

Film News

FROM LATVIA

Special Issue Latvian Animation 2009



NATIONAL
FILM CENTRE
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LATVIAN ANIMATION

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Special Issue Latvian Animation 2009

Front Cover Wings and Oars
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Vladimir Leschiov. Some Notes on Animation.

Although the producer, director and animator of the studio *Lunohod*, Vladimir Leschiov, has worked professionally in animation only since 2004, all of his five films have received a lot of acclaim on the international film festival circuit. Vladimir Leschiov's films can be described as philosophical, visually exquisite, poetic and with a surreal touch. His first two films, *The Letter* and *Grandad's Honey*, were created while studying animation in Sweden in 2002. Both next, professional animated short films, *Insomnia* and *Lost in Snow*, were screened at a record number of festivals (the latter has been screened at about 70 festivals!) collecting several awards. His latest film, *Wings and Oars*, has been included in the official program of short animation films at the prestigious Annecy Animation Festival 2009. Celebrating this achievement we invited the director to a conversation, resulting in these notes.

Annecy and other festivals

The Annecy festival for animators is the same as Cannes is for features. Yes, it's relevant for me, not as sport, but because it really is the most relevant festival and an achievement. I can't really determine how deserving my film *Spārni un Airi* (*Wings and Oars*) is to be included in the competition, because any festival is a lottery and the jury is made up of the most diverse people. I'll say this though, I'm much more

satisfied with *Spārni un Airi* compared to previous films – not completely, of course, but still. When I finished editing and took a look, I watched it with great pleasure, and any doubts about using such an unpredictable medium – watercolour - disappeared.

Hiroshima is the second largest animation festival in the world – when I was studying and making my first film, I could only dream of showing my work at that festival. And look, *Vectēva medus* (*Grandad's Honey*) made it into two of Hiroshima's competition programs in the first year, one for students and the main one. Two years later *Bezmiēgs* (*Insomnia*) was in competition and won an award, and after two more years *Zuduši sniegā* (*Lost in Snow*) was again in competition and won an award. If you consider that the Hiroshima festival takes place every two years, I receive an award each time! I joke with my friends – maybe the Japanese really love me. I've read a lot about the East and still have great interest, so perhaps they feel that.

Being at the festivals is a great opportunity to find partnerships for the future if I decide to work on a serious project, moreover, my participation is great baggage – if I decide to work with someone and he asks who I am, I have only to show my CV, and all will be clear.

But the most important thing is to see good films and meet people who have made the films, to discover what they think and how they work. If you don't see the director and don't find out

anything about him, that lowers the festival's level.

On animation: the author's signature and animation technology

I would, of course, like to create my own signature and recognizable style, but somehow it hasn't worked out. When I think about a new story, technology is one of the most important factors for me that determines the rest of it. If I don't feel the plot in pencil, I must go to watercolour, and vice versa. Secondly, and what's also interesting for me – there are so many techniques in the world, so why shouldn't I try something new? I like to experiment, and my signature can be recognized elsewhere – in the film's language and plot.

There is an episode in each of my films that wasn't planned on at first concept and framing. Sometimes the film is finished and I look at it and see – ah, I need something like this here... In the film *Zuduši sniegā* the episode was the moment when the man throws off the coat and jumps into the water, and in *Bezmiēgs* it was when the woman appears in the window... It's like preparing food – it's ready, you taste it, but think it still needs something else... you rummage through the spice rack and suddenly find the right pepper!

I don't agree with the idea that a film

needs only one main character – every good film has to have at least one character that appears, disappears, and we don't know anything about him – it's Fellini's finest trick. If you're filming on the street, then the usual way is to seal the whole block off with police tape, have actors in all the windows, and lock the doors so that there are no mishaps – we're filming! But in a Fellini film, suddenly, calmly, in the middle of a scene, a second storey window flies open and a rotund Italian woman shakes out her enormous drawers, fastens them to the laundry line and shuts the window. And that lends credibility to the rest of what happens in the scene, that's Fellini's realism.

Animation brings everything to life – old photographs, interviews, drawings... but it isn't anything radical – it's simply one of the ways it can be done. And documentary animation is actually an even easier method – if you have, for example, old albums with photos or drawings, you already have a ready-made film setting and a world that doesn't have to be constructed from scratch, just brought to life. But when you start from zero with a storyboard and frames, you have to depict each detail of a completely new world that

hasn't previously existed, only in your fantasy, and that is a very lengthy and serious process.

I don't see how 3D animation can develop. You can experiment with other animation methods and figure out new ways, but with this it isn't possible – your new animation medium is your newest *super* computer, and you have to buy an even newer and better one next year. That's simply the development of equipment, not animation. Okay, you'll have even more perfect lighting and precise movement, and finally we won't be able to tell the difference between 3D animation and reality – but what's the point?! A few years ago the Americans said – it's going to be great, soon we won't have to pay actors huge salaries, we can make anything in 3D. But who will want to watch something synthetic with no life?

Schools of Art and Life

At this point I'm more or less trying to forget everything I learned at the Jānis Rozentāls Art School, because sometimes when I draw something freely as

I feel it, the knowledge slowly starts to creep in, and it ends up being too correct. I feel an image and I know how it should move, but knowledge of correct proportions messes about in my head... I can animate any image, even those that don't exist in reality; I know what the internal skeleton is or should be. But sometimes I need to work freely, and it's not easy.

When I finished school, my teacher said that I would definitely get into the graphics department at the Art Academy of Latvia. After the entrance exams – never in my life have I've been as sure of something as when I went to see my results. I was sure I was in, but when I saw the results... at first I thought it was a mistake, and at that time it only meant one thing – off to the army. I went to the enlistment office and the officer was gleeful – so Leschiov, didn't get in? Here you go – *Severnij flot* in Murmansk... I didn't serve the whole three years though, as it was the end of the 80s and they let us go home after two. I returned, no one needed me, and I had forgotten how to draw... I worked in advertising for a time and made the first 3D graphics even though I didn't know anything about computers. And so I worked and worked, going from



job to job, company to company, collecting experience and growing.

