done."

Robinson, who came on board as a co-executive producer, introduced Osborne to Adam Goldberg and David Guarascio, who would also

become co-executive producers and co-creators of the series. "I realized that they know how to make a show; they know the ins and outs of taking notes, executive involvement, studio vs. network and all that stuff that I didn't know anything about. Plus I just like them. So I thought it was

probably worth partnering up.

"In making the pilot I realized quickly that my role in the executive position here was going to be to educate the entire team on what animation is, because no one had really done any," he adds. "I had to educate them on things like, you can't see every shot finished and then give notes. We have to step up to the plate and look at blocking and understand that unfinished animation can be guided to the right place. That was an education for not just the other producers and the directors of each episode but all the executives as well."

Puppeteer Jeny Cassidy handled a puppet on set to help block the shots and give actress Jenna Elfman, who plays Alice, the PR executive, something to act against (Alice is the only one who can see Mary).

A voice actress read Mary's lines, while visual effects supervisor Sallyanne Massimini made sure whatever they were trying to do was technically possible.

Osborne called the process "previs-ing wide with puppets." Editors used the raw footage with the puppet to cut a first edit before the animation had even started, to make sure the pacing

was working. But eventually the puppet had to be taken away.

"Most of the show is Jenna acting to nothing," he says. "There were a couple rehearsals and then we took

"I'm excited to see how weird we can get in more seasons."





IMAGES © ABC TELEVISION GROUP

the puppet away and she had to just do it. We still recorded every take with the puppet and without it because it was a great lighting reference, and you could see how to properly integrate the puppet into the scene pretty easily.”

On set, the VFX team would capture a spherical HDRI photo of the set “so you could pretty much get first cast at lighting at the press of a button, which was pretty neat,” he says. “Then we just went from there and completed each shot. The general post time frame for a TV show without animation is about three weeks. Ours was between six and seven weeks per episode, depending on how big the episode was. Some episodes were bigger than others.”

Overall, the series’ nine half-hour episodes required about 100 minutes of animation. The crew at Zoic included roughly 26 animators, and as many as 15 lighting TDs, as well as production staff.

Osborne had high praise for Elfman. “We feel really lucky that we found someone like her that was interested and game to really make it her own, because it’s a challenge,” he says. “We’re asking her to just imagine the character, but literally, on set, there’s nothing there. We looked into the idea of painting out tennis balls and

“ *realized quickly that my role was to educate the entire team on what animation is, because no one had really done any.* ”

green screens and all that, but it just becomes so much of an ordeal on set and it slows everybody down and it’s distracting.”

Osborne explained that the biggest challenge came early on in production of the pilot episode. Mary’s character had been designed before the script was written, and the imaginary creature on screen didn’t quite match the one envisioned in the script. “It was a much more monster-y, mean kind of thing,” explains Osborne. “It became clear that the design was not working. It was not appealing enough and not cute enough to carry the show.”

He recalled that the pilot had been greenlit in January and they had until April to deliver the show, so the redesigned Mary had to be made quickly, and that it went from a doodle on a

Jenna Elfman, Nicholas Coombe and friend share a moment in ABC Television’s Imaginary Mary.

napkin, to an illustration to a character on the screen in no time. “A character at Disney takes 17 weeks to make and we had like nine weeks to make the whole show. And the fact that Sony Television was okay with me doing that was great because they saw the value in the appeal of that character.”

“Television is collaborative, in a lot of ways like animation, where it’s really a mix of everybody involved,” he adds. “You’re never getting exactly what you want, but you’re getting surprised in good ways.”

Looking forward, Osborne is obviously hoping for a second season renewal from ABC, which will inevitably depend on ratings.

“What’s cool is that if we have to do another season, we have a certain amount of crew that’s already kind of ‘got it,’ so that would be pretty neat if we can,” he concludes. “It’ll be fun to keep exploring. The set’s pretty crazy and it gets weirder, and I’m excited to see how weird we can get in more seasons.” 🐾

BIX PIX BRINGS HANDCRAFTED APPROACH TO AMAZON'S *TUMBLE LEAF*

Co-creator and executive producer Kelli Bixler reveals the craft and wizardry behind the award-winning stop-motion animated preschool series.



