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Excerpt From...

## Fresh from the Festivals: July 2006's Reviews

Taylor Jessen reviews five short films — *One Rat Short* by Alex Weil, *Smile* by Chris Mais, *Memorial* by Matt Clausen and Jon Gutman, *Coffee* by Rohitash Rao and Abraham Spear, and *Dog Worries* by Chris Armstrong.

Within the world of animation, most experimentation occurs within short format productions, whether they are high-budgeted commercials, low-budgeted independent shorts or something in between. The growing number of short film festivals around the world attest to the vitality of these works, but there are few other venues for exhibition of them or even written reviews. As a result, distribution tends to be difficult and irregular. On a regular basis, Animation World Magazine will highlight some of the most interesting with short, descriptive overviews.

### One Rat Short

*One Rat Short* is a love story where intimate glances are stolen between pairs of huge pink eyes and caresses are exchanged with a brushing of whiskers. This CGI piece opens in the bed of a subway's tracks, as dozens of rats vie for whatever nourishment they can scrounge. When the train comes, it sends them scurrying and makes a plastic bag of a puffy junk food called Chee-Chee's go airborne. The bag floats up out of the subway, over the night-time cityscape, and onto a rooftop, where a sleeping rat takes interest. This hero rat wants to get into the bag and extract the leftover goodies within, and behind that bar code it looks like there is indeed something orange and tasty poking out. But the wind catches it again and sends it into a revolving fan unit at the top of a ventilation shaft.



When the scientists come, will they find their lab *One Rat Short*?  
A Charlex Film © 2006 New York.

The rat pursues, and somehow squeezes in between the slats; he and the plastic bag both fall, barely missing being sliced by the revolving fan. They land on a ventilation grate just above a dark, shiny, too-tidy room, which on closer inspection reveals itself to be an animal testing lab with thousands of white rats in compartments waiting to be taken to and from a tiny testing stage by a robot arm with one big red eye.

During the action that follows, the rat manages to drop to the laboratory floor, where it tries to approach one lovely white lady rat on her way to running a treadmill. The pair makes eye contact and he tries to get closer. All the rats, it seem, have bar codes implanted on their sides, and the robot arm is working automatically through the night, plucking the specified rat from its compartment, running it through its test routine, and putting it back.

What begins as a simple case of curiosity on the part of the visitor from the outside turns into a whirlwind of chaos and mayhem when the big robot eye tries to catch the interloper, and becomes confused by the bar code on the marauding Chee-Chee's bag. The lab eventually erupts in rats, free and scurrying for their lives across the polished floor, with our hero and his love interest making a desperate break for freedom.

*One Rat Short* is professional filmmaking all the way down the line — strong character animation, verisimilitude to the point of photo-realism and an airtight tight story reel. It's especially effective in the way the point of view is kept extremely limited and only slightly shaky, just as our main characters would experience it. From the visual evidence alone, in particular the behemoth robot Cyclops with its complex articulation and polished surface reflections, this is clearly the product of an experienced commercial CG house with amazing resources. Charlex Studio and director Alex Weil are New York-based and are indeed very prolific, with Weil's experience stretching back 25 years to include breakthrough CG animation milestones like the "You Might Think" video for The Cars. I'd only quibble that they possibly fell into the trap of over-scoring *One Rat Short*, which is always a risk when the artist has access to a favorite composer or the budget for a proper orchestra — but I always think a little music goes a long way.