In the mid-90s I began exploring animation, trying out plasticine, using a computer, and found I really liked doing it. I began pitching animation for ads – if a client let me I made an animated clip, but I soon understood that I was subjected to other's tastes – to what the agency and the client wanted...I wanted to do my own thing and had already started making a film during my free time. After a while I knew I would never finish the film this



Photo: A. Zeltina

Vladimir Leschiov

Vladimir Leschiov was born in 1970. He finished the Jānis Rozentāls Art School in Riga in 1989, and studied animation at Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Sweden. Since 1992 he has worked as an illustrator, designer and art director on commercials in Latvia. From 2004 he has worked professionally in animation, and since 2005 he teaches animation at the Art Academy of Latvia. After working at the larger Latvian animation studios - *Rija Films* and *Jet Media* – he established his own animation studio, *Lunohod*, in 2007.

FILMOGRAPHY:

Wings and Oars, 2009
Lost in Snow, 2007
Insomnia, 2004
Grandad's Honey, 2002
The Letter, 2002

way, so I had to decide what I really want – to work in advertising or make films. There are a lot of people like that in advertising – they really want to make films and say, that's it, one last ad and I'm off to write a script. And they say that every day for years!

It took quite a while for me and it was even a bit painful, because once a decision like that is made, suddenly there is no more income. But finally I started looking for a school where I could learn animation – one not too far away and where I didn't have to pay. I found a school in Sweden where I was accepted into the graduate program right away because I had submitted my work – the ads, the clips, my own attempts...

It's better to work in my home country; I've tested this out. In Sweden I didn't have to worry about the lack of anything – if you don't have the right pencil, sign up and the next morning you'll receive a packet of pencils, nicely wrapped, inscribed with your last name and a smiley face...Here you have to fight for every pencil, but even so it's more interesting. That's why I like it in Latvia – everything here is absurd and illogical, that's why foreigners think my films are strange, but I'm not making it up, I show it like it is. I don't feel as good in Sweden or Germany because everything there is clear, logical, and too correct.

His Own Studio – *Lunohod*

There are many reasons why I can't work in someone's studio. I'm a huge egoist in regards to my work, and if I'm doing a project, it's important that the very best people with the most serious attitude are involved. And in big studios three or four projects are going in parallel, and if the situation on one suddenly becomes intense, then the best people are mobilized for that one project and the others almost stop. It's very disruptive and doesn't benefit any of the projects. An animator is an actor who has to grow into a character until he knows it and feels it completely. If he's suddenly yanked away and put into a different character, and then released after two months, he has, in the meantime, forgotten the feel of my film and time is wasted reviving that. It isn't normal, it's not the way to work, at least not for me. I'm the king and dictator where I work, that's just how it is.

I spent a long time thinking about a name for my studio – I couldn't use my last name as it's difficult for foreigners to say. I knew I needed something not from this world. I was born in 1970, right when the *lunohod* landed on the Moon (in 1970 the Soviet lunar-rover *Lunohod-1* landed on the surface of the Moon – ed.)

I've heard talk that *Lunohod* is one of the biggest studios in the Baltics, and I also read in a serious animation portal that Vladimirs Leschiov has established his own studio. Someone is obviously following what I'm doing, and it's really interesting to discover that – almost like standing behind a door and listening to what others are saying about you. That's what happened during *Bezmiēgs* when I was still unknown at the festivals – I'm standing beside a famous French director who says to his colleague that *Bezmiēgs* is a very interesting film, fresh and new, but the director must be on some kind of drugs...And literally a few hours later someone introduced us and then he felt a bit uncomfortable because he had seen me earlier, and I told him I don't do drugs...

Future Animation Projects

I think I could make a feature-length animation film at some point, a series, or animation for children, but I'm not ready yet, as, truthfully, it's a very serious undertaking. There's no point in making a feature-length film that isn't commercially viable; it's too big a project to fool around with.

If someone asks why I don't make films for children, the only answer is – it's the most serious audience. It's not as risky making films for adults, but children perceive the world very deeply and directly, and that's a huge responsibility. The other thing is that children now are different than we were, and they know and have experienced much more. That's why creating stories for them about bears and foxes is no longer relevant – they know a different world, of robots, killers and ninjas. I'm not really interested in working with foxes or killers, and I've yet to discover a world I want to show children. That's why I'm doing more passive exploration now and looking at what might work in the future. **FN**



NEWS

Latvian Animation

RIJA

■ Studio *Rija Films* animators are always busy and the activity is noticeable enough that the phrase “economic crisis” doesn’t seem to apply. Founded in 1995, *Rija*, perhaps the best internationally-known Latvian film studio, keeps making co-productions, and is currently working on two new features. Continuing their successful collaboration with the Estonian studio *Joonisfilm*, *Rija* promises, in the next year, to release the continuation of the adventures of much loved puppy-girl Lotte, in the animation film *Lote un Mēness akmens noslēpums* (Lotte and the Moonstone Secret). A few intriguing plot secrets have come to light – Lotte and her friends will meet some unknown Moon dwellers, and the film will feature at least two new songs from the band *Prāta Vētra* (Brainstorm).

Immediately after Lotte, the next project will be an animated version of the play *Zelta Zirgs* (Golden Horse) by Jānis Rainis, meant for the whole family. Producer Vilnis Kalnaellis anticipates that *Zelta Zirgs* (MEDIA Development Support) will be a feature-length animation that fits with *Rija's* inter-

nationally recognized image: national in content, international in form. On board is director Signe Baumane who has worked for many, creatively-rich years in the US, and Xavier Dujardin, a character artist from Belgium, who is lesser known to Latvian viewers.