BY JENNIFER WOLFE

With its play-based focus on science and learning in a colorful world filled with lovable characters, Amazon's *Tumble Leaf* has charmed and delighted viewers around the globe. The award-winning preschool series follows Fig, a blue fox who sports a yellow-and-orange-striped tie, as he discovers adventure and friendship around every bend. The cast—which includes Fig's best friend, a caterpillar named Stick, and a pink fox named Maple—is voiced by real children. The series was created by Drew Hodges and Kelli Bixler, the founder of stop-motion specialists Bix Pix Entertainment in Sun Valley, CA, where the show is produced.

"We started out purists," Bixler says of the company's early days in Chicago. "We were mostly doing clay animation in the late 90s, and then we got into other materials for fabricating puppets, and now we're working in plasticine and silicone. We just love stop-motion and are always trying to find new materials and techniques. We've also done paper animation and all sorts of mixed-media projects, but, for the most part, stop-motion is our one, true love."

First introduced in 2014 at Annecy, where it received the Special Jury Award for a TV series, *Tumble Leaf* has gone on to rack up three consecutive Annie Awards for Best Animated TV/Broadcast Production for Preschool Children, and a

whopping eight Daytime Emmy Awards, including two for Outstanding Pre-School Children's Animated Program.

Following this raft of accolades, the series debuted its first seasonal special, back in April, *Spring-a-ling Surprise*, which introduced two new characters to Tumble Leaf Island. Episodes are written by an internal team that includes educational consultant Dr. Alice Wilder and story editor Karen Greenberg, and storylines tend to be character-driven, developed around what a character would want to do or might be interested in discovering. "Another way to get into it is, 'What kind of science concept can we have fun playing with?'" Bixler says. "And, really, those two approaches kind of work in tandem."

THE SECRET LIFE OF PORCUPINES

Yet, while the writing process might begin with a concept, often the characters take on a life of their own. "Until you start writing stories for all your characters, you really don't know where they are going to go. You have an idea, but you don't know what personalities are going to come out," Bixler recounts. "Hedge the porcupine was super shy at first, but he has grown and met a lot of his fears. And now, in the third season, he has interests we didn't know he would have back in the first season. It's been very fun and exciting to see them grow."

Once a script has been polished and locked down, the team moves on to creating storyboards and animatics. "You can learn a lot about Fig just by watching him walking from point A to point B," Bixler says. "So a lot of things that aren't



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“We just love stop-motion and are always trying to find new materials and techniques.”



Putting the “fun” back in fundamentals: Tumble Leaf’s colorful characters teach preschoolers about science. Facing page and left: Scenes from Season 3. Above: Spring-a-ling Surprise special.

written into the script actually take a lot of time on screen.”

Those additional, non-scripted details are what give *Tumble Leaf* a lot of its charm. “It’s a big part of what makes them special, in terms of getting to know our characters and how they move and think and react,” adds Bixler.

From greenlight to delivery, Bix Pix has roughly 15 months to deliver a full season, moving through script and storyboards to animatics and puppet and set fabrication, then on to production and post, including scattering touches of CG effects. Every element of the show, including lighting, water and props, is captured “99 percent in-camera,” according to Bixler.

The process of stop-motion animation—painstakingly capturing movement at 24 frames per second—is necessarily destructive. Elaborate puppets, costumes and sets are created, primarily by hand, only to undergo a slow demolition during the animation process. The first season of *Tumble Leaf* employed 98 separate sets, many of which—such as Tumble Park and Beetle Hollow—have become mainstays over the course of the show’s run. (At the same time, each episode does include at least two new sets.) To avoid rebuilding the same assets over and over again, Bix Pix production designer Jason Kolowski created molds of each set’s flooring and other typically non-reusable elements, which allows the production team to quickly replace them with new versions as they’re needed.

Magnetic facial replacements and rapid prototyping facilitated by advances in technologies like 3D printing have also helped create efficiencies in the production of the show. “3D printing is a wonderful time saver,” says Bixler, “but you have to learn

what to use it for. It’s trial and error. We did a tricycle for Maple and that was not the best thing. Anything that supports weight or has moving parts is probably not a good idea.”

