

• *A European Animation Hiccup!*

by Heikki Jokinen

The European animation industry seems to be suffering from some kind of hiccup. It is not an illness. The industry is growing strong but it has to adapt to a new reality. This new reality includes smaller budgets of tv channels and competition that is keener than ever.

After many years of growing production there is more animation than ever on the market. New productions have to compete more and more against those already made some years before. Distributors back catalogues are impressive.

The European animation industry gathered for its annual market, Cartoon Forum, this time in Italy, in the small town of Varese, not far away from the mighty mountains of the Alps. 82 new projects were presented for the 108 broadcasters and 154 other investors. Figures are impressive. 503 hours of animation with a budget of 285 million Euros!

The projects are from 14 different countries, Britain being again the leading one with 21 projects, followed by Italy with 17 and France with 16. Surprisingly Germany presents only 6 projects. The German animation market is at the moment more or less full. Production has been too rapid in recent years. This has led to problems in some of the major German production houses.

The half-hour or quarter-hour series are again the dominant format, but compared to former years the shorter format of 10 to 13 minutes has gained more ground. Productions are smaller and also cheaper than in last year's Cartoon Forum in Wales. The calculated cost per minute is going down. In the 2002 Forum it was 10.555 euro/minute, now it is 9.146 euro/minute. Producers are aware of the worsening economy in the animation industry and try to play safe. Most of the projects presented are adventure and comedy aimed at children from 5 to 12. Experiments for adult or limited audiences are the field of smaller studios from the small countries.

The coming enlargement of the European Union with ten new member states in 2004 has already had an effect. For the first time there are projects from Poland and Slovakia.

Cartoon managing directors Corinne Jenart and Marc Wanderveyer confirm the fact that financing an animation series needs more and more work: "Today the task of raising finance is more diverse and more complicated than ever before, with broadcasters sometimes playing a lesser role than in the past". They believe the animation industry is adapting to this but "all the financial partners must remain aware that cross-border co-production is still the strongest link in a very cultural industry". And this is what the Cartoon Forum is for.

The new animation projects presented offer a wide selection of themes, animation techniques and target groups. Most try, however, to walk in the middle of the road, cutting off too strange and too national things in order to reach the widest possible international audience.

A funny detail in this ideologically pan-European gathering is the way to appeal to a wide European audience. The milieu of many series often looks like the American towns and streets familiar to all Europeans from television, cinema and comics. The lowest common denominator for Europe is the USA. It has really colonized our common visual subconscious. Partly this has happened due to the fact that US media companies like Cartoon Network are actively looking for material from European markets. And if Americans are involved in financing a series it has to look like America. Americans are not exactly globally famous for their broad multicultural understanding. Cartoon Network has an amount of 500 million US dollars to co-produce non-US animation during the five year period 2003-2007. In Europe their financial share of co-productions will be around 25 per cent, globally up to 30-40 per cent.

One of the productions where Cartoon Network is involved is 'Chopsocky Chooks' by Aardman. "Its an action comedy based on characters" defines Cartoon Network Europe's Finn Arnesen. "That makes it strong", he underlines. Chopsocky Chooks are three kung-fu chickens fighting constantly against the evil Dr. Wasabi in a huge shopping centre. Characters are caricature-like and at least the pilot of this series was really full of action. "The series should be universal" said producer Miles Bullough. "There are shopping malls all over the world and the humour in this series arises from the characters". That did not convince all the listeners. In the discussion that followed the first person to ask a question wanted to know more detail of the plots. Characters alone do not make a good series. The animation work is distributed in several studios around the world and production cost for a half-hour is 380,000 Euros.

Quite a different kind of project is 'Grubby Girls' by the Norwegian Mikrofilm. This is a small company, more handicraft than industry, but because of this they can offer interesting projects. 'Grubby Girls' is based on a comic by Inga Saetre, presenting three girls discussing all aspects of life. Producer Lise Fearnley presented the idea of the series like this: "The issues presented in the series will not always go towards the obvious. However they will be clear". In a way 'Grubby Girls' has an atmosphere like Daniel Clowes' comic story Ghost World - young women facing the different wonders of everyday life. Visually 'Grubby Girls' looks like a diary, drawings are a bit amateurish but at the same time intimate. Due to the strong and fitting dialogue, and the idea, the films look good. Mikrofilm is brave enough to present a very unusual format: 26 episodes of 2.5 minutes each. But the series is aimed at adult audiences and fits well for magazine type programmes.