Even though *Rija Films* has had plenty of success in international co-productions, there is also a bounty of home-grown animation in its wings. The beginning of 2009 saw the international premiere of Reinis Kalnaellis’ debut film *Kad āboli ripo* (When Apples Roll) at the 59th *Berlinale* film festival, and just now in April, the 2D animation film did the rounds of six international festivals – in Greece, Germany, the USA, Turkey, Italy and here in Latvia, at the *Berimora kino* festival. In addition, the film has received an invitation to participate in France’s *Annecy Plus*, founded by Bill Plympton. With positive reviews, an abundance of ideas and zeal, there’s no standing still; Vilnis Kalnaellis thinks that work will soon begin on another new animation film - a sequel to *Kad āboli ripo*, but this time in feature length.

Working at the same pace as till now, studio *Rija* hopes to finish two more Latvian animation films by the fall. Viewers will first be offered a 3D

animation, *Skatu meklētājs* (View Finder), by Pēteris Noviks, a story about a blind person’s insights and radiant daydreams while waiting for the green light at a crossing. Soon after that, the 2D animation, *Norīt krupi* (To Swallow a Toad), will be ready, and director-artist Jurgis Krāsons’ signature will now be in colour [his 2006, internationally recognized animation film, *Melnā kaste* (Black Box), was in black & white].

Not waiting on the creation of an animation school in Latvia, the studio organizes animation courses on its own, and helps young artists in their craft. Vilnis Kalnaellis promises that *Rija* will continue to provide opportunities for the expression of animation ideas that are new, original, and able to compete internationally – some of those will take shape very soon.



Golden Horse

(The Cuckoo and her 12 Hubbies), is a comic story with Pēteris Brūveris’ poetry about Dzeguze’s romantic adventures. Through Roze Stiebra’s direction and her screenplay, *Dzeguze* is full of rich, colourful visual imagery created by artist Gundega Muzikante, with an equally colourful original score by composer Mārtiņš Brauns.

The studio’s founders would be happy to accept new professionals into their small, experienced collective, and in order to train skilled animators they’ve organized year-long courses for five promising youths. Roze Stiebra emphasizes that *Dauka* is a workshop type of studio – small, open to creative ideas,

and willing to train those interested. And as the fall will once again be busy – financing for a new animation film was granted by the State Culture Capital Foundation – one of the upcoming animators will have a chance to show their skills. Roze Stiebra’s assistant on her latest project is Miks Straume, a student from the Baltic International Academy. Inga Actiņa, whose drawings the director characterizes as spirited caricatures, will be the film’s artist. Pre-production has begun, and the studio promises to showcase a new and thrilling 2D animation film - *Kā brālītis trusītis uzvarēja lauvu* (Brer Rabbit and Boss Lion). This will be the fourth story in the *Dauka*

ANIMĀCIJAS BRIGĀDE

■ The studio that is continuing the tradition of animation master Arnolds Burovs’ puppet film studio founded in 1966, currently has more than ten associates. The small collective will soon finish work on two new puppet animation films. Soon too, sound will be added to the 35mm film *Cūkas laime* (Pig’s Happiness), by director Dace Rīdūze and artist Ieva Kauliņa - a jolly story about a city pig family’s vacation in the countryside.



Master of Ice

By mid 2009, the studio also plans to finish director Ēvalds Lācis’ newest achievement – a magical story about love and saving a princess, called *Ledus pavēlnieks* (Master of Ice). Jānis Cimermanis, one of the film’s animators, tells us that the story will have many visually impressive marvels that computer artist Andris Gailītis is helping to create. As soon as the digital processing of the film is done, composer Juris Kulakovs will begin his work.

Animācijas Brigāde is currently preparing for a large-scale co-production project – the shooting of the feature-length film *Mežonīgie pīrāgi* (The Wild Pirogi), (MEDIA Development Support). The screenplay author and artist is Māris Putniņš, with director Jānis Cimermanis, who reveals that 20 dolls have already been made for the film, and a 3 minute film clip will be finished shortly. He added that *Mežonīgie pīrāgi* will be a romantic, adventure-filled pirate story with a happy ending, but it won’t be the end of the adventures of the *pīrāgi* – the

JURIS PODNIEKS STUDIO

■ The heart and soul of animation at the *Juris Podnieks Studio* is Nils Skapāns. One of the most notable international achievements of Nils Skapāns’ claymation films was the *Crystal Bear* at the *Berlinale* for the 1994 film *Lidojam?!* (Let’s Fly?!). Ten years later, his film, *Redzi, Trusi... Tētis brauc uz Londonu* (Listen, Rabbit...Daddy Goes to Lon-

don, 2004) was again screened at the Berlin film festival.

The studio is currently creating a claymation mischief and adventure story about a day in the life of a nasty lady and her cat – *Burvīga diena* (Wonderful Day). The artist, helped on occasion by puppet artist Ilze Esme, hopes to finish this 15 minute film by the end of 2009.

Parallel to this project, Nils Skapāns is also making claymation episodes for Pēteris Krilovs’ latest documentary, *Lietus un vēji*.

■ **STUDIJA CENTRUMS** and the producer Bruno Aščuks have begun their activities by releasing the first ever Latvian documentary animation *Little Bird’s Diary* – an exceptional life story told through animated drawings of the main character – 80 years old Irina Piļķe. Another docu-animation is in the pipeline – this time based on the drawings from exile in Siberia.

Studio **JET MEDIA** is developing a series of 2D/3D animation *Tales of the Sunrise Tree* (MEDIA Development Support and co-production with Slovenia). Another series by this company *Weasymartenette* has also got MEDIA Development Support and is in an early development stage.