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

With 20 sets in operation, and a fluctuating number of crew members that peaks at around 80, there are usually six to eight episodes in production at any given time. “It’s a big Rubik’s Cube,” Bixler says. “Everything is arranged around sets being installed and kept in one spot for a period of time that’s most beneficial for everyone. If there are a couple of episodes using the ship deck, then we try to leave the ship deck in a stage for as long as possible because of the time it takes to light and dress and set it.”

Puppets and costumes can also dictate the production schedule. “We have 17 Figs made right now,” Bixler explains. “We’re up to 15 Maples, 12 Hedges, eight Pines (Hedge’s aunt), and who is available to go where? Also, costumes are a big thing. Certain episodes specify different costumes for our characters to wear. Are the costumes ready? If not, we have to shoot something else real quick. It’s all very fluid.”

What’s in store for Fig and friends in Season 3? “Every season we try to up our game,” Bixler declares. “We love these little characters and we have certain notions that excite us when each new season starts. It’s like, ‘Let’s go here, let’s go there.’ In Season 3 we have richer storylines, and go to a lot of new places. Hopefully our fans will dig it.” 🌱

Based in Los Angeles, Jennifer Wolfe is the Director of News & Content at Animation World Network.

GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S *TROLLHUNTERS* MAKES MAGIC FOR NETFLIX



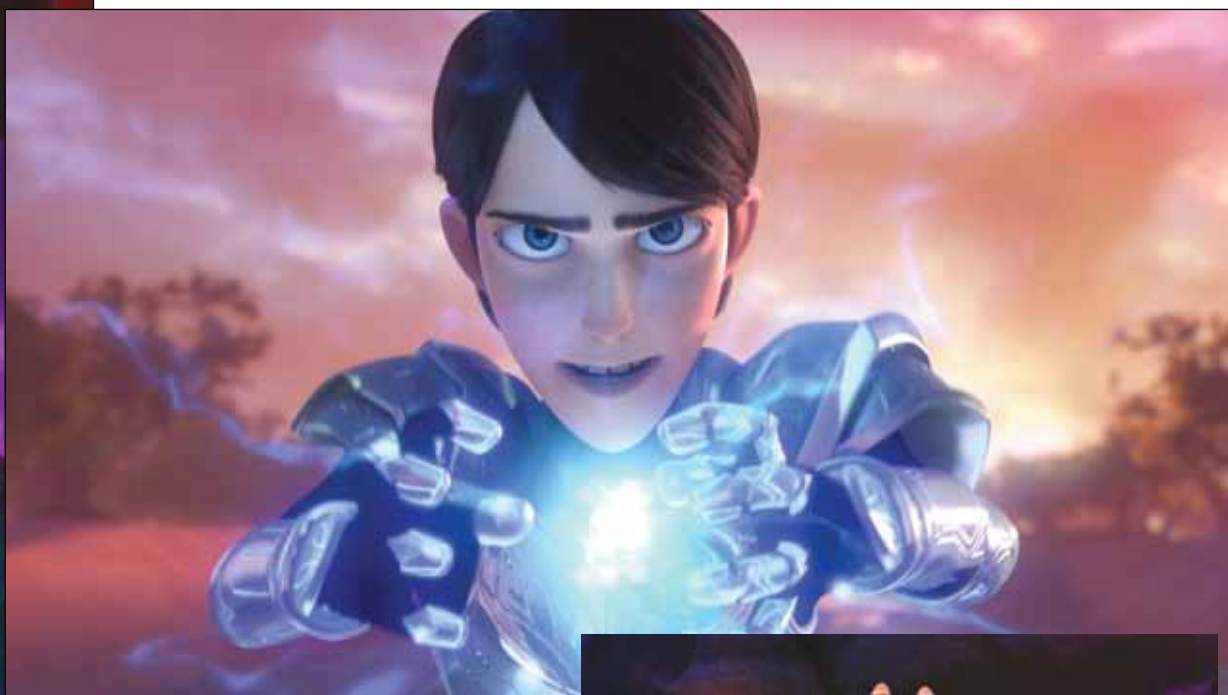
DreamWorks Animation's CG fantasy series uses an expansive canvas to explore contrasting, intersecting worlds.