German Andreas Hykade is well known for his animation films like 'Ring of Fire' (2000) which collected a lot of prizes at festivals. Now he is working with a highly original series 'Tom'. 4 out of 26 x 5 minute parts are already made. The basic story in every film is the same. Tom wants to eat a strawberry jam sandwich with honey and is off to get one. In his search he meets a miller, some bees, a strawberry mouse and his mother. It may look simple but it works, and is well thought out. "Stories are always simple but the more you see, the more complete this universe is becoming" says the director. And this is true.

Even though the films are completely professional and can compete with any major production, everything is made by a small crew in one house in Stuttgart, Germany. Hykade likes to keep full control of the work he has written, designed and directed.

A good example of how it is possible to do animation nowadays in small countries is the project 'Anna and the Moods' by Icelandic company Caoz. Iceland has altogether only some 280,000 inhabitants and no tradition of animation. 'Anna and the Moods' is a 30 minute tv-film about a girl reaching her teenage years. The most kind and cute Anna turns almost overnight into a sinister teenager. Her parents take her to Dr. Artmann but even he has only one solution. The parents must wait. Behind the script is Sjørn, a well-known poet and writer in Iceland. He has also written Lars von Trier's internationally known feature film 'Dancer in the Dark'. Sjørn believes the story is universal. "Many of us have been like Anna, many of us had a sister like Anna, many of us are even married to one who has been Anna." The way director Gunnar Karlsson has chosen to show the horrors of teenage is strong 3D caricature, both in character and in storyline. Backgrounds are often like expressionist art.

Without this kind of international link only a few major animation productions would be possible in the smaller European countries. And this is what Cartoon Forum is for, a place for producers and financiers to meet.

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• ***A Farewell to Jules Engel***

Jules Engel, one of the great pioneers of animation, responsible (with Herb Klynn) for the "Mr.Magoo" shorts and who later became one of the world's leading experimental animators, died in September aged around 94. He was a producer, director and abstract artist and founded the experimental animation programme at CalArts.

He was born in Hungary and moved to the USA when he was 13, winning a scholarship to UCLA. He began his career in animation as an inbetweener and in the late thirties worked at the Disney Studios contributing to the Russian and Chinese dance sequences in "Fantasia" and working on "Bambi". He was a founding member of UPA where he developed characters like Gerald McBoing Boing, Madeline and Mr. Magoo. But he was best known for his outstanding abstract work in films such as Shapes and Gestures (1976) and Train Landscape (1975). He believed that the future of experimental animation, which he called fine art animation, depended on those who would promote the abstract film as galleries did with paintings by artists such as Jackson Pollock.

Jules Engel received the ASIFA Prize in 2000.

• ***McLaren Award for New British Animation***

Now in its 13th year The McLaren Award is presented at the Edinburgh International Film Festival for New British Animation. As the UK's most prestigious award it carries a trophy and a cash prize of £1,000 and is decided by audience vote.

Dedicated to the memory of Norman McLaren, the award aims to nurture a spirit of experimentation and innovation within British animation production.

This year's winner was "Pullin' the Devil by the Tail" directed and written by Stephen McCollum and produced by Pearse Moore with original music by Stoisis.

• ***Congratulations to Slinky Pictures***

Chris Shepherd has reason to be proud. His latest production **Dad's Dead** has won five awards this year. Using live-action manipulated by 2D computer the film is a harrowing tale of a young man trying to cope with the ghosts of his past. The awards are:

- Quantel Animation Award: 5th Rushes Soho Shorts Film Festival
- Metropolis Prize: 9th L'Isola Del Cinema, Rome
- Encouragement Award, Fantoche, Switzerland
- Grand Prix, CIBC Award, Cabbagetown Short Film and Video Festival, Toronto
- Special Award Video, Split International Festival of New Films, Split, Croatia

The film has also been nominated for Best Short Film in the British Independent Film Awards.

• ***Cartoon d'Or***

Although not winning this coveted award that gives a prize to the best film screened in 7 European festivals, the UK had three nominees out of a total of five: 'Dog' the multi-award winning film by Suzie Templeton, 'NSPCC Cartoon' by Russell Brooke, and 'The Dog Who was a Cat Inside' by Siri Melchior.

The overall winner of the Cartoon d'Or was 'Sans Queu Ni Tête' by Sandra Desmazieres, a 6-minute painted on paper film about a woman's nonsensically absurd day. The jury consisted of Mark Baker (UK), Jannik Hastrup (Denmark) and Antonio Zurera Aragon (Spain).