SIGNE BAUMANE, the internationally acknowledged Latvian animation film director, Member of the American Motion Pictures Association, is working

both in Latvia and the US. Signe’s latest animation *Birth* has experienced its world premiere nominated for the Best Short Film at the Berlin International Film Festival 2009 and is now on its way to be screened at the Annecy Film Festival. In the meantime, Signe is working on the feature animation *Golden Horse* at studio *Rija Films* in Riga.

There is a lot of production activity taking place at other animation studios as well. Studio **URGA** has previously produced two of director, artist and animator Kārlis Vītols’ animation films, *Mehānisms* (Mechanism) and *Trofeja* (The Trophy), and have now released an ironic, visually interesting and attractively narrated animation film, *Velna Fudži* (Devil’s Fuji). Several new animation films in collaboration with well-known Latvian animation directors are in the making at studio

ATOM ART. Māra Linīņa is working on a three-part animation series based on Latvian folklore on how the world was created: *Reiz Dievs...* (Once Upon a Time God...). Edmunds Jansons is directing two films: *Lupatiņi* (Shammies) and *Pavasaris Vārnu ielā* (Springtime on Vārnu Street). The last is a musical animation about the adventures of the children of a working-class family in 19th century Riga. Director Aija Bley has her own studio, **A. BLEY FILM STUDIO**, and her latest project is an animation short, *Sieviete un Vējš* (Women and Wind), together with recognized artist Patrīcija Brekte - a poetic story of passionate love between a Western Woman and an Eastern Wind.

It is certain that viewers both here at home and those abroad will soon get to experience a new and rich crop of Latvian animation!

Lote un Mēness akmens noslēpums
Lotte and the Moonstone Secret RIJA

Skatu meklētājs *View Finder* RIJA

Norīt krupi *To Swallow a Toad* RIJA

Sarkanais jātnieks *Red Rider* RIJA

Austras koka pasakas
Tales of the Sunrise Tree JET MEDIA

Kā brālītis trusītis uzvarēja lauvu
Brer Rabbit and Boss Lion
DAUKA

Cūkas laime *Pig’s Happiness*
ANIMĀCIJAS BRIGĀDE

Ledus pavēlnieks *Master of Ice*
ANIMĀCIJAS BRIGĀDE

Burvīga diena *Wonderful Day*
JURIS PODNIEKS STUDIO

Reiz Dievs... *Once Upon a Time God ...*
ATOM ART

Lupatiņi *Shammies* ATOM ART

Pavasaris Vārnu ielā
Springtime on Vārnu Street
ATOM ART

Sieviete un Vējš *Women and Wind*
A. BLEY FILM STUDIO

Defining Moments in Latvian Animation

Notable animation films in Latvian film history

1966 *Ki-ke-ri-gū!* *The Cock's Crow*

■ *Ki-ke-ri-gū!* is the first Latvian animation film. The director, Arnolds Burovs, is already well-known in Latvian culture circles, having secured a spot in the Latvian theatre Olympus with achievements in puppet theatre. At the age of 50, he begins to create...animation! Burovs is the father of Latvian animation, and his traditions are now carried on by studio *Animācijas Brigāde*. The director's filmography includes both Latvian folk story themes as well as classics of world literature.

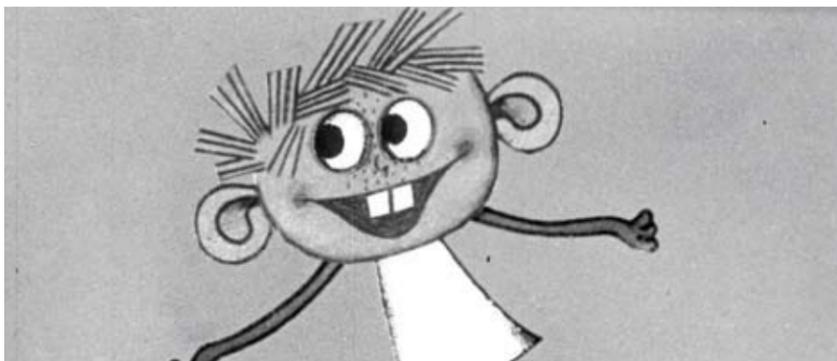


1967 *Pigmaliņš* *The Pygmalion*

■ The legendary story is successfully re-created in the hands of Riga Film Studio director Arnolds Burovs. Though the film's fate in Latvia is complicated, Moscow officials proudly screen it for foreign delegations, saying, look, we have modernism, symbolism and abstractionism in the Soviet Union as well...

1974 *Dillī Dallī Perpendikula valstībā* *Dilly Dally in Perpendicular's Kingdom*

■ The first series (films made in 1974, 1975 and 1976) in Latvian animation history, in which good and bad characters are clearly defined, and there is a special emphasis on the accompanying sound. Perpendikuls, created by artist Daina Lapiņa, becomes a scary ghost-image for young viewers!



1969 *Lietainā diena* *Rainy Day*

■ Animators at Latvian Television get into the game, and Roze Striebra, an actress from the puppet theatre together with documentary film maker and cinematographer, Ansis Bērziņš, create the first film using applique technique. This successful collaboration will later become the animation studio *Dauka*, with traditions focused on Latvian folklore, poetic rhythm and sincerity.

1976 *Caps meklē* *Caps in Pursuit*

■ Puppet master Arvīds Noriņš creates a detective story for children in a James Bond mode, solving tricky secrets one after the other. Remaining aware of his young and demanding audience, a large role is given to communism, so that the educational aspect isn't lost, of course.

1977 *Si-Si-Dra*

■ Thanks to Arnolds Burovs' far-sightedness, some notable caricaturists arrive at Riga Film Studio, and one of them, Gunārs Bērziņš, is responsible for this jolly film's visual image and playfully instructional tone. The kids like it and the adults are happy that their offspring were now clear on why it's bad to act like a pig in the forest, and what happens if one should be a "pig".



