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special report BROADCAST DESIGN

Alex Weil Sees New Era Of Independent CG Features.

By Carolyn Giardina

With the annual Siggraph conference scheduled to take place on the East Coast for the first time since '98, it is indeed most fitting for a New York-based company that's in the primary business of commercial advertising to earn Siggraph's prestigious Best Of Show honor in its annual Electronic Theater.

One Rat Short—an animated short written and directed by Alex Weil, executive creative director at New York-based Charlex, which created the work—was selected by the Computer Animation Festival jury from 726 entries for exemplary use of CG imagery and animation, and compelling storytelling. With this recognition, One Rat Short also becomes an automatic qualifier for Academy Award consideration in next year's best animated short category. Historically, these Siggraph shorts have performed well; last year's Best of Show selection 9 received an Oscar nomination. And in '04, Electronic Theater honoree Ryan went on to win the category.

In addition to Charlex's honor, a higher than average number of commercials were selected for this year's Electronic Theater screening. Spot work includes visual effects from London and New York-based Framestore-CFC, Sydney and Venice, Calif.-based Animal Logic, Method Studios in Santa Monica, and Passion Pictures in London.

Selections included Framestore-CFC's work on Guinness "noitulovE" ("Evolution" spelled backwards), which recently earned the Grand Prix at Cannes, as well as honors including Best of Show at the One Show in New York, the Best of Show GRANDY at the ANDY Awards, as well as two Golds and a Silver at the Clios. The spot, helmed by Daniel Kleinman (then of London-based Kleinman Productions, now of London-based Rattling Stick) for London's AMV BBDO, essentially starts at the end, with three men in a bar raising their pints and enjoying their first sip of Guinness. Scenes shift backward and down the evolutionary chain where viewers see prehistoric flightless bird creatures, tiny dinosaurs and finally mudskippers.

The Electronic Theater also features a notable Cannes final contender, Carlton Beer's "Big Ad", featuring visual effects from Animal Logic. Directed by Paul Middleditch of Sydney-based Plaza Films, this comedic epic—featuring digital actors that create the formation of a person drinking a beer—was created by agency George Patterson Partners in Melbourne.

ONE RAT SHORT

One Rat Short follows a New York City rat from his gritty world to the interior of a futuristic laboratory. Along this journey the main character discovers love, danger and fate.

"We decided it would take place in two worlds: one so gritty, grimy and dark that the viewer needs to peer into the screen in order to make out the images; the other a sterile, white world so brightly lit that you feel the need to turn your head away from the screen," explains Weil, who will present a Siggraph Sketch about the making of the short. "It was also important to me to keep the film looking as real as possible. One of the techniques we used was to give a lot of the camera work a hand-held feel and to keep it a little behind the action so that the scenes didn't seem staged. Lastly and most importantly, I kept the story simple and tried to give it heart. One of my favorite short films, which I saw as a child, was *The Red Balloon*. I think the melancholic and innocent spirit of that film inhabits *One Rat Short*."

Weil also created this inventive short with characters that do not act like people and without dialogue. Instead, the story is told through action, music, sound design, cinematography and lighting. "That was very challenging," Weil relates. "I didn't want dialogue... Once we got the gritty look, the idea of them talking seemed absurd."

Another storytelling challenge, he explains, was "to mix a feeling of repulsion with the feeling of romantic love... the rat is the ultimate anti-hero. He is so down and out and dirty, but you can still identify with him. He is still the protagonist."

One Rat Short began as an exercise to help grow Charlex's CG department; Charlex president Chris Byrnes served as executive producer, with Bryan Godwin producing. The short became a multi-year, on-and-off project during which the CG team moved into new space, added equipment and expanded from eight to 35. During this time, the team continued its high level commercial work, including M&M's "Color My World" for BBDO New York. Today Charlex employs roughly 110 and inhabits four floors in its midtown Manhattan building. It remains committed to the commercial business, but this project certainly caused the team to contemplate the changing business.

Weil and Byrnes suggest that the era of the independently produced CG feature has arrived.

"Whereas in 1995 it was only possible to create a computer-animated feature using tremendously expensive in-house proprietary software, today even the most complex visuals can and are being done using off-the-shelf software," Byrnes relates.

With this in mind, Byrnes and Weil are seeking to develop properties that can be produced for relatively low budgets while still maintaining high production standards.

"If you look at what's out there, everybody in one way or another has been taking their creative lead from Pixar," says Weil. "Just as independent filmmakers broke down the walls of studio produced movies, I feel that independent CG will open the world to an entirely new way of looking at 'animated' entertainment. For instance, *One Rat Short* has a unique, more filmic look than traditional animation. I'm sure there are many other artists out there that will eventually express themselves in CG and find new ways to entertain the world."

"It will have creative implications, with artists controlling the content," Weil says of independently produced CG features. "I think the mold is going to break... the creative will be very different."

"There's less risk with smaller budgets, so you don't need to use a proven formula," Byrnes adds.

In recently months, Charlex has taken the film on the road, with screenings at such events as last month's Los Angeles Film Festival.

COMMERCIAL THEATER

Additional commercials featured in this year's Electronic Theater include Framestore's "Cityside," for Dairy Crest's Country Life Spreadable butter—created by New York-based Grey Advertising, produced by London and Santa Monica-based Outsider Films and directed by Dom and Nic—which features countryside critters lending a hand to a beleaguered mother facing the post-breakfast clean-up; and Tooneys Extra Dry "War of the Appliances" created by Animal Logic for Sydney-based BMF Advertising and directed by Graeme Burfoot of Sydney's Filmgraphics. The Tooneys ad takes place at an apartment complex and brings to life a vacuum, washing machine and pool cleaner that battle for the last beer in the fridge.

Method's work on Toyota Tacoma's "Meteor" appears in the Electronic Theater. The spot, director by Baker Smith of harvest, Santa Monica, for Saatchi & Saatchi Los Angeles, shows that the Tacoma is "meteor proof" after one strikes earth.

Passion Pictures and its animation director Darren Walsh reached the Electronic Theater with Vodafone's "Mayfly" directed by Peter Thwaites of Gorgeous, London, for BBH, London. By following the short life of a Mayfly, the spot reminds the viewer to live in the "now."



"One Rat Short"