

- 
- A felted bear, likely made of wool, is the central focus. It is brown with a textured surface and is holding a large, vibrant bunch of raspberries in its mouth. The background is a mix of blue and white, suggesting a sky or a misty environment. The overall style is soft and tactile, characteristic of felted animation.
- National Film Centre of Latvia
 - Latvian Animation Association

Latvian Animation

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The new decade in Latvian animation

This is a time when Latvia's famous past role in animation connects with its likewise impressive and active development in the present moment. Two-dimensional cut-out animation as well as spatial puppet animation emerged in Latvia at almost the same time – namely, in the 1960s – and, by continuing to evolve and branching out, both of these traditions have since been taken up by new generations of promising, serious filmmakers, who have brought deserved praise and acclaim to Latvia on the global animation stage. The feature-length format has not been traditionally used much in Latvian animation, with the first “long film” made thirty years after the introduction of animation and only a handful of feature-length animated films being made in the subsequent twenty years. In recent years, however – along with the centenary of the Latvian state, although this is only a symbolic coincidence – this genre of cinema is proving its maturity and vigour by having finally reached a sort of critical mass, with several feature-length animated films in production in various studios at the same time. Even more symbolically, for two years in a row now, a Latvian feature-length animated film has been awarded at the *Contrechamp competition* at Annecy. Our films are being noticed elsewhere in the world as well. And this is only the start of the journey, because Latvian animation is set to continue receiving financial support from the state, and even a “virus crisis” did it no harm. If animators are forced to “stay at home”, they know exactly what to do – make a film! ■



Kristīne Matīsa
Animation expert at the National Film Centre of Latvia

Latvian Animation Association

In 2016, a group of nine Latvian animation professionals, including Sabine Andersone, Edmunds Jansons, Vladimirs Leščovs, Nils Skapāns, Anna Zača, Jurgis Krāsons, Kārlis Vītols, Egīls Mednis and Roberts Vinovskis, decided that it is time to take matters in their own hands and made a large collective step into the international arena by forming the *Latvian Animation Association* (LAA). The LAA became the basis for the representation of the industry's own prioritized necessities. That same year, in cooperation with the *National Film Centre of Latvia*, their primary intention to enter the *Annecy International Animation Film Market* (Mifa) as an alliance was fulfilled and Latvian animation booth is open for Mifa visitors every year ever since.

Nevertheless, by now the LAA has grown to gather 30 members and has become more of an animation “institute” rather than a representation organization. They praise the diversity of the rich Latvian animation bouquet and are working to encourage it even more. Their everyday work is, in cooperation with the state institutions, dealing with deputizing Latvian studios and animation authors for financial resource, co-producing and film accessibility development. Their long-term strategy is set in three directions. First is to initiate young talent development through

education and mentorship, second being facilitating co-productions by raising international visibility and presence of the Latvian professionals and studios. The third direction is to engage and educate the audiences by bringing the best of world's animation to their availability.

As described by the head of the LAA Anna Zača, it has also become a one-stop-agency for animation professionals and others interested internationally. The LAA sets out to Latvian animation film screenings abroad at least once a year and is always interested in hosting international screenings in Latvia. They manage and organize a number of activities including courses, workshops and screenings during film festivals, and take care of networking and communication matters when needed. So it really is a one step for it all if international institutions, festivals or other event organizers are to get to know the colorful Latvian animation realm. ■



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Signe Baumann



As director, Signe Baumann, a Latvian living in the United States, gives an exterior language to the various internal, yet hidden, psychological processes that influence our communication with others and how we perceive the world around us. Her films are diverse in terms of colour and technique as well as structure; expressive and clever visual metaphors have become an integral feature of her style. Her latest film *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts* was premiered in June 2022 at the *Tiribeca Film Festival's* competition

programme and included in the Annecy International Film Festival's competition programme. In it, she combines characters drawn in the classical animation technique with a filmed papier mâché background.

The voices of the film's thirty characters have been recorded by actors from New York and Los Angeles, including Matthew Modine, who has worked with Hollywood heavyweights such as Stanley Kubrick and Christopher Nolan. *My Love Affair With Marriage* is a coming-of-age story about a woman and her search for romantic fulfilment. It is based on Baumann's own

personal experience – openness has always been a hallmark of her work. In addition to following the course of several love affairs, the film also touches upon the biological processes at work when we fall in love with someone and society's glorification of romantic love.

The main hero, Zelma, sincerely believes that the meaning of life lies in love and that there's an "other half", or a soulmate, for everyone. But she always ends up in a dead end. *My Love Affair With Marriage* is a study about myths, reality and femininity. Baumann began her work on *My Love Affair With Marriage* already in September 2015. She remembers that just writing the script took a whole year, because it began with an in-depth study of the film's theme. She wanted to learn not only why people get married but also how the biology works; that is, what happens in us when we fall in love, what biological processes determine our gender, what lies at the foundation of gender-related behaviour? "It's not just biological determinism," says Baumann. "It's also social circumstances, how we play gender roles, and how society forces these roles on us." It is precisely this aspect of research, as well as her own personal



experience, that sets the film apart from others about similar topics.

Signe has been married twice but is currently unmarried, despite being in a relationship since 2000. She has always wanted to tell this story about love and marriage, about how two people come together and how their previous experiences influence each subsequent relationship. Music plays a major role in *My Love Affair With Marriage*. Three mythological figures (sirens, to be exact) sing about love, because, "How else do we learn what love is? Obviously, we hear about it in songs – we grow up with songs like this, and people want the kind of love that is worthy of being sung about in a song," says Baumann. The project is quite extensive and ambitious. The film is 107 minutes long, features 30 speaking and singing characters, 200–300 non-speaking characters, and involves 26 American actors, 1 British actor, 4 Latvian singers, and 13 Latvian actors.

In order to prepare, Signe spent three weeks working with the actors. She is very pleased with the result and says that the actors were great. The project has also involved 50 artists, students and interns from the United States as well as Latvia. Baumann comments that at first it was difficult to understand how to go about working with people on the other side of the world. ▶





My Love Affair with Marriage

The biggest challenge, however, has been attracting financing for the project. *My Love Affair With Marriage* received support from around 1700 people through fundraising campaigns and is a co-production between Latvia (*Studio Locomotive*, prod. Roberts Vinovskis), USA (*The Marriage Project*, prod. Sturgis Warner & Signe Baumane) and Luxembourg (*Antevita Films*, prod. Raoul Nadalet), as well as worked with individual backers in order to finance the film. She would like to involve a million people in this conversation about love, relationships and social stereotypes. She wishes to entertain, provoke and shed light on the film's viewers so that, as they leave the theatre, they might take a fresh look at their relationships, observing the influence of oxytocin and dopamine in their bodies.

Although Signe has not studied animation, she is nevertheless one of the best-known Latvian animators in the world thanks to her distinct personal style and courageous topics. Baumanne started as an animation director in Latvia, but she gained international recognition in the world of animation with her series of short films titled *Teat Beat of Sex* (2008). In addition to several other short-format projects, the popular series was followed by her first feature-length animated film, *Rocks In My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014), executing the classical animation technique and filmed papier mâché background mix flawlessly already then. It has a first-person narrative recorded by Signe herself; her voice in combination with the film's general ironic mood creates the kind of Signe Baumanne closeness one enjoys with a conversation partner who is able to laugh about herself and life's difficulties. ■



Signe Baumanne

www.myloveaffairwithmarriage.com


My Love Affair with Marriage

Most significant film:

Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās

Stop motion, drawn animation, 88 min, 2014, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogues

■ A story based on real people and events. The director tells about five women in her family, including herself, and their battles with life's challenges, depression and mental illness. In this bleak yet funny film, the twists and turns of Latvian history are interlaced with personal experiences and stories about family secrets, love and marriage.

Recent film:

My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts

Stopmotion papier mâché, drawn animation, 107 min, 2022, Latvia / United States / Luxembourg, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian

■ From an early age, songs and fairytales persuaded Zelma that Love would solve all her problems as long as she abided by societal expectations of how a girl should act. But as she grew older something didn't seem right with the concept of love: the more she tried to fit in the more her body resisted. A story about the acceptance of the inner female rebellion.



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Flow

Gints Zilbalodis

Gints Zilbalodis is a young animator and director who already has considerable experience in the field. After several shorts that gained recognition at film festivals and on the Internet, he began an independent feature-length project, the animated film *Away / Projām* (2019). The first part of the project, titled *Oasis / Oāze*, premiered in 2017 and introduced audiences to the hero of the story whose adventures now continued in the full-length version – and it was created all by himself.

After winning the *Contrechamp Award* at the Annecy Festival, *Away* has now been screened at more than 90 film festivals and won 13 awards, and even made it to the *Oscars* longlist of Animated Feature films in 2020. Ever since the film has been distributed in

more than 30 countries all around the world, including on *Amazon Prime* and other VOD platforms in the United States.

Zilbalodis says that he chose to work alone because he wished to learn all of the aspects of film production; besides, working alone simply seemed easier and cheaper at the time. Asked whether he still believed this to be the case after three and a half years of work, he says yes. The lack of a team also allowed him to get by without a storyboard, meetings, obstacles and instructions from others, thus saving time and giving him more creative freedom, he says.

However, after accumulating this experience and establishing various contacts, Zilbalodis has decided doing his next project together with a small team in Latvia as well as abroad. Producers' load for his next feature film *Flow / Straume* is now shared with the Latvian producer Matīss Kaža at Zilbalodis' own company *Dream Well Studio*, Ron Dyens of *Sacrebleu Productions* in France, and Lilia Schneider of *Cine-Litte Productions* in Germany.

Gints admits that the story of *Away* was a metaphor for its creation – his feeling of being alone on an island and trying to reach others for an understanding and

togetherness. “It’s similar with *Flow* – it’s a story about a character living alone but finding itself in need to learn working in a team,” says the director. „In *Away*, I knowingly had to avoid time-consuming technical difficulties and the story was centered on subjects that are easier to animate. A bigger team now allows me to build a denser story environment including more complex elements as well.”

The protagonist of the film is a cat who is afraid of water but is forced to live in a world that is rapidly succumbing to floods. One day he is forced to step onto a boat with other animals and to face two of his biggest fears at once – the water and the often ambiguous presence of other beings. Together, they travel through an unusual world into flooded cities and mystical islands, and meet other animals on their way. It is a story of accepting differences and learning to understand and to trust each other. „I find it best to tell the story of my own experience as I live it,” says Gints.

Flow will be made in a graphically stylised 3D animation technique, and, according to Zilbalodis, the animators are to have quite a few challenges. Besides most of the story unfolding on the water surface, the film will have no dialogue as the characters will be four-legged and animal-like. Zilbalodis will use handheld-like camera movement and long takes where the camera floats through the environment creating a sense of immersion and intimacy with the characters.



Away

For this reason, the animatic is already being created in 3D instead of relying upon traditional storyboards.

