

## Alphanim gets scary

French animation house Alphanim is branching out this year. In addition to the launch of a video label with StudioCanal Video, the Paris-based animator is producing its first 3D project and has plans to develop provide content for mobile phone operators.

The deal with StudioCanal Video will see a minimum of three animated kids properties on DVD each year. The first release will be series *Mona The Vampire* (6x26') in October.

Meanwhile, Alphanim is wrapping a pilot of 3D kids series *Hairy Scary*. Codeveloped with Sweden's Happy Life, the pilot is being produced in Hong Kong by Menfond which created the special effects for hit movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. *Hairy Scary* features an underground world populated by a hirsute group and a

bald group. "This is our first jump into 3D," says director of international distribution and coproductions, Julie Fox. "I've always been sceptical about 3D but this is a great project." Alphanim is also busy finishing 2D series *Cosmic Cowboys* (52x13') and the first episodes of *Delta State* and *Creep School* and the scripts for *Robot Boy*, a copro with Cartoon Network.



Big Kahuna from Hairy Scary

# The Trials of Selling an Orange Aardvark

As this year's Cartoon Forum preps in Varese, Lianne Stewart catches up with some of Europe's leading players to uncover what to watch this year in Northern Italy

**E**very year, European producers meet with local broadcasters to debut their new animation projects at the Cartoon Forum; and every year, these producers learn more about the enigma that is programme financing.

The organisers at the Cartoon Forum have confirmed broadcasters will spend less money this year than they did in 2002, the cost per minute of animation in 2003 averaging E9,146 as opposed to E10,555 in 2002.

So, what's the current climate for European animation? "It's cold!" says Wendy Griffiths from France's Digital Salade.

Yet despite talk of shivery temperatures, most animators feel optimistic that broadcasters will warm to their ideas at this Forum, even the producers behind the frowned-upon preschool shows.

Commissioners from across Europe have warned producers

against making preschool programming since 1999, claiming their libraries are full and their funds are dry for that demo in the kids' genre. Yet one fifth of programmes at this year's Cartoon Forum are made for audiences aged two to six.

"If I was listening to the broadcasters, I wouldn't make preschool at all," Two Sides TV's