1978 *Vanadziņš* *The Hawk*

■ Undoubtedly one of the all-time most beautiful Latvian animation films - the screenplay is based on themes from the stories of writer Vilis Lācis, and depicts the relationship between a small boy and his father - a seaman. The emotional portraits included in Arnolds Burovs' direction lend this tragedy the ache of human drama.



1983 *Kabata* *In My Pocket*

■ Latvia's first animation film drawn on celluloid is based on themes from Latvian poet Ojārs Vācietis' children's poems, with a musical score by Imants Kalniņš.



1991 *Gulbis* *Swan*

■ *Gulbis* marks the beginning of Studio AB's *Avārijas Brigāde* (Rescue Team) series, which quickly gains popularity not only in Latvia but also far beyond the borders, and rather convincingly showcases the talent and ability of the young artists who have come from the Arnolds Burovs' school. The three main characters - Silinks, Poteriks and Bembelāts - "lend" their faces to local manufacturers for advertising purposes, and entertain viewers with their imagination and the turns of events that befall them. Soon after, Studio AB creates two more series - *Munks un Lemijs* (Munk and Lemmy) and *Zvēri* (Animals). Later on, together with the Danish studio *Zentropa*, they make two animated features - *Props un Berta* (Prop and Berta) and *Trīs Muskietieri* (The Three Musketeers). All around success!

1981 *Bimini*

■ A visualisation of the reflections and ideas on a poem by Heinrich Heine - the film's title was also borrowed for a while by the only Latvian animation festival. That is long gone, but this Arnolds Burovs' film has become a Latvian animation classic, and the music, composed by Imants Kalniņš and performed by *Menuets*, beckons us to a wonderland called *Bimini*, where there is eternal spring, and a drink from the brook's water grants all wishes, such as restoring youth.



Čapliniāna. 1983 *Sapnis* *The Dream*

1984 *Pēdējā lapa* *The Last Leaf*

1986 *Princese un puma* *The Princess and the Puma*

■ Charlie Chaplin said: he's a citizen of the world, and perhaps that is why the famous character, The Tramp, appealed to Arnolds Burovs and his team. After returning from America, Burovs is completely taken with the works of O. Henry, and begins to make films based on what he's seen across the ocean. The events and characters are, of course, given comic notes and sentiments, which are nicely underscored by maestro Raimonds Pauls' music.



1991 *Ness un Nesija* *Ness and Nessy*



■ A collaboration between almost all forces of Latvian animation creates the first Latvian animated feature - a love story based on the legendary Loch Ness Monster. Many sayings from this film have become part of spoken Latvian, but the likable hero's name, Knipucītiņuminiņimais Pintīkupinītis, isn't even pronounceable. In 1993, *Ness un Nesija* receives a *Lielais Kristaps* award for best animation film.

1991 Kā bērniņš nāk pasaulē *How a Baby Comes Into the World*

■ The sexual revolution happened in Latvia thanks to Māris Putniņš, an artist and soon-to-be among the most visible Latvian puppet animation specialists. In 1989, he published a series of drawings showing that babies aren't brought by storks or found in cabbage patches in the famous children's magazine *Zilīte*. This popular-science film by Roze Stiebra recreates this long-kept-from-children truth on the big screen.



1994 Aicinājums *The Summons*

■ Studio *Dauka* makes a film to begin the series *Pasaciņas* (Little Fairy-Tales),



artists are brought into the world of animation – they light up the screen with shades of colours that, up to now, were only used on canvas.

1999 Clara un Rubiņšteins *Clara and Rubinstein*

■ At the end of the 1990s, Askolds Saulītis is declared to be one of Latvia's most promising young directors, and Studio *Rija Films* strikes while it's hot. The first co-production film is made together with producer Paul Thiltges, who knew of the accomplishments of Latvian animators from *Kirikou et la Sorciere*, and is, since 2008, a co-producer on Studio *Rija Films*'s upcoming feature *Zelta Zirgs* (Golden Horse). *Clara un Rubiņšteins* is a mix of the director's grandmother's memories and never-made films about excess weight. Artist Jurgis Krāsons received a *Lielais Kristaps* award for his work.



1994 Munks un Lemijs. Lidojam?! *Munk and Lemmy. Let's Fly?!*

■ Director Nils Skapāns' second film is in competition at the *Berlinale* Film Festival. Slightly bewildered by the turn of events and still not really knowing much about directing, he heads to one of the world's most prestigious film festivals, and becomes even more bewildered when his film wins a *Crystal Bear*. The award shatters into pieces in a plastic bag on the way home, but that doesn't take away from the creator's joy. One after the other, articles start to appear in the press praising the future of Latvian animation.



1998 Kiriku un burve *Kirikou et la Sorciere*

■ Michel Ocelot's award winning animation film *Kirikou et la Sorciere* (awards at Annecy Animation Film Festival, Chicago and Montreal) has names of Latvian animators in the credits. This is a successful start in the animation world arena, and is followed by work on the Oscar nominated *Les triplettes de Belleville* (2003).



which is Roze Stiebra's pet project. Through the more than twenty films that ensue, the viewer is introduced to Latvian stories, and popular Latvian

1999 Velniņi *The Little Devils*

■ Studio *Rija Films* releases *Velniņi* in the same year – a modernized screen version of a work by Latvian writer Rūdolfs Blaumanis, with voiceovers by local celebrities. An interactive game in CD format aimed at children follows.



2001 Pavasaris *Spring*

■ Nils Skapāns joins *Juris Podnieks Studio* and makes his first claymation film. Even though by the end of the film the snowman has become a shade of light gray, the KROK animated film festival recognizes his achievement with a special award.