A large role in *Flow* will be played by the music that Gints has partly already created. The film is in the pre-production stage and is planned to be finished by 2024. The budget is already in place with the help of *Latvian Cultural Capital Foundation* and *National Film Center*, as well as support from Region Sud in France. The team is looking forward for to premiere the film for the international festival audiences. ■

Work in progress:

Flow / Straume

3D animation, 75 min, 2024, young adults, no dialogue, Latvia / France / Germany

■ After a terrible flood wreaks havoc on the world, a stubbornly independent Cat is forced to share a small boat with a group of other animals. Getting along with them turns out to be an even greater challenge for him than surviving the flood.

Most-significant films:

Away / Projām

3D computer animation, 75 min, 2019, young adults, no dialogue

■ A boy and a little bird are traveling across an island on a motorcycle trying to escape a dark spirit and get back home. Contrechamp Award at the Annecy Festival / Total of 13 awards Screened at 90+ festivals / Annie Award nomination for best music / Oscars longlist of Animated Feature films in 2020.

Priorities / Prioritātes

3D animation, 9 min, 2014, young adults, no dialogue

■ After his plane crashes on a small uninhabited island, a young man and his dog must find a way home.

Aqua

Classic animation, 7 min, 2012, young adults, no dialogue

■ A cat wakes up surrounded by water and must learn to survive.



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Kārlis Vītols

Kārlis Vītols works in two main directions regarding Latvian culture: in the film industry he is known as an animation filmmaker with ten works to his name, while in the art world he is known as a painter of large-format works that are often exhibited in Latvia and abroad. In fact, his animation work also often balances on the border between the art gallery and cinema, and has been shown at a variety of festivals around the world, including the prestigious *Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen* and the *Annecy International Animated Film Festival*.



The Swan Maiden

Vītols focuses on mythology, archetypes and their usage as well as the role of consumers in society. Critics describe his work as “light existentialism whose pop-like moods are also characteristic of his animated and non-animated projects”.

Vītols has experimented with various animation techniques, such as digital cut-out, painting on glass and 3D computer animation in combination with watercolour. He manages to include a variety of materials in his films: photographs, drawings, paintings

by himself and other artists, newspaper clippings, posters, quotes from art history. His first animated film, *The Trophy / Trofeja* (2004), was shown at the *Arsenāls Film Forum* and won the award for best animated film in the Baltic section; it was also nominated for best artwork at the *Latvian National Film Festival*.

In 2006, Vītols released the first animated film as part of a self-reflective meditation. The animated film trilogy that is made specifically to be shown at an art gallery started with *Garden of Fetish / Fetišu dārzs* and was followed by *Eclipse / Aptumsums* (2010) and *The End / Beigas* (2018). The latter started its film life outside the gallery premiering at the *Riga International Film Festival* in 2019. All three films were made in a relatively short time and without a script or storyboard in its traditional sense. With his auteur form of

animation, Kārlis believes “there is no need for communicative intermediaries between the brain and the hands that execute the work”. Therefore when working alone he has “characters that have been giving me no peace for many years”, and the outlines of the script reveal themselves while working with mise-en-scenes.

His most recent film, *The Swan Maiden / Gulbju jaunava* captures the uneasiness of love. The story is based on motifs of a classical Latvian fairy-tale and it goes about a woman who has to choose between her freedom and being a loving mother and a wife for her family.

Currently, Kārlis along with his producer Sniedze Kāle are working on his first feature length animation project that was developed at the *CEE Animation Workshop* in 2021. It is entering the pre-production stage and will be released as the first full-length title of their family-based studio *Studija Kokles*.

They describe *Northern Star / Ziemeļu zvaigzne* to be a family film about giving up privileges for the sake of one’s ideals, the power of the true values and knowledge sharing. Characteristically for Kārlis, the film will be rich in historical details and cultural-



The End



Northern Star

historical references, and the story does not avoid vivid confrontations and contradictory sets of characters. The script will be just as captivating for adults as for children and it is developed together with the well experienced children’s film scriptwriter Līga Gaisa and the young and promising Pēteris Rozītis who was the co-writer for the recent Dace Pūce’s *The Pit / Bedre*, the Latvian submission for *Academy Awards 2021*. ■



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Most-significant films:

Minotaur / Mīnotaurš

Oil on glass, 8 min, 2016, adults, no dialogue

■ While Father is at work, little Minotaur looks for playmates. In the endless labyrinth, he finds mythological figures who are occupied with their own ambitions.

Eclipse / Aptumsums

Digital animation / original technique, 10 min, 2010, adults, no dialogue

■ As the shadow of the moon covers the earth during a solar eclipse, the twilight creatures come to life, the boundary between the real and the imagined vanishes, and a transcendental ritual takes place in nature.

Devil's Fuji / Velna Fudži

2D animation, 32 min, 2009, adults, dialogue

■ Mount Fuji is occupied by a Latvian devil, who creates Latvian culture and forces it on the native Japanese people. An ambitious samurai is sent to fight him.

Garden of Fetish / Fetišu dārzs

Digital animation / original technique, 10 min, 2006, adults, no dialogue

■ The film analyses the abstract components that make up a work of art as well as the fetishes cultivated by the artist while creating it.

The End / Beigas

Digital animation / original technique, 11 min, 2019, adults, no dialogue

■ The heavenly Count Pīlādzis sees a younger version of himself reflected in the water. Being a slave to vanity, he must now observe his own withering away and turns to various clichéd survival strategies: the breasts and legs of pretty girls, a house with a pool, a fancy car and endless sleepless nights.

Recent film:

The Swan Maiden / Gulbju jaunava

Digital animation / original technique, 15 min, 2020, adults, no dialogue

■ When in love, one has no idea the price that must be paid to keep this love alive. This is a film about a woman forced to choose between her own freedom or being a loving mother and wife. The script is based on motifs from the fairy tale by Latvian writer Kārlis Skalbe.

Work in progress:

Northern Star / Ziemeļu zvaigzne

2D animation, 72 min, 2025, family, dialogues

■ The young idealist Nikolauss fon Himzels is traveling his dream land Italy to collect artefacts for the first public museum in the Baltics – that is not really needed by anyone because knowledge is only meant for the privileged.

Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen

Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen is a Latvian who has lived in Norway since the early 1990s. She has created several personal documentary films, the most recent of which is the animated documentary *My Favorite War / Mans mīļākais karš*. The film tells a story of Ilze's childhood and youth in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Creators admit – they hadn't imagined that it would resonate so much with the nowadays.

The recent film by Burkovska-Jacobsen makes use of both animated and documentary materials: approximately 80% of the film is animated, with the rest consisting of archival materials or contemporary documentary footage. Most of the film is created in

a classic cut-out 2D animation style, with some 3D elements.

The film was premiered at the *Anney International Animation Film Festival* in 2020 becoming the winner of the Contrechamp Competition. The jury stated: „We were touched by this memoir that is part of a bigger story. It gives a vivid feeling for a young girl growing up and evolving in a small Latvian town during the Soviet occupation. *My Favorite War* teaches the global value of freedom and demonstrates how a very personal story can be of universal interest.” Film was also acknowledged as the *Best Animated Film* and Ilze became the *Best Animation Director* at the *National*



Film Awards Lielais Kristaps. In 2020, Palm Springs International Animation Festival & EXPO named her the *Animator of The Year*.

After traveling more than 50 festivals worldwide, Ilze who had previously been working as a motion-picture documentarian has become known by the animation industry. *My Favorite War* is now settling in European cinemas and other viewing platforms through *EastWest Film Distribution GmbH*. Head of the Latvian production company Ego Media Guntis Trekteris says once they have gotten the know-how it is not only pragmatic but also enjoyable to continue working with the animation medium, and the tandem is now developing their next feature-length animation project. The world is to see Ilze's new film *Roach Coach / Trakmakāns* around 2025.

The classic 2D and 3D animation *Roach Coach* will be a story of a girl Viga who struggles with reading and writing. She has a chatty cockroach friend, Taro, talking to her and helping overcoming everyday difficulties. After her classmate finds it out, Viga starts getting bullied. But Viga is not the only one having such a friend and it soon turns out a reconciliation between the girls must be found.

Describing working in animation medium, Ilze draws parallels to a conifer forest path hidden behind a thick wall of spruces. Each next step lets her discover something new thus luring her to go even further. „*Roach Coach* is a truly exciting challenge for me – to change the negative connotation of a cockroach and making it lovable. The insects in my story symbolize all sorts of creativity and its endless expressions. The film is to be a glorification of creativity.”

Roach Coach continues the collaboration between the *Bivrost Film studio* in Norway and the *Ego Media studio* in Latvia, and the team is open for international partners joining aboard. ■



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Recent film:

My Favorite War / Mans mīļākais karš

Classic animation with documentary footage, 82 min, 2020, Latvia / Norway, adults, dialogues

■ An animated documentary telling the personal story of its director, Ilze, about her growing up in the Cold-War USSR. An exciting coming-of-age story about finding one's own identity, truth and loyalty. First, we meet Ilze as a little girl playing war at her granddad's farm, then she is faced with the horror of war threats at school. Ilze lives in a clash between the Soviet reality and propaganda denying what people actually are experiencing. Moreover, Ilze also finds out how opposite in their beliefs are people whom she loves the most. The film is about choices a girl has to make in a very young age, then getting wiser and finding courage to speak out.

In development:

Roach Coach / Trakmakāns

Hand-drawn & cut-out, 2D and 3D animation, 80 min, 2025, Latvia / Norway, children 7-12, family, dialogues

■ Nine-year-old Viga hides her lack of knowledge of how to read – letters are acting as dancing insects. Cockroach Taro helps Viga get through life as he tells funny stories that Viga entertains her classmates with. However, her classmate Sana becomes suspicious and jealous: why is the awkward Viga so popular? Sana follows Viga, films and exposes her – so the whole class can see that Viga believes in a talking cockroach. The class pushes back Viga and laughs at her. Sana's mom is a famous influencer. TV series will be shot about the beautiful family's sweet life. When the TV people arrive, Sana realises that mom talks to the butterflies living in her house plants and working as filters in her photos. That mom will be filmed so the viewers would have something to laugh about. The butterflies must be lured away. Reconciliation must be found. Only Viga can help Sana.



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Shammies



Atom Art

Atom Art is an award-winning 2D animation studio established in 2001 by animation film director Edmunds Jansons. It is known for its auteur short films and animated films for children audience. The studio works in a variety of animation genres such as magical realism, animated documentary, musical and absurd. The studio mainly works in the computer cut-out animation technique, but films are also made by traditional drawing, sand animation, animation with charcoal and even puppet animation. The studio began working with auteur animated short films, first of all Jansons' own films, but

over the years has collaborated with many artists and creatives among them Reinis Pētersons, Ivo Briedis, Lizete Upīte and Zane Oborenko. Animation short films made in Atom Art have participated in all the major animation film festivals all over the world – *Annecy, Berlinale, Zagreb, Ottawa, Fantoche, Clermont-Ferrand, Hirosima, New York Children Film festival* a.o.