BY SCOTT LEHANE

Though it debuted on Netflix only six months ago, DreamWorks Animation's *Trollhunters* is already the recipient of three Annie Awards and no fewer than six Daytime Emmy awards, including awards for outstanding writing and direction. This achievement, while exceptional under any circumstances, is perhaps more understandable when one learns that *Trollhunters* is the brainchild of renowned Mexican director Guillermo del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, *Pacific Rim*), whose highly imaginative (and frequently dark) films have been widely acclaimed by audiences and critics alike over the course of his 30-year career.

Trollhunters follows 15-year-old Jim Lake Jr. and his friend Toby Domzalski, who live in the fictional town of Arcadia. Unbeknownst to the residents of Arcadia, a secret civilization of trolls lives beneath them. When Jim finds a magic amulet, he not only becomes aware of the trolls' existence, but he is designated their "Trollhunter," a warrior who is bound





Jim Lake Jr. and his friend Toby discover a secret civilization of trolls living beneath their town in DreamWorks Animation's Trollhunters.



"He said, 'Vendré, cabrón' ('Come work with me, motherfucker') and I couldn't say no."

to protect the trolls from their enemies the Gumm-Gumms, as well as other beings who would do them harm.

Del Toro initially planned for *Trollhunters* to be a feature film, until Netflix proposed that he make it as a 26-episode series. In February, the streaming giant renewed the series for a second season of 13

episodes, which is expected to be released later this year.

Rodrigo Blaas, who served as executive producer, director (13 episodes) and writer (two episodes), was one of Del Toro's earliest collaborators. "I'm a huge fan of Guillermo's work," says Blaas, "and how he's been able to combine independent filmmaking with big blockbusters."

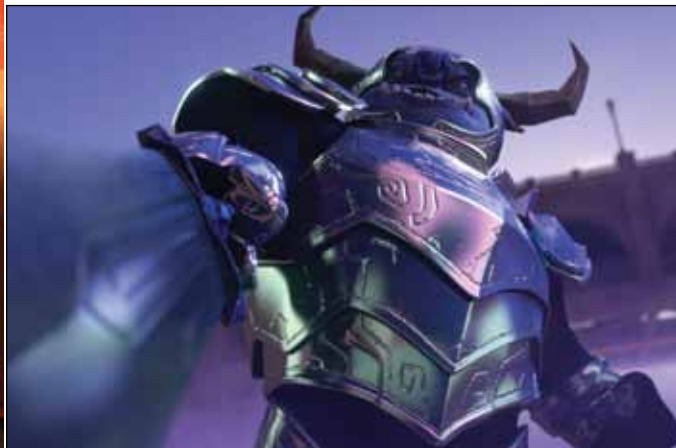
Blaas explained that Del Toro loved his 2009 short film, *Alma*, and in 2010 the director proposed that they collaborate on what was then still a film concept. "He said, 'vendré, cabrón,' which basically means, 'Come work with me, motherfucker,' in Spanish. It's the very forceful way that Guillermo always talks, and I couldn't say no."

Writer/EP Marc Guggenheim came on soon afterwards. "I got a cold call from DreamWorks Animation asking if I would come on board and help with the screenplay," says Guggenheim. "I had a meeting where they showed me all the incredible art, about a year's worth of initial development on the project. You look at just one piece of the art and you know this is something special. Obviously, the chance to work with DreamWorks, and the chance to work with Guillermo, was too good to pass up."

The filmmakers initially struggled with how to work all of the ideas Del Toro wanted to explore into a feature-length movie. "One of the biggest challenges was figuring out what to keep and what to lose. It was all so great," says Guggenheim. "So when Netflix said that they wanted to buy a *Trollhunters* series, I think we all immediately breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly we had the canvas to tell the story that Guillermo's ideas really called for."

With two or three years of character development, story development and visual development under their belts, they had gained "a really deep knowledge of what the world was before we started the series," says Blaas. "That was really a huge plus for us."