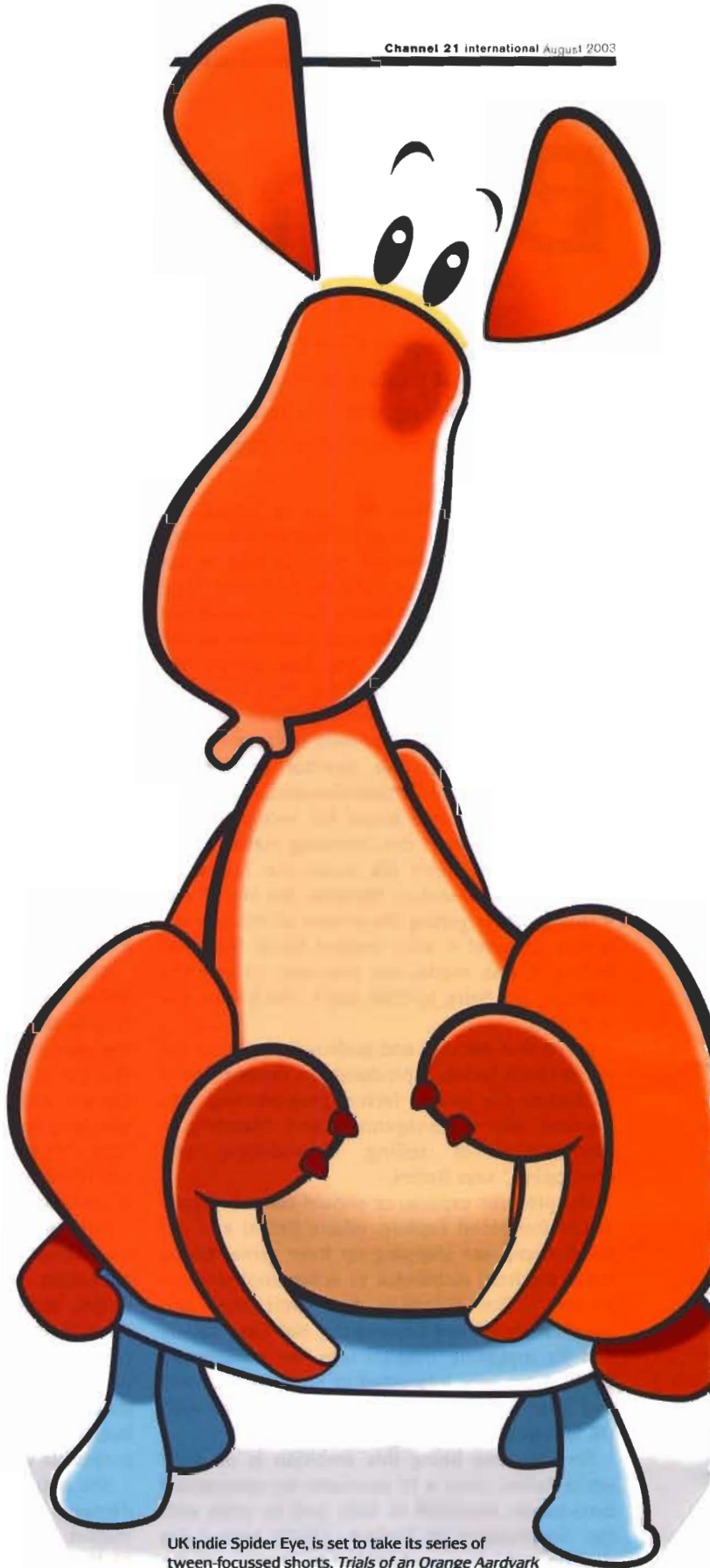


Catherine Robins

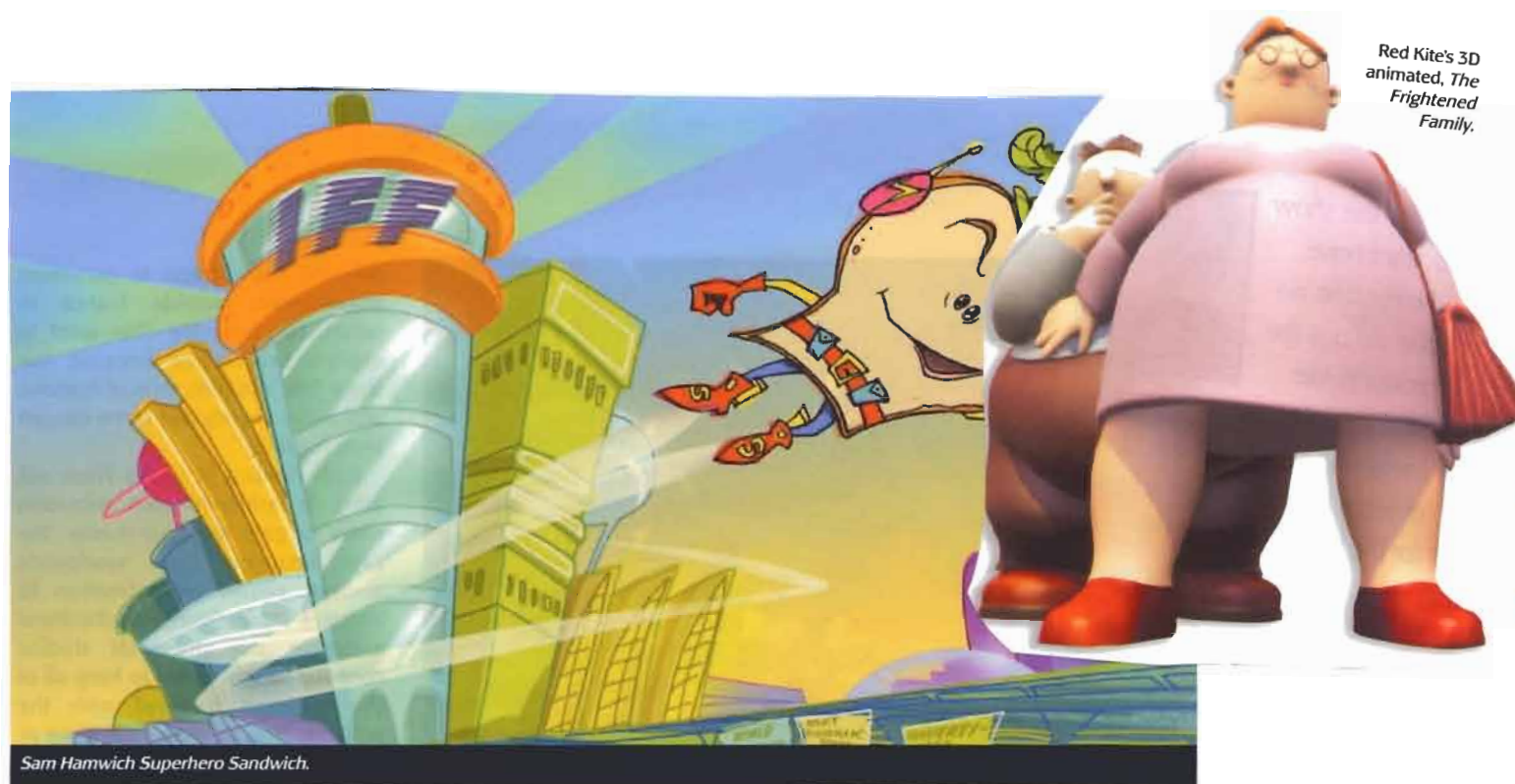
Catherine Robins says. The UK indie will bring *Fairy Mary* to the Cartoon Forum, a preschool animation about two female apprentice fairies. She justifies her production, saying broadcasters in the UK have focussed a lot of preschool programming for boys with *Bob the Builder* and *Tractor Tom* and: "It's time for a girls show now."