Besides auteur short films, studio's second direction of activity revolves around producing animated films for children. *Atom Art* has developed children's projects in a variety of formats preschool miniseries *Shammies / Lupatiņi* and tv special *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness / Bize un neģuļa* (2017) to the feature-length film *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs / Jēkabs, Mimmi un runājošie suni* (2019). The new feature film currently in development *Born Happy / Laimes bērni* is a story

about a Latvian adventurer's family living in the Venezuelan jungle in the mid-20th century. "We believe visual content for children needs to be created as a dialogue that you have to form with a great sense of responsibility and truly believing in what you do, because it influences the taste of the young generation. As we are parents ourselves, we want to create something our children will enjoy. And, we see that there's no limit for films made with such an approach; they're appreciated all over the world," says Sabine Andersone.

Atom Art is now able to support itself by fully devoting itself to arthouse animated films, a point it has reached after many years of trying to balance between films and various commercial projects. Edmunds Jansons: "I sometimes compare our studio to the situation with Icelandic music. There was a distinct 'boom' about ten years ago or so when Icelandic bands became super popular, and people asked them how they did it. So art-housey, doing such a totally crazy, alternative thing... And they replied: we just came to the realisation that there was absolutely no point in being commercial, because we simply aren't capable of doing commerce! I don't think any attempts by *Atom Art* to become commercial would work either, because we don't have that kind of taste here at the studio. But, by doing what you know best, you eventually realise ▶



■ **Edmunds Jansons** is an award-winning director and the founder of the *Atom Art* studio. He also works as an animator, graphic artist, editor and creative producer, and enjoys illustrating children's books in his free time.



■ **Ģirts Bišs** is the sound director for most of *Atom Art's* films. For some films, he has also composed music and has been quite successful at that, having received many national and international awards for his work.



■ **Sabīne Andersone** is the CEO of the company and the head producer of all major projects at *Atom Art*. Dealing the financial matters, Sabīne is still one of the most creative people of *Atom Art's* team.



■ **Reinis Pētersons** is an illustrator and artist who works in diverse styles. He has created the design for the studio's children's films as well as his own short animation film, *Ursus*, made in a delicate charcoal drawing technique.



■ **Mārtiņš Dūmiņš** is the lead animator and animation supervisor at *Atom Art*. Over the years, he and Edmunds Jansons have developed a unique cut-out animation style that serves as the brand of *Atom Art* in Latvia and abroad.



■ **Elīna Brasliņa** is a talented artist and book illustrator who is collaborating with *Atom Art* already on the second feature film. Her unique colorful and rich visual style beautifully attracts children as well as adult audiences.



■ **Ieva Zeldere** is second producer and production manager on all different film projects at *Atom Art* studio. She equally well handles Excel timetables as well as artistic decisions.



■ **Zane Oborenko** is an artist and animator who creates short films in the challenging sand animation technique, mastering it beautifully. No story is too difficult for her, not even one inspired by the seemingly dull existentialist Franz Kafka.



Born Happy

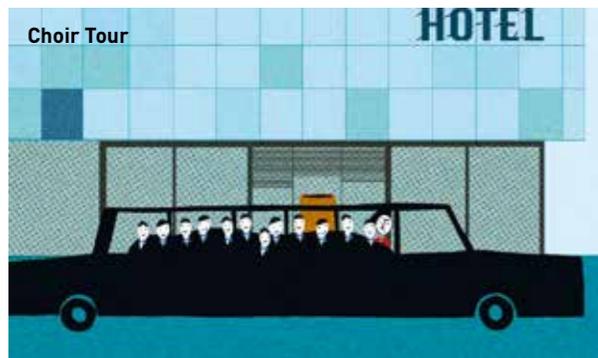
that that's even more profitable than trying to be commercial. Over time, the films created by our studio bring in a lot more, in terms of satisfaction and sometimes even financially, because they continue to be shown."

Atom Art produces and distributes films not only locally but also internationally.

Participation at international industry forums plays an important role in the studio's development. In order to find new coproduction and distribution partners studio presents projects at *Cartoon Forum*, *Cartoon Movie* or *CEE Animation forum*. In recent years Atom Art has established collaboration with studios from

Poland, Czech Republic, Spain and France. Last but not least, films produced by Atom Art have been successfully theatrically released in France, Spain, Benelux, Poland, and other countries.

Recently Atom Art has premiered two short films – Edmunds Jansons' new auteur film *Guard of Honor / Goda sardze*, which was screened at Clermont-Ferrand and *Hush Hush Little Bear / Čučī čučī* by Māra Liniņa has been premiered this year at the *Berlinale Generation Kplus competition programme* and is now on its way to the little viewers all around the globe. Currently the studio is developing miniseries based on Andrus Kivirähk's book *Oskar and the Things Hello, Oscar / Oskars un lietas*. Atom Art's next feature length animation *Born Happy / Laimēs bērni* is in pre-production and Edmunds Jansons' new short film *Freeride / Brīvāis nobrauciens* as well as Zane Oborenko's *Kafka. In Love / Kafka. Iemilējies* are to premiere in 2023.



Choir Tour



Ursus



Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness

Most-significant films:

Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs / Jēkabs, Mimmi un runājošie suņi

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, Latvia / Poland, 70 min, 2019, universal, dialogues

- An adventure story about two children spending summer in an old suburb, where, together with a bunch of talking dogs, they rescue the romantic neighbourhood of wooden houses from destruction.

Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness / Bize un Neguļa

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, 2D computer animation, 25 min, 2017, Latvia, children, dialogue in Latvian / English

- To win back her parents' attention, a six-year-old girl nicknamed Pigtail and her imaginary friend, Mr. Sleeplessness, come up with a clever plan to send her Baby Brother and Grandma to the moon.

Choir Tour / Kora turneja

Edmunds Jansons, 2D computer animation, 5 min, 2012, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- It's a wild free-for-all when a famous boys' choir breaks away from their conductor while on tour in Seoul and causes mayhem in the hotel.

Ursus

Reinis Pētersons, charcoal drawing, 10 min, 2011, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- A charcoal-on-paper animation about a circus bear on a motorcycle who decides to leave the daily routine and takes off into the forest, where his true happiness seems to dwell.

Riga Lilac / Rīgas ceriņi

Lizete Upīte, 2D computer animation, 14 min, 2019, France / Latvia, adults, no dialogue

- On Riga's public transport system, you can call the police if someone smells bad and disturbs your ride. But would you call? Lizete, an amateur interviewer, tries to figure out whether we have the right to stink.

Recent films:

Guard of Honor / Goda sardze

Edmunds Jansons, 2D computer animation, 5 min, 2021, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- The guards stand in front of the historical symbol of the state. No matter the season or weather, they fulfil their duty, the obligation of honour. Is there a boundary beyond which this honourable credibility begins to look exaggerated?

The Shammies / Lupatiņi

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, Latvia, 2010–2020, preschoolaged children, dialogue in English / Latvian

- The Shammies are an animated cross-media project for preschoolaged children about discovering the world through children's games, fantasy and wordplay. In the latest instalments "How The Shammies Travelled", "How The Shammies Had Breakfast" and "How The Shammies Counted Time", the little Shammies travel without leaving the house and learn how to count chairs and time.

Hush Hush Little Bear / Čučī čučī

Māra Liniņa, Author technique, animation in wool, 5 min, 2022, Latvia, no dialogue, song in Latvian

- While the bear parents are away looking for berries and honey, the baby bears stay at home with the sheep. The bear cubs have a good time playing merrily with a ball of yarn, but soon enough the cubs find themselves all tangled up and everything is turned upside down! Luckily the sheep help them put everything in order again. The film is based on the traditional Latvian lullaby "Hush Hush Little Bear" ('Aijā, žūzū, lāča bērni')



Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs

The Film *Hush Hush Little Bear* was inspired by the memories of Māra Liniņa's childhood. The story is based on the classic Latvian lullaby with the same title (*Aijā žūžū, lāča bērni* in Latvian) – that is still lovingly sung by parents to their little children while they are falling asleep.



Māra Liniņa

“I found it peculiar that the song had not been visualised yet. I wanted to depict the sincerity, tenderness and the true longing for our working parents when we were little,” Māra Liniņa says. She remembers her growing up with her brother, and

the lonely days were accompanied by a toy bear that still embodies her emotions of the time.

The story revolves around a bear family. While the bear parents are away looking for berries and honey, the baby bears stay at home with the sheep. The bear cubs have a good time playing merrily with a ball of yarn, but soon enough the cubs find themselves all tangled up and everything is turned upside down! Luckily the sheep help them put everything in order again.

The success of capturing the lullaby's atmospheric essence is evidenced by the fact that the film is often played without translation to the international audiences – the soothing audio track combined



Hush Hush Little Bear

with wool felt animation is universally understood. “Initially, we took time to find the right animation technique that could convey the feeling I wanted to create,” says the director. “As a team, we came up with an idea to try out the felt animation technique, and as we tried it with the artist Ūna Laukmane, it was instantly clear that it's the right way to go.”

The film was premiered at the *Berlinale Generation KPlus competition programme* continuing its journey in other prestigious festivals such as *IAFF Annecy* and *ISFF Oberhausen*, and is now meeting its viewers all around the world.

Mara's love for animation began in the Latvian animation studio *Dauka* with grandmasters Ansis Bērziņš and Roze Stiebra. The experience as an executive artist encouraged her to continue working as an animation director, and *Hush Hush Little Bear* is her ninth film already. She has previously worked with the *Atom Art* studio as well and is pleased to describe studio's director Edmunds Jansons as her “animation soulmate”. “Animation is not and should not be a one-man's job and I am happy to have been able to work with a team of professionals for each part of the process.” ■



Kafka in Love



Born Happy



Freeride



Hello, Oscar

Work in progress:

Kafka in Love / Kafka. Ielīmējies

Zane Oborenko, sand animation, 10 min, 2023, Latvia, adults, dialogue in Latvian / English

■ Franz and Milena – between them a distance, her husband and loads of letters. It's a love that fills Kafka's life with light and hope and at the same time illuminates the fears and darkness in him. This animated short is based on Kafka's Letters to Milena and explores less known but nonetheless extraordinary and puzzling aspects of Kafka's personality.

Born Happy / Laimes bērni

Edmunds Jansons, cut-outs, 2D computer animation, 70 min, 2024, universal, dialogues

■ Spending her summer break at the rainforest, nine-year-old Ilze volunteers to shortly look after her three-year-old brother Alex. However, instead of paying attention to her brother, Ilze's nose is stuffed in a book. When finally Ilze looks up, she discovers that Alex has disappeared. All signs show that he has wandered towards the jungle. Ilze has to bring him back home before their parents return. And exciting and sometimes risky adventures begin.

Freeride / Brīvais nobrauciens

Edmunds Jansons, 2D, 12 min, 2023, universal, no dialogues

■ Characters of different shapes and colors in groups and pairs travel to the top of the mountain to begin the descent. In the rapid downturn, all previous concepts, social, national, emotional commitments become insignificant. Groups are divided into pairs, pairs into individuals, individuals into geometric elements. Everything disintegrates, unleashes to form new momentary systems, which will regroup into new and new mosaics. The film is an audiovisual adventure, an abstract dance of freedom about the illusory and ethereal world of strict order.