"We had a draft of the screenplay by that point, and now



Things can get complicated when you suddenly find yourself defending a race of underground trolls.

we had an order from Netflix,” Guggenheim adds. “The first step was to basically write a two-part pilot that would set up the world and set up the characters.”

Guggenheim also wrote a series bible that laid out the characters’ back stories in broad strokes and looked at where the series could go.

“After that, we brought in co-executive producers Kevin and Dan Hageman to help run the show on a day-to-day basis, as well as a group of incredibly talented writers,” he says. “You need to come up with an overarching narrative plan, so you always know where you’re headed. But at the same time, you have to do the microscopic work of breaking out each individual episode scene by scene. It was incredibly helpful to have the contributions of all these writers.”

Blaas explained that TV in general, and Netflix in particular, called for a different type of storytelling. “Netflix gives you an opportunity to tell these really great stories that are character-based, that you can actually develop through time in a different way than you can in features.”

“I think the biggest difference between streaming and broadcast,” adds Guggenheim, “is you’re aware that your audience can consume all the episodes at once, binge-watching the show. As we design each season, we really think in terms of arcs of 13 episodes. The fact that the show is going to be available all at once encourages you to tell a serialized story, but a serialized story where one episode leads very organi-

“When Netflix said they wanted to make it a series, suddenly we had the canvas that Guillermo’s ideas really called for.”

cally into the next. So you start to write as if you are writing a 26-part movie, as opposed to 26 distinct episodes.

“It’s a long road from start to finish on each episode of *Trollhunters*,” he concludes. “From the start of the writing process to final color grade and final sound mix, it takes about 43 weeks to complete one episode.

As many as 60 people work on the show in Los Angeles, plus there are contributions from animation facilities around the world, including China, Taiwan and India.”

Tragically, the show lost its lead actor last summer when Anton Yelchin, who plays Jim Lake Jr., was killed in a freak accident. “Even once we got the news, it took a very long time to process the reality of it. Then to process the grief. It was a long while before we were ready to deal with the logistical consequences of it,” says Guggenheim.

Looking ahead, Guggenheim said that the new episodes would be even better than season one. “Because we’re telling a serialized story, the emotional journeys of the characters are able to continue and to deepen. The characters are able to evolve. Everyone who saw the first 26 episodes saw that the characters, who we met in episode one, were changed by the time they got to episode 26. That growth, that evolution, continues in season two. But I don’t want to spoil anything.”

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MOTOR AWAY: ŠPELA

*Slovenian stop-motion
short co-produced by
RTV Slovenija and Croatia's
Bonobostudio is the
follow-up to the widely
acclaimed 2013 short
film Boles.*



BY CHRIS ROBINSON

From its debut at the 2016 Ottawa Festival to its recent Grand Prize win at HAFF, the Slovenian stop-motion short *Nighthawk* has stunned and mesmerized audiences and juries with its blunt, tragicomic depiction of a boozy badger on a blurry drive through darkened streets.

Co-produced by RTV Slovenija and Croatia's Bonobostudio, *Nighthawk* is the creation of Slovenian stop-motion director Špela Čadež and scriptwriter Gregor Zorc. The follow-up to *Boles*, the duo's widely acclaimed 2013 collaboration, *Nighthawk* is a deeply personal and honest portrait of the destructive, demoralizing and pitiful effects that unhinged alcohol feasting can have on a person.

It's an everyday, universal problem that affects far too many people—including the inspiration for the film, Čadež's father. "There was a moment," recalls Čadež, "when we were at my parent's place. My dad was so drunk that he

couldn't stand up anymore. He was lying on the floor, and this was the moment where I realized I have to make a film about it, because it was so heavy on me. I had this feeling of, 'I don't really have feelings for him anymore. I don't care if he ever stands up on his feet.'"

BUKOWSKI AND BADGERS

More than a year in the making, what elevates *Nighthawk* above many films that deal with substance abuse is Čadež's refusal to judge. In *Nighthawk*—which at times feels like a synthesis of the spellbinding tension of Claude Lelouch's 1976 short, *C'était un rendez-vous*, with the dirty realism of Charles Bukowski—Čadež creates an impartial snapshot of the waning moments of a long day of drinking. "I wasn't really trying to moralize," says Čadež, "or provide any sort of solutions, because I don't have them. I just wanted to deal with a subject that's difficult for me."