2002 Vectēva Medus *Grandad's Honey*

■ Created as a graduation project at Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design, Dept. of Animation, in Eksjö, Sweden, Vladimir Leschiov makes a notable entrance onto the Latvian animation scene. The director, having already tried his hand at making commercials, shows the local viewer a new form of drawing and in-frame detail, and convinces the national film festival *Lielais Kristaps* jury of his talent, as *Vectēva Medus* receives the award for best Latvian animation in 2003.



2003 Jāņtārpiņš *Firefly*

■ Dace Rīdūze, one of the large Studio AB family, directs *Jāņtārpiņš*, as part of the *Animals* series from *Animācijas Brigāde*. The film is screened at the *Berlinale* festival, and makes both adults and children think about tolerance. Is firefly Otis not as good as others because his glow-light doesn't work?



2002 Sieviete *Woman*

■ Signe Baumanē first sat in the director's chair in 1991 when she dared to make her dream of making animation come true. But only in 2009, after some 20 years of work, her film *Dzemdības* (Birth) is finally included in the Annecy film festival! *Sieviete*, made under the wing of *Rija Films*, is a philosophical study. Screened both in Woodstock and KROK, the film captivates viewers with the elusive and not wholly understandable inner world of a woman, and is in contrast with the films she creates in New York that are full of sexuality, and are often criticized by Latvia's puritanical society.



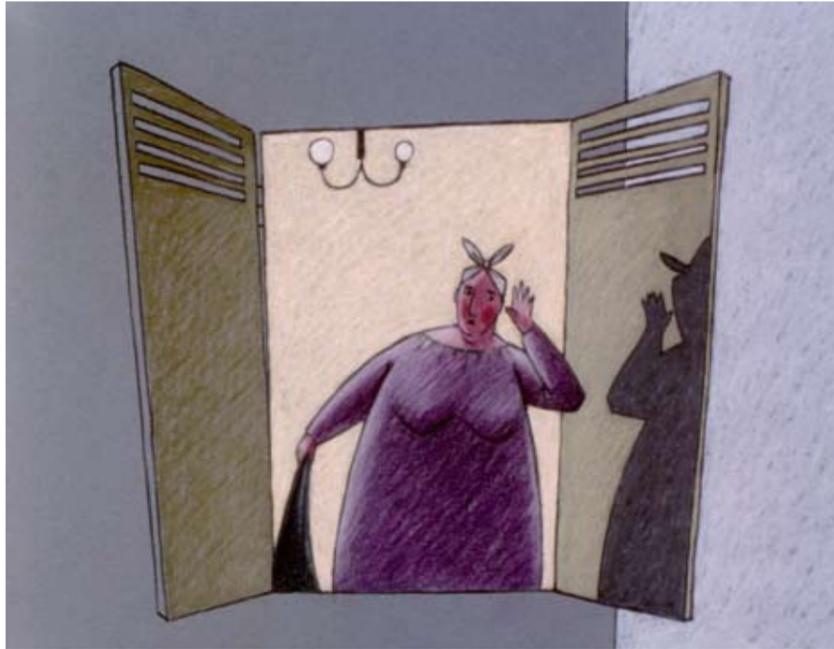
2004 Poēm pa kulšēn

■ One of rare, true cinematographic Latvian animation films is directed by Jānis Cimermanis under studio *Animācijas Brigāde*. The screenplay is based on a work by Frīdrihs Džeizma published in 1948, on the tradition of grain threshing in the Kurzeme region. Alongside the human lives, there are also the joys and woes of the little animals, and the lively whirl of intertwining events carries the viewer into the distant past, perhaps recognizing the fond memories shared by their parents or grandparents.



2004 *Bezmiegs* *Insomnia*

■ One of the most internationally-known Latvian animation films, *Bezmiegs* (Insomnia), was created at studio *Rija Films* by Vladimir Leschiov. The form is intriguing, and the ascetic but still pulsating frames are appreciated by both viewers and professionals. The film receives awards at the KROK, Clermont-Ferrand, Zagreb, Hiroshima, Nashville, Melbourne and many other animation film festivals, and the national film festival jury decides to award Vladimir Leschiov with the *Lielais Kristaps* for best animation film.



2006 *Melnā Kaste* *Black Box*

■ Jurgis Krāsons is one of the most prolific Latvian film artists, with his name appearing in feature films as well as in animation, and not only in Latvia, but also internationally. *Melnā Kaste* is his directorial debut, and he creates a black & white, stylized and modern-day globalization-triggered bustle, where strange things happen. Krāsons' next film, *Norīt krupi*, is currently in production.



2005 *Eža kažociņš* *The Prickly*

■ A screen version of this Vilis Plūdonis' story was made in Latvia in 1972 by Arvīds Noriņš, with a screenplay by Arnolds Buravs. 33 years later, animators once again tackle this story, and *Rija Films* makes the first Latvian 3D animation. The expensive technology used to make it doesn't perhaps completely justify the intent, but it is still invaluable experience.



2007 *Čīža acīm* *Little Bird's Diary*

■ Edmunds Jansons mastered animation at studio *Dauka*, and he's also worked as a documentary filmmaker. The film, *Čīža acīm*, is a combination of documentary and animation that re-creates the life story of 80 year-old Irīna Piļķe, called Čīža, on screen, portraying her experiences and relationships as well as the surrounding political events. The film receives two *Lielais Kristaps* awards at the national film festival: for best short animation and the FPRESI jury's special award.



2007 *Kuģis* *The Ship*

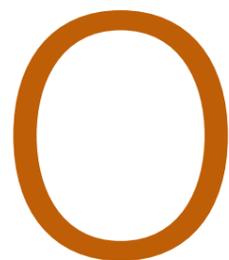
■ *Kuģis*, created using the computer game technology *Machinima*, marks the debut of artist Egils Mednis, who has, up until now, done graphic design for the media and ad agencies, as well as teaching in the Art Academy of Latvia's visual communications department. The innovative vision and use of technology makes Latvia now able to compete in this sub-genre of animation, as also proven by the awards the film has received in international festivals.