In development:

Hello, Oscar / Oskars un lietas

Edmunds Jansons, 3D and 2D, 10 x 7 min miniseries, children 5-8, dialogue

■ Overwhelmed by boredom while spending summer at his Granny's house, Oscar makes himself a Toy phone out of a log he has found in the shed. Much to his surprise, Oscar discovers that on this phone he can call any of the objects he can find in Granny's house and garden, from her iron to a rusty bike. That opens a whole new world to Oscar and leads to new extraordinary friendships.



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VFS Films

VFS Films is no doubt one of the most experienced Latvian film studios. In its 25 years of work, led by the producer Uldis Cekulis, they have organically grown into a multitalented superteam creating documentaries, a number of well known TV shows, fiction films, and for 15 years now, also animation. Studio's signature is not only a logo in the beginning or the end of their creations – they do not follow the paths already conquered but love to experiment and innovate, and always look for stories that require unfolding.

Studio's journey with animation medium started in 2008 when they first integrated animated sequences into their documentary *Klucis. Nepareizais latvietis / The Deconstruction of an Artist*, directed by Pēteris Krilovs. It was the award-winning animation director Edmunds Jansons and the audiovisual artist Miks Mitrēvics who created a robust dynamic vision of the future city and set Gustavs Klucis', the world-famous Latvian artist's, posters in motion. „It was the time when the documentary cinema transformed into a grounded form of a cinematic experience. We started using the modes of staging, reconstructing

and animating. We witnessed Mitrēvics, who played Klucis, actually becoming him – the effect of the mixed techniques was so powerful that the audiences realized he was an actor only by the end of the film,” remembers Cekulis.

When it came to creation of Pēteris Krilovs' next film, they already knew from the very beginning that they would be filling the parts they could not stage with plasticine animation. And so for *Obliging collaborators / Uz spēles Latvija* (2014) they invited the enthusiastic puppet master Nils Skapāns on board. His task was to enrich the story by picturing the scenes of happenings in the dark KGB cellars and the famous *Yalta Conference* when “The Big Three” – U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin – met. Later on Krilovs admitted that after the film was finished he realized that Skapāns' plasticine creations seemed so human-kind and psychologically believable that it left „a shamanic ritual's effect” on him. Nils had proven that in some cases animated creatures can embody the character complexity at a whole new level incomparable to an actor's work.

In 2017, the third *VFS Films* documentary using the animation medium came done by the director Krista Burāne. *The Fairytale of Empty Space / Pasaka par tukšo telpu* is the third in her tryptich on significant Latvian theatre personalities, the first two being *The Fifth Hamlet / Piektais Hamlets* (directed along with Mārtiņš Eihe, 2009) and *Māra* (2014). In making the latter, she had already discovered the benefits animation can bring to the story. Now, directing a documentation of the scenographer Andris Freibergs, she entrusted picturing his childhood and youth memories, dreams and visions to the young animation artist Toms Burāns. He created scenes with a silicone puppet interacting with computer graphics. That year, Toms received the *National Film Award Lielais Kristaps* as the *Best Animation Artist*. „We kind of broke

into the animation nominations with a documentary, but it was well taken and accepted by our colleague animators,” Cekulis remembers.

In 2019 *VFS Films* released their first all-puppet-animation short film, *All my friends are dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši*. In a way it was the first for both the directors – Nils Skapāns, and Anna Zača as well. For Anna, it was indeed her first film, but for Nils it became an occasion to try out the silicon puppet animation technique for the first time. After that he used the mastered technique in creating his and the studio's next puppet film, *The Nap / Diendusa* – a 23 min story of a rebellious little girl who stops robot villains of stealing children's dreams. Unfortunately, this has become Nils' last film and he did not experience the film's premiere that was held at the *National Film Festival Lielais Kristaps* in early 2022. The studio has now dubbed the original soundtrack in Lithuanian and English and the film is ready to start the journey to international film festivals honouring his legacy.

Asked to describe their latest animation project, *The Magic Wardrobe / Brīnumskapis*, Uldis returns a question: „Have you ever been hiding into your mom's

closet? The darkness launches imagination, and it turns into something different for everyone.” *The Magic Wardrobe* is a cycle of musically educational carefree 3–5 min short films for pre-school and primary school children about the construct of world. The idea of the film series origins from a children's TV project with the same title. Its creators have written around 50 children's songs that *VFS Films* team plans to base educational and entertaining children films on. So far, they have released the first episode – a pilot, *Dust Fairies / Māsiņas Puteklītes* (2021). The second film that is an introductory episode for the whole cycle will be premiered in autumn 2022. It presents the signature of all involved artists – Edmunds Jansons, Anete Melece, Anna Zača and Toms Burāns who will take parts in being the artists from now on, and the director Krista Burāne and arts director Kristīne Jurjāne who are to work with all the films. Currently three more episodes are a work in progress to meet their audiences in 2023.

Recent films:

Dust Fairies / Māsiņas Puteklītes

From the cycle *The Magic Wardrobe / Brīnumskapis*, dir. Krista Burāne, author Toms Burāns, art. Kristīne Jurjāne, mixed technique, 4 min, 2021, children, no dialogue, song in Latvian

■ In a completely typical building, in a typical apartment, in a completely typical kid's room there stands a not at all typical wardrobe. Behind its doors, behind the dresses and blouses, the shirts and trousers that obediently live on the hangers, lives a secret darkness of the imagination from which some interesting characters appear and begin to live in the children's room. You need only to knock and see how the dust fairies start to play with others in the room – even starting to play the piano! This is a carefree story about the construct of the world and that which appears up! and down!

The Nap / Diendusa

Nils Skapāns, stop motion/puppet animation/2D, 23 min, 2022, children, dialogue

■ Eight-year-old Antonija, who seems like just an ordinary girl but is in fact quite rebellious, is taken to art camp. At the same time, it is announced on the radio that two robots have escaped from an AI laboratory and have disguised themselves as humans. Naturally, their paths cross at camp. Thanks to her rebellious nature, Antonija helps to stop the robots' villainous plan of stealing the children's dreams while they nap and transforming them into dumb advertisements.

Most significant films:

The Fairytale of Empty Space / Pasaka par tukšo telpu

Krista Burāne, motion-picture & puppet and 2D animation, 95 min, 2017, adults

■ A documentary fairytale about the life and work of accomplished European scenographer and educator Andris Freibergs, and his quest to find the empty space. The artist paints a self-portrait by shaping the stage for an imaginary production titled *Andris Freibergs*. He transforms himself into a space that contains close to eighty years worth of stunning success, tragic loss, birth and death. It is an attempt to create the perfect empty space – one that would simultaneously encompass everything and nothing, the beginning and the end.

All My Friends are Dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši

Nils Skapāns and Anna Zača, stop motion/puppet animation, 5 min, 2019, young adults / adults, no dialogue

■ When Anna Zaķis was young, she experienced the upswing of social networks. Her once active cultural life has slowed down, but the desire for real conversation remains. She will fight to the end... for a chance to talk with someone.

The Fairytale of Empty Space





The Magic Wardrobe



The Magic Wardrobe

Though the film cycle *The Magic Wardrobe / Brīnumskapis* is Krista Burāne's debut as an animation film director, she has an extended prior experience with her own two documentaries, *Māra* and *Fairytale of Empty Space*. She has also directed an animated music video for the well known Latvian band Instrumenti in collaboration with her son, animation artist Toms Burāns. For her, animation medium is an extension for all the cinematic possibilities. „The language of animation is a tool to tell a story that is impossible to be told without major SFX. Animation is telling and showing a world of a thoughtful imagination that is only needed to be released. It is irreplaceable in conversing with children and helps creating a wonder in their world. At the same time, it is an opportunity to tell them the serious stories as well,” Krista describes her approach to the medium.

Based on the music by Ingus Ulmanis and Aigars Voitišķis, and lyrics by poets Pēteris Brūveris, Ieva Samauska and Māra Zālīte, *The Magic Wardrobe* short films intend to help children to learn the world.

The films can agreeably be used by parents and teachers to discuss a number of matters such as different social aspects, rules and laws, Maths and Geometry, they help developing language. Even more to that, each film intends to inspire the viewers to try out a musical instrument as the animated scenes interchange with filmed material.

Talking about making films for children, Krista emphasises always keeping in mind the need for thought-and-emotion-provoking stories for children as well. „It is one of the ways they learn what it means to be a human. The more respectful and truthful the stories will be, the more humane and respectful people we will live along with.” ■



Krista Burāne

Coming soon:

Song About the Magic Wardrobe / Dziesmiņa par Brīnumskapi

From the cycle *The Magic Wardrobe / Brīnumskapis*, dir. Krista Burāne, art. Anete Melece, Anna Zača, Kristīne Jurjāne, Edmunds Jansons, Toms Burāns, mixed technique, 5 min, 2022, children, no dialogue, song in Latvian

■ Two children play hide and seek. They open the doors of the Magic Wardrobe and find themselves in a forest full of mystery, inhabited by creatures and characters both real and imagined. They also play hide and seek with each other all year long. This is a story about widening horizons and the joy of discovering a new world.



Uldis Cekulis

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Work in progress:

Three films from the cycle *The Magic Wardrobe / Brīnumskapis*:

My Mommy isn't Afraid / Manai mammai nav bail

Krista Burāne, artist Kristīne Jurjāne, author Anete Melece, mixed technique, 4 min, 2023, children, no dialogue, song in Latvian

■ A story about people's emotions – fear, courage, and love. The superhero mummy isn't afraid of (almost) anything while conducting a work meeting with crocodiles, ghosts, and the dead.... The only thing that frightens her is thunder and lightning. But then some little superhero comes to help.

Everything that isn't Allowed / Viss, ko nedrīkst

Krista Burāne, artist Kristīne Jurjāne, author Anna Zača, mixed technique, 4 min, 2023, children, no dialogue, song in Latvian

■ A story about discovering the world with an adult who understands how to turn prohibition into a safe adventure. It questions what is good and what is bad, what you can and can't do, and why and why not?

Wizard of the Door / Durvju burvis

Krista Burāne, artist Kristīne Jurjāne, author Edmunds Jansons, mixed technique, 4 min, 2023, children, no dialogue, song in Latvian

■ All of us have magical powers to devise ideas and create all kinds of worlds. The wizard living in the playroom knows how to dismantle the borders between the inside and the outside, and between the high and the low. He turns everything on its head and shows us that the current order is just one of many possible.

Studio Locomotive

Studio Locomotive produces fiction, creative documentaries and animation. Founded in 1995, in recent years it has become one of the fastest growing, most creative and productive film studios in the Baltic countries. Nearly all of the films produced by *Studio Locomotive* have been premiered at well-known international film festivals. The head of the studio Roberts Vinovskis has been active in the film industry since the early 1990s. The studio has mainly worked with live-action films, but over the last decade animation has started to feature more prominently as well.



Before the Day Breaks

“The way that I, as a producer, arrived at animation was actually a matter of chance,” says Vinovskis. “But it didn’t come as a surprise to me, because in cinema, I believe it’s important to make good films and stories; the technique through which one achieves that should be the one that’s most appropriate for each particular story”.