Ireland's Jimmy Murakami, who will debut a 'musical Stomp for kids' preschool show called *Rappety Tap*, agrees: "BBC says it has enough preschool product to last until 2006, but it's always on the lookout for a

Channel 21 international August 2003



UK indie Spider Eye, is set to take its series of tween-focussed shorts, *Trials of an Orange Aardvark* to Cartoon Forum



Red Kite's 3D animated, *The Frightened Family*.

Sam Hamwich *Superhero Sandwich*.

better show. Why else would it bother going to the Cartoon Forum?"

Tiger Aspect also takes the preschool warning loosely. The UK producer is creating its first-ever animation for preschool, a humorous look at a typical brother and sister relationship, *Charlie & Lola*. Claudia Lloyd, the show's managing director, says producers sometimes heed the commissioner's advice, but both sides always ignore the rules when the right show comes along.

"You have to go with the projects you love, the projects you see yourself happily working on for five or six years. Broadcasters will always find room for the right project," she says.

At the last MipTV, Spain's Icon Productions introduced its latest animation for ages 7-11, *Lola & Virginia*. Sergi Reigt says listening to the advice of the broadcasters changed the focus of the programme and could make it more saleable. "The original version was really a girls show, but broadcasters said they are afraid of losing the male audience, so we changed the show to make it a better balance between boys and girls," Reigt explains.

He stands by the belief animators

must listen to feedback from broadcasters, even those who won't pick up the programme.

Tiger Aspect's Claudia Lloyd agrees: "No one knows their audience better than the broadcasters. Their input is vital to help the project develop."

UK's Pesky started its animation production house with a series of TV shorts, *The Amazing Adrenalini Brothers*. Pesky is now looking to attach a European broadcaster to turn these shorts into a full series. David Hodgson at Pesky says animation makers need to consider themselves more as creative visionaries. "We proposed a different animation project to a national broadcaster, who suggested it might work better as a live action, which is kind of a strange thing to say to an animation company," he laughs. "It just goes to show how adaptable you have to be to get things off the ground."

France Animation will debut its latest animation for children aged six to 12, *Tama & Melody*, at the Forum. Maia Tubiana, the studio's managing director, says the key issue for producers today is to stick to a reasonable schedule for financing, but be flexible with the programme.

"If you go to the forum with

finalised deals, you're closing yourself off to possibilities," Tubiana warns. "It's always best to adjust and fine tune afterwards." She says many producers rush to get productions finished without 100% of the financing or without a broadcaster in place.

Robin Lyons, managing director at Welsh outfit Siriol, echoes the need for a long-term financial plan: "If a year later you've got the thing financed with broadcasters aboard, then you're doing very well."

Siriol will debut *Holly's Helpline*, a series of late-preschool shorts about a motherly squirrel who can give but not heed her own advice. Lyons says: "The financing climate changes all the time. You have to be flexible. Last year was extremely difficult for us so we diversified into co-businesses with cgi and Flash studios."

Tom Vedel from Denmark's TV-Animation also believes producers need to break with traditional animation to attract new funding.

"It's an industry somewhat in crisis," he says. "But producers have to adapt to the new economy and develop new



Living Doll Productions, *The Christmas Bunny*

technologies to help improve the prices."