2009 *Spārni un airi* *Wings and Oars*

■ Vladimir Leschiov film *Spārni un airi* is a visually nuanced and delicately spun together atmospheric story of a former pilot's memories. This film was picked up for this year's short film competition at the Annecy Animation Film Festival, alongside Latvian animator Signe Baumanes' film, *Birth*, a USA-Italy co-production.





Over the years
Latvian
animators
have gained
international
success and

recognition at film festivals around the world. The latest successes in 2009 include Vladimir Leschiov's *Wings and Oars* (Lunohod, 2009) in the official short film competition at Annecy International Animation festival, and the participation of Reinis Kalnaellis' directing debut *When Apples Roll* (Rija Films, 2009), in the *Berlinale Generation* program. One could say that animation has been the best export product of the Latvian audiovisual industry in terms of the number of animation films that have been on the international festival circuit.

As a result, Latvian animators are internationally recognized as skilful professionals and great artists, and that has led to substantial international contract work for the Latvian animation professionals working mainly at three production studios: *Rija Films*, *A. Film Latvia* and *Jet Media*. In addition, several notable international animation co-productions have emerged in co-operation with such Latvian film studios as *Rija Films*, *ABOOM* and *Jet Media*, and no doubt more co-productions will soon follow.

International Co-operation in Animation: Services and Co-productions

A. FILM LATVIA

■ Animation and TV commercial film studio *A. Film Latvia* was founded in 2001 as a subsidiary of Danish *A. Film A/S*, the largest animation studio in Scandinavia. *A. Film Latvia* mainly works with classically drawn 2D / 3D animation, *flash* animation, as well as with music videos and TV commercials. Animators from *A. Film Latvia* have worked for several major European and American studios completing various large-scale projects, among them: *Asterix and the Vikings* (*A. Film* / M6), the musical *Eight Crazy Nights* (Columbia Pictures / Sony Entertainment), the Oscar-nominated *The Quest for Camelot* (Warner Bros), and *Help!*

I'm a Fish (*A. Film*).

A. Film Latvia also produced the famous music video for the song *Rudens / Lonely Feeling / Veter*, for the most internationally known Latvian band *Brainstorm* (*Prāta Vētra*). This music video was even included in the official competition program for music videos at Annecy Animation Film festival in 2007, and received the Audience Award and the best Commissioned Films Award at the AniFest festival in 2007.

A. Film Latvia has recently co-produced its first 3D animation feature film *Jungo Goes Bananas* (2008) together with PH3 (Denmark) and Nordisk Film (Norway).

ABOOM

■ The studio was founded in 1998 as a joint venture between the oldest Latvian film studio *Animācijas Brigāde*, and the most successful Nordic production company *Zentropa* from Denmark. *ABOOM* is a puppet animation studio, producing puppet films, puppet film series, puppet animation feature films and commercials. The special language that the puppet animation films' heroes use is understandable to viewers all over the world – be it in Latvia, Japan, France, Great Britain or Brazil.

ABOOM has produced a number of very successful puppet-animation

films, such as the humorous story about a man and his cow and their extraordinary adventures *Prop and Berta* (2000), and the first puppet version of Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (2006, *Aboom / Zentropa / Ink Productions*) directed by Jānis Cimermanis, one of the leaders in Latvian puppet cinema. The classic story of *The Three Musketeers* delights both children and adults and is available in four languages: Latvian, Danish, English and French. At the moment, the studio is preparing a new co-production project - a feature-length adventure film, *The Wild Pirogi*.

RIJA FILMS

■ *Rija Films* seems to be the most internationally-oriented animation film studio in Latvia. Since its founding in 1995, animators and other professionals from *Rija Films* have participated in more than 30 international projects commissioned from companies in France, England, Spain, USA, Canada, Denmark, Luxembourg and others. *Rija Films* reached the upper echelons of international co-operation with the French company *Les Armateurs*, in creating both *Kirikou et la Sorciere* (1998) and *Les Triplettes de Belleville* (2003) - films that require no introduction for European audiences. *Les Triplettes de Belleville* involved some 50 Latvian animators and animation professionals producing over 45 000 drawings. The professional work of the animators was recognized with the nomination of this film for two *Oscars*, including one for Best Animated Feature.

In co-operation with Estonian animators from *Eesti Joonisfilm*, *Rija Films* made the popular, feature-length children's animation *Lotte from Gadgetville* (2006), which has been distributed in many European countries. Now the second Latvian / Estonian collaboration – *Lotte and the Moonstone Secret* - is on its way.

Apart from the various facilities for animation in 2D/3D, *Rija Films* offers film dubbing possibilities since 2001, when the first results of their dubbing was seen in cinemas with the *DreamWorks* studio feature film, *Shrek 2*. Over the years, a productive and



successful co-operation in the dubbing of animation for the local market has been established with *Paramount*, *Sony*, *Fox*, *DreamWorks* and *Warner Bros* studios. Soon, studio *Twentieth Century Fox*'s latest sequel of *Ice Age* (*Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*) will make its way to Latvian audiences, dubbed into Latvian by *Rija Films*.

JET MEDIA

■ Animation production studio *Jet Media* was established in 2004, and has worked on several international co-operation projects, among which the most notable is *Kirikou et les bêtes sauvages* (2005, *Les Armateurs*, France). Among *Jet Media*'s other projects is the Belgian studio *Sofidoc*'s animation series *Viva Carthago* (2004), and the German branch of *Warner Bros.* feature animation, *Oh, wie schön ist Panama* (2006).