To date, *Studio Locomotive* has participated in the creation of seven animated films: three feature-length and four short films. The studio’s first animation project was the late director’s Nils Skapāns’ plasticine animated short film *Cat in the Bag / Kaķis maisā* (2013). It

was followed by a collaboration with internationally recognised, New York-based director Signe Baumann for her feature-length film *Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014). The world premiere of this film took place at the *Karlov Vary festival*, and for the first time in the history of the festival an animated feature was included in the official selection of the main competition. In all, *Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* has been shown at more than 250 festivals all over the world; the film was selected as the Latvian entry for the 2015 *Academy Awards*, beating the all-time Latvian record: it made the 20-strong short list among animation films where the competition is even fiercer than among fiction films. It is the strongest result by a Latvian film at the *Academy Awards* to date.

As the Latvian centenary approached, *Studio Locomotive* worked on *Before the Day Breaks / Saule brauca debesīs*, based around motifs from Latvian folklore. The director of the film, Roze Stiebra, is a pioneer of hand-drawn animation in Latvia and made her first film in 1969; she has won countless awards, including the *Latvian National Film Award* for lifetime achievement.

Right after *Before the Day Breaks*, the studio began working on its next challenge, Signe Baumann’s latest film, *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts*, which recently premiered at the *Tribeca Film Festival* as part of the competition programme and was included in the *Annecy International Animation Film Festival’s* competition programme. Film is a co-production with the United States and Luxembourg. “The topic of the film is very universal – it’s about marriage and gender stereotypes, about the roles of men and women in the family and in society. It’s a

subject that speaks to almost every adult who lives in a community rather than all alone in the forest. And so I believe that the potential audience is very, very broad,” – says Vinovskis.

A production of a new feature by Roze Stiebra, *Rule of the Heart / Sirds likums*, is currently underway at *Studio Locomotive*. In this project, Stiebra has paired up with Aleksejs Naumovs, one of the most important painters of recent decades in Latvia. It is Aleksejs Naumovs’ – who is one of the greats in Latvian painting – debut in animation, while Roze Stiebra, informally known as Mother of Latvian Animation, marked her 80th birthday this year and has been working in animation for over fifty years.

As a continuation of a long-time collaboration, a third, as yet untitled, feature animation film by Signe Baumann is in the works, in the early stages of development. ■



Rocks in My Pockets



Rule of the Heart



Most significant films:

Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās

Signe Baumann, stop-motion, drawn and papier mâché animation, 88 min., 2014, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian

Before the Day Breaks / Saule brauca debesīs

Roze Stiebra, drawn animation, 75 min., 2018, Latvia, universal audiences, dialogue

■ The story is based on Latvian mythology. During a joyous hubbub of dancing maskers, the Sun’s and the Moon’s baby girl is kidnapped. The distraught parents beg humans to retrieve her, so Nabasnieks set out on the journey to face monsters, temptations and their own fear.

Recent film:

My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts

Stop-motion papier mâché, drawn animation, 107 min., 2022, Latvia / United States / Luxembourg, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian

Work in progress:

Rule of the Heart / Sirds likums

Roze Stiebra, traditional animation, 2023, 70 min., feature, Latvia, universal audiences, dialogue

■ Princess Alda believes the world is a lonely, cold and strictly regimented place. But her views change completely when she receives a forbidden gift from the Stranger, whom she meets by chance.



Roberts Vinovskis

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Rija Films

The Rija Films studio was established in 1995; its main activities are film production, dubbing of animated films, and film distribution. To date, its films have been made by 19 different directors, including Inga Riba (Praulīņa), Vladimirs Leščovs, Signe Baumannē, Jurgis Krāsons, Reinis Kalnaellis, Aija Bley, Askolds Saulitis and Agnese Aizpuriete. Rija's first animated film, *Little Devils / Velniņi*, was released in 1999. Before that, however, the studio had already amassed considerable experience by doing animation for French director Michel Ocelot's film *Kirikou and the Sorceress / Kirikou et la Sorciere*, which went on to win many international prizes. The global attention *Rija Films* received also led to a significant role for the studio in a French, Great Britain, Belgium and Canada feature-length co-production, the Oscar-nominated film *Belleville Rendez-vous / Les Triplettes de Belleville* (2003).

Rija has had many highlights in its around 27 years of work: the shorts *To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi* (dir. Jurgis Krāsons, 2010), *When Apples Roll / Kad āboli ripo* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, 2009) and *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures / Dziedošais Hugo un viņa neticamie piedzīvojumi* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, 2010) were premiered at the prestigious Cannes and Berlin film festivals and also won awards at several other international festivals.

Rija's short film *Funny Alphabet / Joka pēc alfabēts* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, script and art by Indra Sproģe, music by wellknown Latvian musician Renārs Kaupers, 2010) has become very popular, with more than 19 million views on YouTube. For many years now, *Rija* has been actively participating in co-productions. According to producer Vilnis Kalnaellis, the studio first develops a project and then attracts co-producers, selecting them based on their experience and previous work.



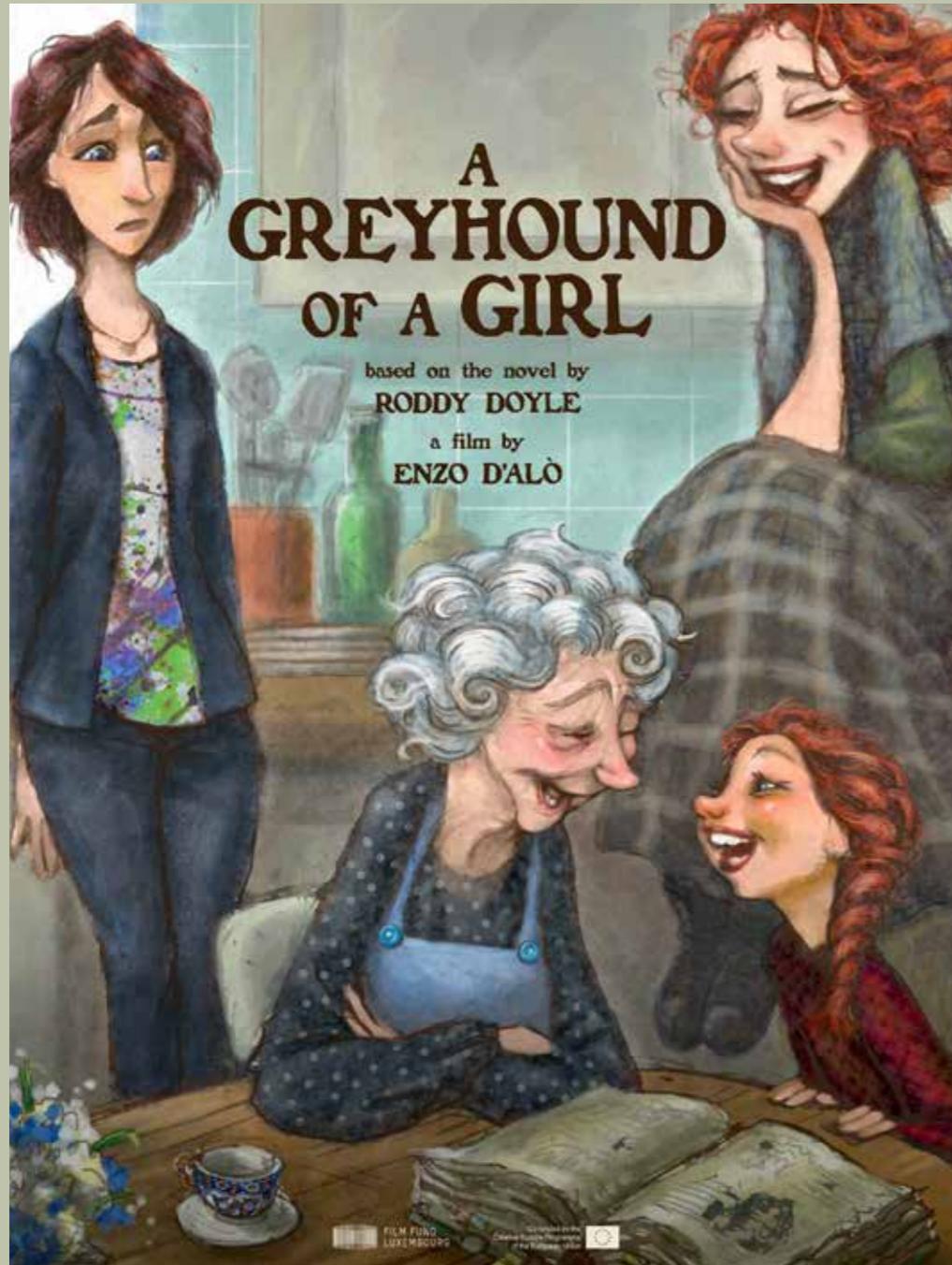
A significant *Rija's* project has been the feature-length film *Lotte from Gadgetville* (2006), which was made in collaboration with the Estonian company *Eesti Joonisfilm*. A second feature-length film with the Lotte character was released in 2011, and a third, *Lotte and the Lost Dragons*, came out in 2019, premiering in the Generation competition at the *Berlinale*.

Rija Films specialises in classic animation technique, in which a team of professionals bring to life the ideas of a director and/or artist. The studio

has 25 employees working with animated films. Recently *Rija* has been working on two feature-length animated films, one short and one documentary premiering *The Crazy Fox and Doctor's / Trakā Lapsa un Dakteri* in 2021 and *The Dubna River Rascal / Dubnas pretekļi* in 2022.

The forthcoming film *Apple Pie Lullaby / Ābolraūša šūpuļdziesma* is being created using the Maya 3D programme, with a 2D version developed later for the film's composition and colourisation.

Currently the studio is also working on director's Enzo D'alo film *A Greyhound Of A Girl / Meitene dzinējsuns* – a co-production with *Paul Thiltges Distributons* (Luxembourg), *Aliante* (Italy), *Jam Media* (Ireland), *Goag Productions* (United Kingdom), *Rija Films* (Latvia) and *Amrion Oü* (Estonia). The story goes of four generations of women travelling on a midnight car journey. One of them is dead, one of them is dying, one of them is driving, and one of them is just starting out. ■



Most-significant films:

Kirikou and the Sorceress / Kirikou et la Sorciere

Michel Ocelot, classic animation, 71 min, 1998, France / Luxembourg / Latvia, children, dialogues

- In a troubled African village, an unusual baby is born.

The Woman / Sieviete

Signe Baumane, classic animation, 10 min, 2002, adults, no dialogue

- A visually poetic story about a woman's creation, her setting out into the world and her ability to bring man either Love or Death.

Insomnia / Bezmiegs

Vladimirs Leščovs, classical animation, 7 min, 2004, adults, no dialogue

- She arrives in the night, silent as a cat. She will not let him fall asleep until he feeds her. She wants milk, which he will find between a dream and reality. Her name is Insomnia. The glimmering characters drawn in coloured pencil highlight the turbulent state between sleep and wakefulness.