For the Forum, TV-Animation will bring its tween-focussed scripted comedy about a secret community of animals called *The Crazy Barn*. Last year, Vedel says the company developed a live animation programme which saw actors speak directly into a computer to immediately vocalise and mobilise a character to help ward off the affects of a poor economy.

Hilmar Sigurdsson of Iceland's CAOZ studio also hopes new technologies will impress the broadcasters. He will attend his second Cartoon Forum as Iceland's only entry with a 30-minute 3D special, *Anna and The Moods*, made for tweens and adults. "The notable difference between American and European buyers is a conservatism in cgi, possibly because broadcasters in Europe haven't been exposed to it as much," he says. "We're working hard to prove ourselves and we've been getting a lot of support."

Producers say it often only takes the support of one broadcaster to

come on board for the remaining pieces of the financing puzzle to fall into place. Yet the days of relying on one broadcaster to finance an entire project are gone. In this climate, producers say the Cartoon Forum is the most important venue to expose their projects to broadcasters outside national borders.

"Things have changed and I do feel having a European broadcaster is just as good as having your own territory in place," Catherine Robins at Two Sides TV says.

Jackie Edwards of Living Doll Productions will return to Cartoon Forum this year with a new family special, *The Christmas Bunny*. She prefers to look for additional broadcasters to help finance the company's niche holiday projects rather than solely rely on a group of international studios. "I think these days it's almost a necessity to get additional broadcasters on board. Broadcasters react to the involvement of other broadcasters," Edwards says.

Wendy Griffiths at Digital Salade has actively promoted tween

oriented *Bob Screen* to numerous broadcasters outside France to secure the financing. "We want to explore Scandinavia because this show falls into their style of humour, and we've already had some interest from Australia."

Ruth Fielding at Lupus Films will bring its fashion-focused animation show for girls: *Mia Cool Hunter*. She says financing from worldwide sources allows an animation to attract a more diverse, multicultural audience. But she feels studios continue to spin plates to keep all of the investors involved with the projects. "You typically have three or four different producers from different countries, each with a shopping list of styles. It's making our animations more international."

Scotland's Red Kite will look to attract the 8-12 year-old audience with its 3D animated *The Frightened Family*. Katja Anderson, managing director, thinks broadcasters need to commission more animation in order to improve and maintain a local productions. "What they spend now will go back into the production, allowing us to finance our own things and improve the quality of animation we can produce."

Despite the room offered to accommodate a strong idea, broadcasters still do not have the money they once did to fund developing shows. "I used to get 30% of the financing from UK broadcasters, but now it's about a 10% maximum," says Two Sides TV's Robins.

Producers must now look outside television and technology to fill the financial gap, and they all now know merchandising revenue is key, and that broadcasters increasingly look for proof a project will be commercially viable off screen.

"The struggle for money has always been there," argues Sirlol's Robin Lyons. "But now the world is



Hilmar Sigurdsson

☐ If the show doesn't have the content, no one will buy the products. We have lots of ideas for merchandising, but they usually emerge from our creative plans for the show."



Jennifer Upton, TV Loonland

becoming more corporate with financial decisions being made by brand managers who don't know a lot about television."

Although the creators of animation all want to maintain the integrity of the story, the new financial climate has turned many into toy creators.

UK indie Spider Eye will bring its series of tween-focussed shorts, *Trials of an Orange Aardvark* to Cartoon Forum. Its director, Morgan Francis, says small indies may need the promise of a possible merchandise deal to help convince the investors. "Broadcasting fees right now are so small that we have to mention merchandising and licensing to them so they can see it converts the show into a money making venture," he says.

"I met an American scriptwriter who told me licensing and merchandising is a preoccupation with the animation investors; so much that potential investors are favouring cgi and 3D animations because they look similar to the merchandise," Ruth Fielding at Lupus reveals.

European producers, although mindful of merchandising, don't appear overly concerned by this trend. Jennifer Upton, managing director at TV Loonland will debut the trailer for the tongue-in-cheek animation for children and adults, *Sam Hamwich Superhero Sandwich*. She says related food products were discussed at the very beginning of Sam Hamwich's development, but were not the driving force behind the programme.

"All production companies now have to look at their projects in this way," Upton says. "But if the show doesn't have the content, no one will buy the products. We have lots of ideas for merchandising, but they usually emerge from our creative plans for the show: they don't cloud

“ Producers have to adapt to the new economy and develop new technologies to help improve the prices.”