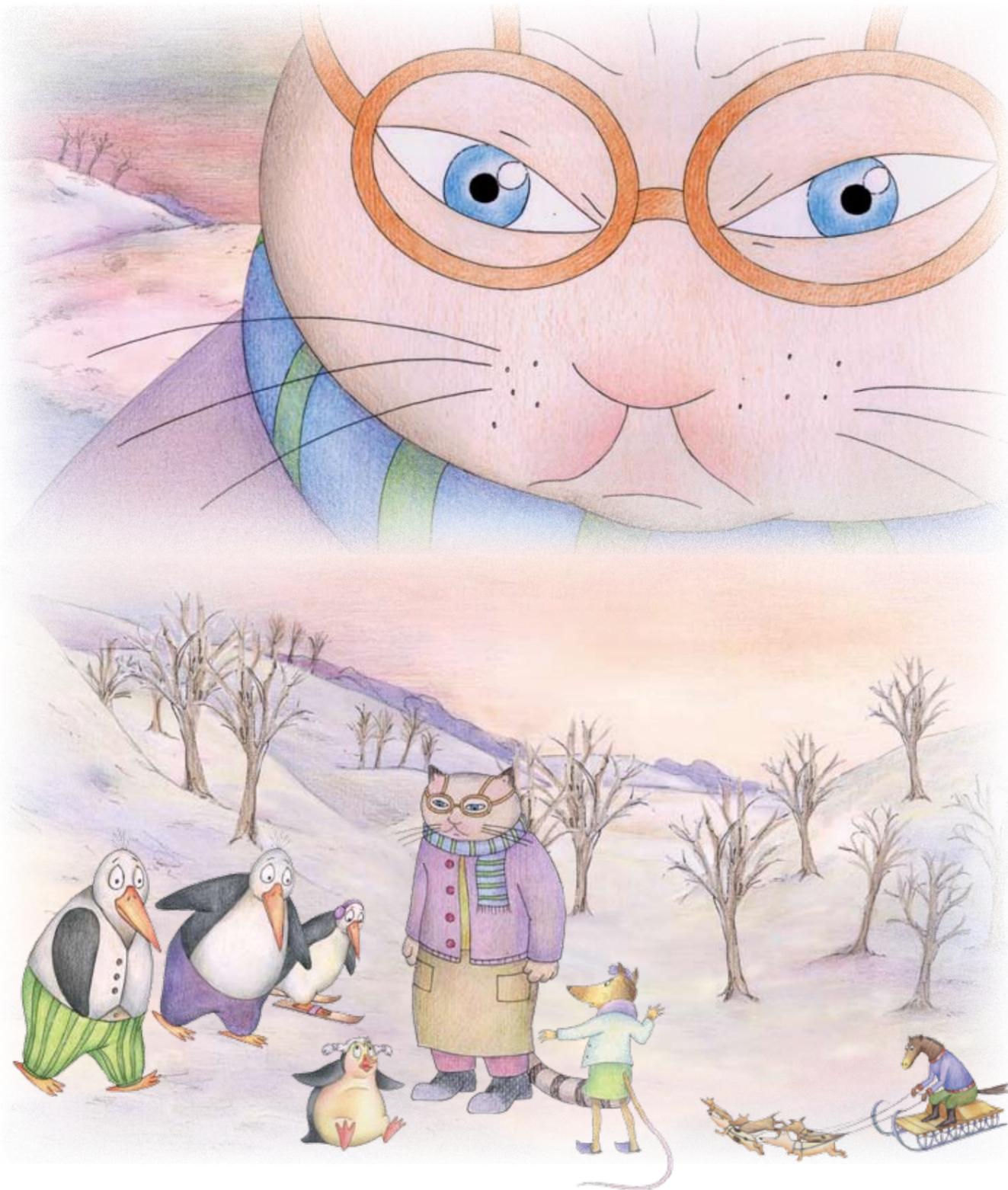
The studio is currently working on a Latvian/British/Slovenian co-production - a 2D/3D animation film series for children, *Tales of the Sunrise Tree* (dir. N. Skapāns). This

series draws on folktale traditions and Latvian legends, focusing on the universal themes of the magical simplicity of the natural world. These animated stories are fantasy-based and driven by a strong combination of both action and comedy.

This year, work will begin on a new project, *Weasymartenette*, intended for children's audiences. The story about little Ani with her puzzling questions and her favourite plush toy *Weasymartenette*, who always knows the best and funniest answer, will be created by director Inga Prauliņa in co-operation with the French artist and author of the idea and screenplay, Francois Bruel.

The solid base of animation professionals in Latvia and the lower than average production costs have contributed to an increasing amount of services being done in Latvia since 2001. Over 40 large-scale and smaller projects with European and American animation studios have been executed with the help of Latvia's animators. Now, in the time of economic hardship, Latvian animation studios are hoping to attract foreign productions and international co-operation projects with its facilities, professionalism and very high work ethic, so that the well-established trend of international co-operation continues into the future.

Director Reinis Kalnaellis Screenplay Andrejs Prigičevs, Māra Liniņa un Andris Akmentiņš Designer Andrejs Prigičevs, Laima Puntule Music Kārlis Lācis



Animation colour pencil drawings, 2 D Format 35 mm Screen ratio 1:1,85 Colour colour Sound Dolby Digital Length 7 min
Producer Viinis Kalnaellis Production Company Rija Films

WHEN APPLES ROLL



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The National Film Centre of Latvia is a state financed governmental organisation overseeing the film branch in Latvia, granting governmental financial support to Latvian films, preserving the national audio-visual heritage, promoting Latvian films abroad, co-operating with the rel-

evant international and national organisations and organising training for Latvian film professionals. We are members of the EURIMAGES Foundation as of 2001 and MEDIA Plus as of January, 2002. At major international events we work together with Estonians and Lithuanians

under the co-operation platform BALTIC FILMS. We are keen on attracting film, television, and video production to Latvia, stimulating inward investment, creating employment opportunities for creative staff, technicians and support service companies.

www.nfc.lv

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