To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi

Jurģis Krāsons, classic animation, 9 min, 2010, adults, no dialogue

- Once some "round" intellectuals and also "square" pragmatic realists lived in a town. "Rounds" were smart and successful. The reason of their success—they could swallow toads. But no toads were swallowed by "square". They lived in peace until one day "square" discovered that the "rounds" swallow the toads.

Funny Alphabet / Joka pēc alfabēts

Reinis Kalnaellis, classic animation, 3 min, 2015, children, lyrics

- A short and witty story featuring the adventures of various animals in alphabetical order. With a fun song and entertaining characters, it helps children learn the Latvian alphabet.

Lotte and the Lost Dragons / Lote un pazudušie pūķi

Janno Poldma & Heiki Ernits, classic animation, 72 min, 2019, Estonia / Latvia, children, dialogues

- Karl the Raccoon and Victor Vetch are two scientists who have arrived in Gadgetville and have decided to take part in a local competition for who can collect the most folk songs. They dream of recording the song of the mythical fire-breathing dragon. Lotte and her little sister hear of their plan and decide to help the scientists.

Animation services:

Les Triplettes de Belleville / Belleville Rendez-vous

Sylvain Chomet, classic animation, 77 min, 2003, France / Belgium / Great Britain / Canada, U, no dialogue

- Nominated for two Academy Awards (Oscars) in 2004, for best animated feature and best original song.



Recent films:

The Crazy Fox and Doctor's / Trakā lapsa un Dakteri

Agnese Aizpuriete, 2D, 6 min, 2021, children, no dialogue

- The Crazy Fox is taken to a veterinary clinic, and the adventure of endless tests, twists and turns begins! Although the situation becomes extra challenging, when the doctor has to pull out fox's bad tooth, the final medical diagnosis is – the Fox is healthy, but... crazy.

The Dubna River Rascal / Dubnas preteklis

Agnese Aizpuriete, 2D, 6 min, 2022, children, no dialogue

- An intrepid Mosquito is keen on anything except friendship, he is intrusive and spiky, until hit by disasters he learns from his mistakes and kind-hearted nature of other creatures.

Coming soon:

A Greyhound of a Girl / Meitene dzinējsuns

Enzo D'alo, 2D, 3D animation, 80 min, 2022, universal, Luxembourg / Italy / Ireland / United Kingdom / Latvia / Estonia

- Four generations of women travel on a midnight car journey. One of them is dead, one of them is dying, one of them is driving, and one of them is just starting out.

Apple Pie Lullaby / Ābolraūša šūpuļdziesma

Reinis Kalnaellis, classic animation, 65 min, 2023, children, dialogues

- A film about the little penguin girl Telma, who worries that her fifth Birthday will not find its way to her house and she will forever remain four years old. She is joined in her adventures in the Land of Ice and the Great Forest by the cat Wilhelm, the mouse Sophia, the king of seagulls Stefan, the zebra couple Teo and Mare with their smartphones, and other inhabitants of the magical land.



Vilnis Kalnaellis

Producer

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Animācijas Brigāde

For the love of puppets

Director and human – orchestra (as well as scriptwriter, producer, artist, even composer) Jānis Cimmermanis and Māris Putniņš have been making puppet films together for more than 30 years. They have become so attuned to each other that they almost have no need for words when working. “Often we’ll begin making a film,” says Putniņš, his elbow resting comfortably on his knee, “and a great solution simply appears. Who thought it up?” He looks over at Cimmermanis, who is resting against the table, his arms crossed. “Who the hell knows,” he replies puckishly and lifts an eyebrow above the frame of his glasses.



Since the mid-1960s, when the *Riga Film Studio* established a puppet department, the group working there has been very close. Generations have come and gone; the appearance of puppets and roles of the filmmakers themselves have changed; political systems, sources of funding and the film industry have also changed. Over the years, hundreds of puppets and decorations have been filmed: rabbits, dogs, big noses from the *Rescue Team / Avārijas Brigāde* series, all painstakingly hand-made. At the present moment, the studio employs 16 professionals in the field of puppets on a number of different projects taking place simultaneously.

The *Rescue Team* films have participated in a variety of international film festivals and have won prestigious prizes, including the *Crystal Bear* children’s jury award

Work in progress:

Henry the Great / Lielais Indriķis

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, feature, 2022, universal, dialogue

■ After a long period abroad, the mighty pie Henry the Great returns to his fatherland and discovers that all of his land is occupied by the Eastern pies ruled by Czar Ivan the Terrible. Henry the Great is determined to free his land from invaders.

at the *Berlin International Film Festival* in 1995 for the film *Let’s Fly / Lidojam?!*, from the *Munk and Lemmy* series directed by Nils Skapāns, 1994.

Another successful animation short is *Hedgehogs and the City / Eži un lielpilsēta*, 2013 by Ēvalds Lācis, which has received ten awards at international film festivals. The studio’s film scripts are mostly original; some are based on Latvian or foreign literature and comic strips. The studio is mostly recognised for its five to ten minute-long children’s shorts without dialogue. “Does the script come first?” I ask Putniņš and Cimmermanis. “First is a crazy idea,” laughs Cimmermanis. Audacious, absurd, a bit wild, crazy – that’s what puppet people are like. ■

Recent films:

Sercets of Paris / Parīzes noslēpumi

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 8 min, 2018, universal, no dialogue

■ “The Rescue Team” men travel to Paris to help fix problems with electricity at the Eiffel tower’s security guard’s office but end up turning off power in all Paris.

The Dust / Puteklis

Dace Rīdūze, puppet animation, 13 min, 2018, children, dialogue

■ Story about a boy and his unusual friendship with a dusty that lives in a bookshelf.

London Holidays / Londonas brīvdienas

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 11 min, 2019, universal, no dialogue

■ Unexpectedly, London’s famous clock “Big Ben” breaks down and the “Rescue team” goes to repair it.

Pea Children / Zirņa bērni

Dace Rīdūze, puppet animation, 14 min, 2020, children, dialogue, song in Latvian

■ 8 pea children live in their green pea pod interacting with the world and its other inhabitants.

Greece Treasures / Grieķijas dārgumi

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 11 min, 2021, universal, no dialogue

■ While fishing from his boat in Greece, a pensioner pulls out an old amphora, but its bottom breaks off and falls back into the sea. Three “Rescue team” men arrive and go deep into the sea to find the lost property.

Angry Bag / Dusmukule

Dace Rīdūze, puppet animation, 20 min, 2021, family, dialogue

■ Two boys find an unusual plastic bag with no handle. It turns out to be alive, moving around and angry because it has become useless to everyone. Together, the Angry Bag and the two boys try to find new meaning in life and a new use for plastic bags that, once used by people and discarded, have become real hooligans.



Dace Rīdūze

Dace Rīdūze has studied theatre arts, theatre directing and pedagogy. She began working with animation in 1998 when she joined the *Animācijas Brigāde* film studio, where she learned about puppet cinema from the very foundations up. Her film *Up and Down / Kaimiņu būšana* (2000) received the *Latvian National Film Award Lielais Kristaps* for best debut, and the experience inspired her to continue creating films. Rīdūze's films *Firefly / Jāņtārpiņš* (2002), *Acorn Boy / Ziļuks* (2010) and *Little Ruddy / Sārtulis* (2014) have taken part in the competition at the *Berlin Film Festival*.

Her 15th and most recent film, *Angry bag / Dusmukule*, was released in 2021. Much of Rīdūze's

work has been inspired by classic Latvian literature, which has not lost its currency in terms of either content or visual values. The characters created by famous illustrator Margarita Stāraste are particular favourites of hers: "In Stāraste's work I find my Latvian 'code', the one I grew up with. Now my children see it as well, and I hope that now in a motion-picture format it will reach yet another generation."

After 20 years in puppet animation, Rīdūze still finds ways to develop her technique and experiment. For example, a real boy appears alongside the puppets in one of her recent films, *Dusty / Puteklis* (2019). "In puppet animation, I can be the director, scenographer, set decorator, actor and tricks master all at the same time," says Rīdūze. "I get excited by the feeling you get when crossing the fragile boundary between the real world and the invisible universe of fantasy." ■



Angry Bag

Most-significant films:

Up and Down / Kaimiņu būšana

Puppet animation, 7 min, 2000, children, no dialogue

■ Strange things are happening at the Tiger's garden. Someone has stolen his carrots and some of the carrots are growing "up and down"

Firefly / Jāņtārpiņš

Puppet animation, 12 min, 2002, children, no dialogue

■ Otis the Firefly is trying to find a girlfriend, but due to his inability to glow, he is finding this difficult.

Acorn Boy / Ziļuks

Puppet animation, 10 min, 2010, children, no dialogue

■ The adventures of a little acorn boy in the village of stalks where he meets Mrs Bee, Mr Spider, the ants and many other insects.

Little Ruddy / Sārtulis

Puppet animation, 9 min, 2014, children, no dialogue

■ The coloured pencils are a merry lot. One day, red Ruddy comes out of the pencil case too late and unsharpened. An annoying fly causes him to fall out of the window into the garden. Finding himself in a new world, Ruddy tries to make himself useful, but it seems he's not wanted anywhere.

The Dust / Puteklis

Puppet animation, 13 min, 2019, children, no dialogue

■ The story about a piece of dust living in a book shelf and its unusual friendship with a boy.

Pea children / Zirņa bērni

Puppet animation, 14 min, 2020, children, dialogue, song in Latvian

■ This film is the cinematic continuation of a classic poem by the Latvian poet Rainis. It follows the subsequent adventures of its main heroes – eight peas – and their interactions with the world around them as well as with the cycles and laws of nature. These musical and countable stories tell about the peas' adventures after spilling out of their original home, the pod.

Recent film:

Angry Bag / Dusmukule

Puppet animation, 20 min, 2021, family, dialogue

■ Two boys find an unusual plastic bag with no handle. It turns out to be alive, moving around and angry because it has become useless to everyone. Together, the Angry Bag and the two boys try to find new meaning in life and a new use for plastic bags that, once used by people and discarded, have become real hooligans.



Firefly



The Dust



Pea children



Dace Rīdūze

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Comeback



Vladimirs Leščovs

Vladimirs Leščovs makes films in Latvia, where his Lunohod studio is registered. However, the scale he works on is international – for example, he has dedicated a short film to the Japanese (*The Letter from Hibakusha*, produced by the *NHK Hiroshima Station* and his only film with dialogue) and has collaborated with and co-produced films with Canada and Estonia.

Leščovs animated films are figural; for the most part, they centre around a clear, albeit paradox-rich, fable told in laconic, pictorial form. His topics usually revolve around border situations where opposites meet sleep and wakefulness, clarity and intoxication, life and death, meeting and parting. Although made in various different techniques, his films share the same tonality – as do the sketches of his travels that he likes to make using coffee and black tea instead of ink. And so is his signature recognisable from the first glance in his latest film – *Comeback* – that is at the same time very different.