Tom Vedel, TV-Animation

our vision.”

Pesky's David Hodgson agrees: "In the back of our minds we're thinking about creating a character with extra large feet so the toy will stand up. Then again, all the characters in the *Amazing Adrenalini Brothers* have small feet."

European animation producers feel the growing pains surrounding this new financial climate has eased over the past year. Instead of fighting the changes, producers and broadcasters alike are now adapting and evolving with the industry.

Gert Ludewig from ASL Animations studio in Germany feels optimistic about the new climate. He will debut a trailer of its preschool *Oscar, The Balloonist*, based on a locally successful CD Rom stream to the broadcasters.

"The big overproduction trend in Europe is now done. In previous years, there were too many productions and the quality really went down across the continent," Ludewig says. "Now I see an additional need for new programming from TV that I haven't seen in a long while, including preschool."

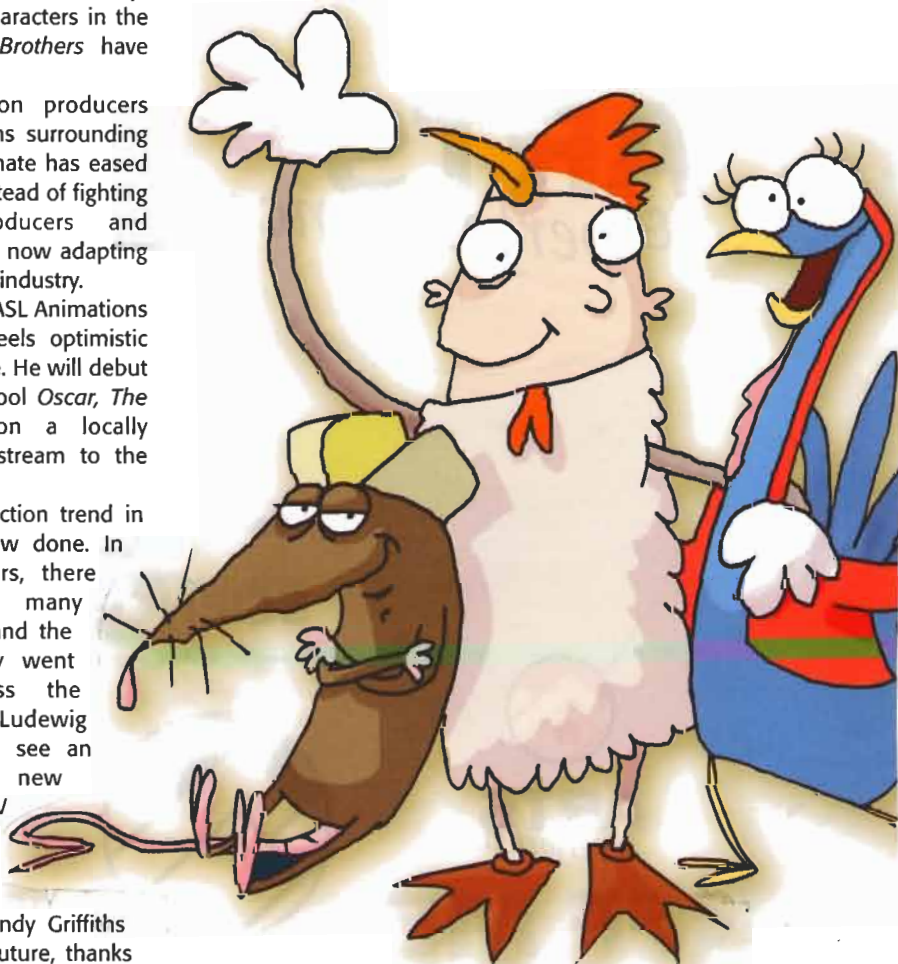
Digital Salade's Wendy Griffiths also sees a brighter future, thanks to the development of new cable

channels. "Animation producers tend to gather together and get their hangdog faces on, but it really isn't all that bad," she says. "We all had our heyday in the late '90s, then the crash hit and the broadcasters cut back completely on animation programming. It's starting to change, though. There are new channels starting all the time."

Jimmy Murakami agrees a new era is emerging for European animation: "It's not like how it used to be. The Forum still gets bigger every year and now American broadcasters have come in with their European channels so hopefully something will change." ■



Wendy Griffiths



The Crazy Barn