The idea for the animal character arrived while Čadež and Zorc were out for a drive and spotted a woozy winter badger stumbling and bumbling along

the road. "His belly was almost on the floor," Čadež recounts. "He was so fat that he could hardly move, and we had to stop the car and wait for the 'gentleman' to cross the road."

Later on, Čadež came across a newspaper article about a badger that got drunk and made a mess on the streets because it had eaten too much rotten, fermented fruit. "What really struck me in the article," adds Čadež, "was when the policeman said that the badger will get in trouble when he comes home. This was viewed as comic news, and for me, after dealing with my father's problems, I wondered, 'why are we treating drunk people as a joke?'"

Nighthawk is quite a departure from Čadež's previous films—which were lighter in look and tone and dealt more with love and relationships. Among most challenging parts of production were the drunk driving scenes—which take up almost the entire film. "I was animating this road for months," Čadež says, "just this road, and then thinking 'Okay, so now the lights should dance. How do they dance? If I had this darkness and just red spots, what do I do with this?'"

ČADEŽ'S *NIGHTHAWK*



ALL IMAGES © BONOBOSTUDIO/RTV SLOVENIJA

I was animating this road for months, thinking ‘Okay, so now the lights should dance. How do they dance?’”

This was new for me. I usually had a script and then a character has to move about or has to do an action.”

Nighthawk’s most significant achievement is the uncomfortable blending of the comic and tragic—which aptly mirrors the contrasting nature of a late-night drunk. Let’s face it, drunks are simultaneously hilarious and pathetic at the same time. Throughout the film, Čadež strikes a unique balance between broad comedy and utter heartbreak, such as when an intense high-speed drive is revealed through a quick cutaway shot to be sluggish and hesitant. The final scene, in particular, is astonishing. While coldly tossing this



pathetic semiconscious creature to the side of the road, an unseen voice tells a hilarious joke about a drunk man returning to the wrong home.

THE END OF THE ROAD

“That was Gregor who insisted that we end this film with a joke,” says Čadež, “because this is the way we want to treat this.” Even finding the road to a fitting ending took time. “I didn’t really know how to solve all this driving and how to do it with technique. We could not plan the script, because I had no idea how I’m going to end it, so it was sort of difficult to write this, and then to balance this in the studio, how to

The ravages of alcoholism are explored in Špela Čadež’s deeply personal, tragicomic Nighthawk.

actually capture this drunkenness. It was sort of a chaotic production.”

Though Čadež made *Nighthawk* for her own sanity, it seems to have had some positive effect on her father. “I’m not sure what his real reaction was, because he didn’t want to see the film with me. He was relieved that I wasn’t putting him in the front and shouting, ‘This is my dad,’ or whatever. He saw that it’s not straightforward. He even stopped drinking for a year.” 🍷

GENNDY TARTAKOVSKY AND THE *SAMURAI JACK*

The celebrated director discusses animation production, his roller-coaster ride at Sony, and the return of a beloved TV property.



RETURN OF

BY DAN SARTO

Best known for the hit Cartoon Network series *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Samurai Jack* and *Star Wars: Clone Wars*, animation visionary Genndy Tartakovsky has received an impressive 13 Primetime Emmy Award nominations and has won three. He is also the recipient of the prestigious Winsor McCay Award in recognition for his outstanding career contributions to the art of animation.

While he has recently been achieving success as a feature director with the *Hotel Transylvania* franchise, Tartakovsky is returning to his roots by bringing back the fan favorite *Samurai Jack* after a twelve-year hiatus. Cinematic in scope, incorporating action, comedy and intricate artistry, *Samurai Jack* is truly unlike anything else on TV.

After a sneak preview of work-in-progress footage at Annecy 2016, the new season of *Samurai Jack* premiered on Adult Swim's Toonami Block on March 11, 2017. Asked how he feels about being back in TV, Tartakovsky was, well, exuberant.