Recent film:

Comeback

Classical animation, 8 min, 2021, universal, no dialogue

■ A little boy dreams of becoming a professional hockey player. Unfortunately, one day he is forced to give up on his passion. His love for sports is revived after several decades when he has his own son. While shopping for a Christmas gift for the boy, the man's childhood memories return; the main player in them is his constantly drunk father. In this low-key and minimalist animation the present is intertwined with flashbacks. A hockey game to the rhythm of the Russian "Kalinka" song is not only about dreams but also about building a relationship between a father and a son.

Leščovs reveals that *Comeback* is a 100% personal story that he mostly wanted to tell for himself. It was inspired by his Canadian friends inviting him for a hockey game. Vladimirs, who had picked a hockey stick for the first time since the age of 15, realized that he was now playing with musicians, artists and other creatives. With all those who would have been forbidden from playing and fully enjoying their childhood if it were *Soviet* countries where a peculiar stereotype was common: if a kid was engaged in music or arts, it was not accepted to play sports spending time with other children outdoors. They only had one way to choose, and the choice was often made by their parents.

Comeback is a story about early interests, hobbies and childhood dreams that were left by the wayside.

But the truth is, they usually reappear later in life to help one overcome hardships and difficulties as an adult. It's a story about how, in spite of history, socio-political systems, religions and other circumstances, people have a lot more in common with each other than they think. More to that, „comeback” is a sports term meaning an unexpected team's win when everything seems to be lost already. Thus, the film's title is preferred not to be translated.

Despite the film's intention not to reflect the shades of Vladimir's childhood's – 70ies – political events, it depicts the USSR-Canada hockey super series, which was the first hockey match between the two countries in a series of eight games in Canada and Moscow in 1972. "It was a very special event that was both a political act as well as changed the way many children viewed hockey," he says. „I, myself, drew a little logo of my favourite Canadian hockey team and placed it in my pioneer badge," Vladimirs remembers. The film is dedicated to his parents, and it is also a story about building and re-building a father-son relationship.

Comeback was premiered at the *Krakow Film Festival* and has been screened at a handful of other film festivals including *Annecy International Animated Film Festival*, *Ottawa International Animation Festival*, *Bucheon International Animation Festival* and others. Vladimirs has noticed that the story is best received at the *Post-Soviet* block countries with a similar historical background. Yet, much to his surprise, it also received the *Audience Award* at the *International Animation Film Festival ANIMA*, Argentina that seems to point to humane similarities previously not realized. ■



Lost in Snow



Wings and Oars

Most-significant films:

Electrician's Day / Elektriķa diena

Classical animation, 8 min, 2018, adults, no dialogue

■ An accident happens during repairs at a psychiatric hospital. As a result, an electrician loses consciousness and finds himself on the other side of the wall.

Villa Antropoff

Vladimirs Leščovs and Kaspars Jancis, classical animation, 13 min, 2012, adults, no dialogue

■ An ironic story about dreams and losing dreams. Inspired by a real event, when both directors found themselves at a strange wedding celebration in the villa of former USSR leader Yuri Andropov near Pärnu in Estonia.

Wings and Oars / Spārni un airi

Classical animation, 6 min, 2009, adults, no dialogue

■ A former pilot looks back over his life: the Earth, the Sky, the Woman – everything that took place on the journey from an air strip to an abandoned boat house. Memories and flashes of various time periods create a surreal mood in which the present, past and future all exist at the same time.

Lost in Snow / Zuduši sniegā

Classical animation, 8 min, 2007, adults, no dialogue

■ A man goes ice-fishing on a winter day. But he is not alone. And his day on the ice involves more than catching fish.

Insomnia / Bezmiegs

Classical animation, 7 min, 2004, adults, no dialogue

■ She arrives in the night, silent as a cat. She will not let him fall asleep until he feeds her. She wants milk, which he will find between a dream and reality. Her name is Insomnia. The glimmering characters drawn in coloured pencil highlight the turbulent state between sleep and wakefulness.



Vladimirs Leščovs

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Anete Melece

Anete Melece was born in Latvia in 1983. She studied visual communication at the *Art Academy of Latvia* (BA) and animation at *Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Art* (MA). She is an illustrator and animation filmmaker currently based in Zürich, Switzerland. Melece created her first animated works while still a student at the *Art Academy of Latvia*, and these revealed the budding director's warm sense of humour and love of cut-out animation. Her graduation film, *Vilma Doesn't Work Today / Vilma šodien nestrādā* (2007), was her first short to attract global attention. After that, Melece headed to Lucerne to finish her studies at the *Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts* with her next film *The Kiosk / Kiosks* (2013) to become one of the most popular Latvian animated films of the past decade. Ever since its premiere the story has moved on to live its life also as an internationally renown picture book translated in 20 languages, and it was interpreted into an opera spectacle at the *Deutsche Oper am Rhein* and staged at the *Latvia Puppet Theatre*. Meanwhile, *The Kiosk* was followed by Melece's *Analysis Paralysis* that has also been screened all around the world.

Melece moved to Switzerland for personal reasons and she was soon heartily accepted into the country's small but dynamic animation community. She considers herself an artist with two nationalities: "Switzerland is unique for being a country with four languages and several dialects. So, even if you speak only broken German, no one will look at you askance; it's easy to feel accepted in this diverse environment. At the same time, my cultural baggage is nevertheless a bit different, and that's good, because an artist needs to be a bit peculiar. I can reflect the idiosyncrasies of the Swiss and at the same time notice my own." Although Melece's characters are for the most part



Most-significant films:

The Kiosk / Kiosks

Digital cut-out animation, 7 min, 2013, Switzerland, universal audiences, no dialogue

■ For years now, the kiosk has been Olga's little home simply because her sweet tooth and monotonous life have made her bigger than the kiosk's door. To distract herself, she reads travel magazines and dreams of being far away. One day, an absurd incident sets her off on her journey.

Analysis Paralysis / Analizes Paralīze

Cut-out animation, 2D computer animation, drawing on paper, 10 min, 2016, Switzerland, adults, no dialogue

■ Anton is lost in his own head until one day a yellow boot brings him to an exit.

In development:

Tomorrow Will Be Sunny / Rīt būs saulains

Application animation, 15 min, 2025, Switzerland, adults, no dialogue

■ After a collision with an umbrella, Lydia loses an eye and gains a new perspective on life.



Anete Melece

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cosmopolitan, her work always contains at least a hint of her homeland, often in the form of an architectural gem or hidden corner of Riga. She comments with light irony: "It's easier for me to think about a film's action if I imagine a specific location for it to take place, and yes, that's usually Riga. For example, Anton from *Analysis*

Paralysis walks along a street in central Riga but lives in my cousin's apartment in a high-rise suburb of the city. And actually, if my thoughts are in Riga, but my head is in Zürich, then where are the things that I imagine located? If I think about that for too long, my head starts to swell..." ■



Lizete Upīte

Lizete Upīte has studied at the *Baltic Film and Media School* in Estonia, the *Escola Superior Artística do Porto* in Portugal, *La Poudriere* in France and the *Art Academy of Latvia*. She is a European director in the sense that she has made at least one film in every place where she has lived for more than a couple of months. “I always seem to be moving somewhere,” she says. “I was in Estonia, then Portugal, then Latvia, and France, now Latvia again.

If I’ve made a film in Latvia, it’s completely different than if I’d made it in France or Portugal. I really like

Recent films:

A Night on the Lake / Une nuit sur le lac

2D digital animation, 4 min, 2013, adults, dialogue

■ Madeleine and Henri have lived deep in the countryside for more than twenty years. One day, their regular daily quarrel takes an unexpected turn.

Night Walks / Nakts pastaigas

2D computer animation, painting on glass, cut-out animation, 6 min, 2018, children / adults, dialogue

■ Tonight Anna and her father have decided to walk home through the forest. Anna takes a torch, and her father lights it for her. The silent forest is as enchanting as it is scary, and the bright flame is as protective as it is blinding.

Riga’s Lilac / Rīgas ceriņi

2D computer animation, 14 min, 2019, universal / adults, dialogue, France / Latvia

■ Riga’s Lilac is a tragicomic story about the social impact of a bad smell. In the style of a documentary film, the story is based on real interviews with people who reveal how overwhelmed they can be by the strong smell of another person.

In development:

On the Road / Ceļā

2D computer animation, 7 min, 2024, adults, dialogues, Latvia

■ One evening after a tiresome workday a police couple get in their car to get out of the city. With every minute the snowy road gets more impassable and the fatigue - more and more exhausting.



On the Road



Riga’s Lilac

the fact that these influences are perceptible.” *Night Walks / Nakts pastaigas*, Upīte’s first film made in Latvia, premiered in 2017 and earned five nominations for the *Latvian National Film Awards* – winning for best artwork and best sound design. In the film,

Upīte invites the viewer on a nighttime walk through the forest: “I try to catch that wonderful and at once terrifying feeling you get when you walk through the forest at night, in total silence and darkness.” Upīte’s work first attracted attention in 2013, with her graduation film *Une nuit sur le lac / A Night on the Lake*, made while she was a student at *La Poudriere*.

Her most recent film *Riga’s Lilac / Rīgas ceriņi* is a co-production with the French studio *Papy3D Productions*, and the Latvian studio *Atom Art* was the minority partner. Upīte calls the film a tragicomic work of docufiction. It is based on interviews and, similarly

to her other work, focuses on little-discussed corners of our internal world – this time, the realm of smells. She is currently developing her next story, *On the Road / Ceļā*, which will be executed in a traditional 2D animation on a police couple’s travel through a snowy road outside the city. ■



Lizete Upīte

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Jurģis Krāsons

Jurģis Krāsons is a feature-film artist who studied to be a painter and turned his attention to animated films in 2006. He worked with the *Rija* and *Kompānija Hargla* studios and went on to establish his own animation studio, *Krasivo Limited*, in 2015. The studio currently has two employees, including the director, bringing in experienced

animators for individual projects. Each year, the studio has an average of five to seven film projects in addition to its other principal activity of designing costumes for art films made in Latvia and abroad. To *Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi* (2010), a short created by Krāsons at the Rija studio that has gained recognition at several film festivals, was made in the classic 2D technique. At *Krasivo Limited*, however, he is working on a combination of 2D and 3D computer animation. Krāsons' recent film *In the Pipe / Trubā* is made by integrating the 2D technique for character animation and the 3D technique for backgrounds. He used a similar approach in *How I Gave Up Smoking / Kā es atmetu smēķēšanu* (2016). In the *Pipe* features a new technical aspect: background animation made possible by 3D technologies. ■



How I Gave Up Smoking



Black Box



To Swallow a Toad



In the Pipe



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Most-significant films:

How I Gave Up Smoking / Kā es atmetu smēķēšanu

3D computer animation, 11 min, 2016, a film for adults, no dialogue

■ The habit of smoking will truly be broken by the end of this film. At the beginning of the film, however, a Scandinavian woman almost dies because the main character lights a cigarette at an airport.

To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi

At Rija Films, classic animation, 9 min, 2010, adults, no dialogue

■ Once upon a time, the rotund intellectuals lived in a small town. They were smart, good-natured, prescient and successful. And this success was based on their ability to...swallow a toad. In other words, to swallow their pride, or overcome offence. The square, practical workers also lived in this same town. They were pragmatic realists who rewarded good with good and evil with evil and did not swallow any toads. A peaceful coexistence. But one day one of the squares inadvertently found out that the rotunds swallowed toads.

Black Box / Melnā kaste

Rija Films, drawn animation, 16 min, 2006, adults, dialogue

■ In a land untouched by globalisation, all sorts of strange individuals scurry around. One of them, Hoggie, is a creature of particularly unknown origin. The Flying Hedgehog Ball arrives in the land in search of a new brand. After various misunderstandings, Hoggie's image is published on magazine covers all around the world. And it's all because of the Black Box.

Recent films:

In the Pipe / Trubā

Krasivo Limited, 3D and 2D animation, 9 min, 2020, adults, no dialogue

■ Since the dawn of animation, there has always remained an empty space for a film using darkness and sound as the main media. Many will follow, because we believe there is plenty of space down there. As a first attempt, we offer a story about an old plumber captured within a system of pipes. He helped to build this system, which has collected all of the bitterness, fear, populism and garbage flushed away by the society above. Now the plumber looks for an exit, creating mayhem and a tribute to extinct professions. Be sure you're not living in a pipe. How long will your profession last?

Indra Sproģe

Indra Sproģe's studio *infinityBOX* was established in 2012, by three people from the core of the studio: artist Indra Sproģe, camera operator Mārtiņš Veļa and designer/light artist Kaspars Maračkovskis. They base their creative work on various combinations of art, technology and technique and also invite other artists and animators when the pace of work becomes more intense. The studio usually works on one film at a time, the length of which varies from project to project. Initially, *infinityBOX* focused on the educational animated films for children *Teach Me, Nose-Bear!* / *Māci mani, Degunlāci!* (2012), which teaches children the multiplication table, and *Awesome Beetle's Colours* (2016) to help them learn the alphabet.

The latter film won an award at the Annecy festival in the educational film category. With its first project, *Teach Me, Nose-Bear!*, the studio tried out all possible animation techniques, gradually developing and defining its own specific style: a combination of classic animation, plasticine animation and chiaroscuro on various textured backgrounds. In an effort to find the best combination of these three elements, the filmmakers at *infinityBOX* continue to fine-tune their style with each new project. To help with this process of discovery, the studio welcomes collaborations involving various animation techniques and has also begun making allegorical short films for adults. ■



Most-significant films:

Introduction to an Epilogue / Ievads epilogam

Plasticine, tracing paper, 9 min, 2018, adults, no dialogue

■ An allegorical animated film about the fear of death, which, it turns out, is in fact a narcissistic emotion. The film reflects man's transformation at truly difficult life moments and his ability to accept the inevitable and understand that life is always just one life long.

Awesome Beetle's Colors

Plasticine, acrylic, pastels, 3 min, 2016, children's film, dialogues

■ A colourful, surreal animated film that presents the English alphabet three times. The film received the Cristal Award at Annecy and has been screened at more than one hundred festivals on five continents.

Coming soon:

Where is the Key? / Kur manas atslēgas?

Mixed media, 7 min, 2022, young adults

■ A 2D and 3D allegorical animated film (music by Rihards Zaļupe & Mārtiņš Brauns). The hero of the film tries out the experiences of other characters, but she only finds the key when she looks into herself, starts doing the thing she loves the most – art. Lara begins to love herself, her experiences, connecting with the world she was looking for. When she finds the keys, the world becomes colourful and takes on proper dimensions. This is also reflected in the choice of animation technique. The technique changes, too, to stop-action plasticine animation. This project is still in production.



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The Nap

IN MEMORIAM

Nils Skapāns

The late Nils Skapāns was an independent puppet animation director who has left a legacy of more than 40 short films loved by children as well as by adults.

Being a self-educated director, Skapāns started out as the DOP for classical drawn animation at the *Dauka* studio. In 1993 he began working at the *Animācijas Brigāde* puppet animation studio, where he directed and co-authored the script for the *Munk and Lemmy / Munks un Lemijs* series. Less than two years after joining the studio, his short film *Let's Fly?! / Lidojam?!* (1994), from the same series, made history and received Latvia's first *Crystal Bear* in the *Generation children's competition* at the *Berlin International Film Festival*.

The next turning point in Skapāns' career was the short film for adults *Brickannia / Klucānija* (2002), created using turned blocks of wood. Following this film, he established his own brand, Nilsons, and turned to plasticine animation, the technique in which he became a master of the art. "Well, plasticine is simply a very accessible and egalitarian material that any dabbler can work with, so I began using it," said Nilsons.

With his films *Listen, Rabbit!... Daddy Goes to London / Redzi, Trusi!... Tētis brauc uz Londonu* (2004) and *Wonderful Day / Burvīga diena* (2010), he returned to the children's competition at the *Berlin International Film Festival*. Around that time, Skapāns began a collaboration with the *Studio Locomotive*, which produced four of his animated short films for children.

Lately he had been settling with the *VFS Films* studio. After creating *All My Friends Are Dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši* together with the young and promising director Anna Zača, Nils had made a foray into silicon puppet animation and used the newly obtained experience in creating his final film, *The Nap / Diendusa*.

The Nap celebrated its national premiere at the *National Film Festival Lielais Kristaps* in early 2022 and got nominated for the *Best Animation Film*, and Nils got nominated to be the *Best Animation Director* for it. It is Nils' first film with original

soundtrack in three languages – Latvian, Lithuanian and English – ready to start the journey to international film festivals. Unfortunately, this time it won't be accompanied by its charismatic creator anymore.

Nils is and will forever be remembered as a hard-working, enthusiastic and inspiring colleague to whom animation was the true calling he had always been responding to. While his own persistent work manifested directly on the screen, his undeniable impact on life decisions is admitted by many of today's animation artists to whom he has been an influencer of his own time, probably unknowingly.

Always eager to discover puppets anew, Nils is remembered to be an example of what a true artist and a master of his craft is. ■



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Most-significant films:

Brickannia / Klucānija

Stop motion, wood, 6 min, 2000, adults, no dialogue

■ Strange, bird-like, meteorite-eating creatures live on a planet not far from Earth. Their problems are different from ours, and their joys... well, it's difficult to tell exactly what those are. But as we become more familiar with the birds' world, we see that there are nevertheless plenty of similarities with our own world.

Listen, Rabbit!... Daddy Goes to London / Redzi, Trusi!... Tētis brauc uz Londonu

Plasticine animation, 8 min, 2004, children's film, no dialogue

■ A film about a little girl, her beloved toy rabbit and her always-busy father, who doesn't even notice that his daughter and the rabbit have figured out a way to accompany him to London. Who would have thought that an ordinary suitcase is such a great means of transport?

Wonderful Day / Burvīga diena

Plasticine animation, 15 min, 2010, children, no dialogue

■ The carefree and flighty Witch lives with her grey tomcat, listens to tango music and enjoys life. That life becomes even more exciting when a very ordinary day turns into an adventure and becomes an extraordinary day.

All My Friends are Dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši

Nils Skapāns and Anna Zača, stop motion/puppet animation, 5 min, 2019, young adults / adults, no dialogue

■ When Anna Zaķis was young, she experienced the upswing of social networks. Her once active cultural life has slowed down, but the desire for real conversation remains. She will fight to the end... for a chance to talk with someone.

Recent film:

The Nap / Diendusa

VFS Films, stop motion/puppet animation/2D, 26 min, 2022, children, dialogue

■ Eight-year-old Antonija, who seems like just an ordinary girl but is in fact quite rebellious, is taken to art camp. At the same time, it is announced on the radio that two robots have escaped from an AI laboratory and have disguised themselves as humans. Naturally, their paths cross at camp. Thanks to her rebellious nature, Antonija helps to stop the robots' villainous plan of stealing the children's dreams while they nap and transforming them into dumb advertisements.

Student films

The Art Academy of Latvia is the first institution of higher education in Latvia to offer a course in animation technique and direction. In 2013 it established the *Motion. Image. Sound* bachelor's (four years) and master's (two years) programmes within the Faculty of *Audio-Visual Media Art*. Instructors include Edmunds Jansons, Inga Prauliņa, Dzintars Krūmiņš and other well-known names in Latvian animation.

The artist Ojārs Pētersons is the director of the programme. At the secondary level, young animators (nowadays called multimedia design specialists) are being taught in the four-year *Visual Communications Art* programme at the *Janis Rozentāls Riga Art School*, which begins in the tenth grade. There, students are taught animation by Dzintars Krūmiņš, one of the most experienced 2D animation specialists in Latvia. Gints Zilbalodis is a recent graduate of the programme.

Elementary-aged students can also participate in afterschool activities in which they learn the foundations of visual art as well as animation. In Riga, the Latvian capital, students can enrol in the *Multimedia Design Specialist – Animation* programme at the *Riga Art and Media Technical School*. Upon graduation, they receive a vocational secondary education diploma that allows them to enter tertiary education or employment in their profession. The programme is four years long.

The Daugavpils Secondary School of Design and Art "Saules skola" offers a *Multimedia Design* programme directed by artist and animator Vladimirs Leščovs. The four-year programme prepares students for employment not only in animation but also video, graphic arts, sound and other media.



Likewise, animation can be studied at the *Liepāja Music, Art and Design Secondary School*. Its *Multimedia Design* programme teaches the foundations of 2D and 3D animation. If a student enrolls in 10th grade, the programme is four years long; if a student enrolls after 12th grade, the programme is two years long. Students can also learn animation as

a separate course in addition to audio-visual art and multimedia studies at various educational institutions and special interest education programmes outside of regular school programmes. For example, animator Ilze Ruska teaches animation to children and youth ages eight to 25 at the *Annas 2 Centre of Creative Learning*. ■

Recent films by students:

i made 10 001 steps today
Elīna Deinate, analogue animation, 2 min, 2021, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- An analogue experimental film – process of an exploration of the “hidden” movement in between an idea of a drawing, consciousness, hand and paper as one and the same image is drawn and re-drawn for multiple times.

Circadian Dancers / Diennakts Dejojāji
Madara Dūka, 2D animation, 3 min, 2021, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- Plants’ point of view of urban space inspiring the viewer to ponder about each beings’ individual perception of the world, and the power each of us possess to change someone’s life.

Mirage Formula / Mirāžas Formula
Rasa Pavilona, 2d animation, computergraphics, 2 min, 2021, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- Racing cars mix the air of the aglow track, transforming familiar shapes into evil omens. Apparent mirages reveal the processes in human psyche and their interaction with the material world through symbols, nevertheless their collision is inevitable.

Insy and Outsy / Iekšējais un Ārējais
Digne Briģe, 2D animation, 3 min, 2021, Latvia, universal, no dialogue

- Two characters run through an abandoned tunnel until they arrive at a white wall. They both want to paint the wall but their different methods of expression clash.

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Front cover: A film still from *Hush Hush Little Bear* by Māra Liniņa
Author technique, animation in wool, 5 min, 2022, Latvia