"It feels incredible. I remember when I first sat down to start boarding the first episode of the new *Samurai Jack*, it was like feeling unshackled. Features are high budget. You get that one opening weekend and if you don't nail, it you're dead. There's all this pressure. Everybody's job is to give you notes. On everything I drew for *Hotel T* it was always, 'What are they going to think? What are the hoops I have to jump through to sell this idea?' With this, I'm just doing it and it's going to be on the screen six months later.

"Sometimes, Craig Kellman, who's our character designer, will show me a design that is completely crazy to me. My initial instinct is, 'That's not going to work.' But I go home and I sleep on it. I envision it in the show. Then I come back to him the next morning and go, 'Yeah, I think that's going to be great.'

"That's what you don't get on features. You get, 'Wow this is weird and strange and that's not going to work, change it.' But you hired me! That was the one thing that I always used to say. 'You hired me for this job, this is what I do. If you were directing it you would direct it this way, which is fine. But you hired me because of everything that I've done and I'm directing it this way.'"

The idea to revive *Samurai Jack* came at a particularly low point in Tartakovsky's life. In 2015, a shakeup at Sony Pictures led to the cancellation of a CG version of *Popeye* that the director had been working on, and in which he was artistically and emotionally invested.

"That was a killer," he confirms. "I was like, what am I going to do? What can I emotionally handle? *Samurai Jack* was always a conversation somewhere. I thought, let me just send

"To me, 2D is a connection to my childhood and my love of animation. It's never gone away."

In the new season of Samurai Jack, director Genndy Tartakovsky is hoping to create "the biggest impact I could ever have in anything I've ever done."

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out one email and see what happens. If I get one story note, even an email saying 'Come pitch us the story,' I'm out because I do not want to deal with that. It was a really egotistical way to approach it, but I couldn't deal with it on *Jack* because it's mine."

As it happened, Cartoon Network Executive VP Rob Sorcher forwarded the email to Adult Swim Executive VP Mike Lazzo, who called Tartokovsky the next day. "We talked for 10 minutes. 'How much is it going to cost and when can I have it?' That's all he asked. I gave him my estimates and within two weeks the deal was done and we were off and running."

As happy as he is to be back in TV, Tartokovsky is also acutely aware of the ways in which the landscape has shifted since he last worked in the medium.



**"I'm very traditional
in my storytelling...
It's very straight and
it's all about emotion."**

"*Adventure Time*,
Regular Show—it's
all a type of storytelling
that's very different
from me. I'm
very traditional in
my storytelling, even
though I try to do it in
a visually 'avant garde'
way, or whatever you
want to call it. It's still
very based in setup and
reveal. There's not a lot
of one-liners, not a lot
of non sequiturs. It's
very straight and it's all
about emotion.

"The greatest thing
that George Lucas ever
said to me was, "The
audience just wants
to see a puppy thrown
into traffic." You care

about this thing, then you put it through the most horrendous situation. As a filmmaker, I want people either to laugh or feel something, whether it's sadness or happiness or empathy or something. You want them to feel."

Similarly, his longtime affection for 2D animation is based in what he sees as its capacity for conveying feeling.

"To me, it's somebody's abstraction," he explains. "It's hard to pinpoint, but it's like if you look at 'Calvin and Hobbes,' it's so great and relatable—and it's not even animated. In only three panels, you feel something from your life, the humor and you feel the character. It's so personal. Maybe there's something to the getting lost in a drawing versus getting lost in something alive. I don't know. To me it goes back to doing a flip book and, wow, that ball is bouncing. The illusion of that, as cliché as that sounds, is incredible.

"I got to animate a lot on the *Samurai Jack* shows because I had to do stuff that was more complex, or fix retakes. I got TVPaint, I can animate digitally so it's all quicker now than on paper. I'll do a run cycle with Jack and I'll play it and, yeah, that feels so good. It's still exactly the same as it was in the 1940s... James Baxter helped us out with some cycles for this one episode and his stuff, we watched it, it was like, my god, that's just incredible. You get that feeling. I don't know about anybody else, but to me it's a connection to my childhood and my love of animation. It's never gone away."

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