

▪ National Film Centre of Latvia
▪ Latvian Animation Association

Latvian Animation

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The new decade in Latvian animation

By now, the success of Gints Zilbalodis and his film *Away* has spread around the world, ensuring Latvia's reputation as an animation-producing country. Meanwhile, *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* producer Sabine Andersone was nominated for the Cartoon Movie award for best European producer of the year, and her *Kafka in Love* project with director Zane Oborenko won the main CEE Forum 2019 award. Continuing the momentum from Latvia's centenary celebrations, Latvia currently has 16 animated film projects in the works, almost half of which are feature-length films. Audiences will soon see Ilze Burkovska-Jacobsen's documentary animated film *My Favorite War*, Signe Baumann's musical *My Love Affair With Marriage*, the *Apple Pie Lullaby* project by Rija Films, three new instalments of the *Shammies* series and also the premieres of short films by artists Edmunds Jansons, Kārlis Vītols and Jurgis Krāsons. We can surely declare that, before long, festivals around the world will become acquainted with new stories by known filmmakers and exciting debuts full of the wild and untiring spirit of 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 included in 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” can do it no harm. If animators are forced to “stay at home”, they know exactly what to do – make a film!



Anna Zača
director of the Latvian Animation Association



Kristīne Matīsa
animation expert at the National Film Centre of Latvia



National
Film Centre of Latvia



Latvian Animation Association



Away



Aqua

Gints Zilbalodis

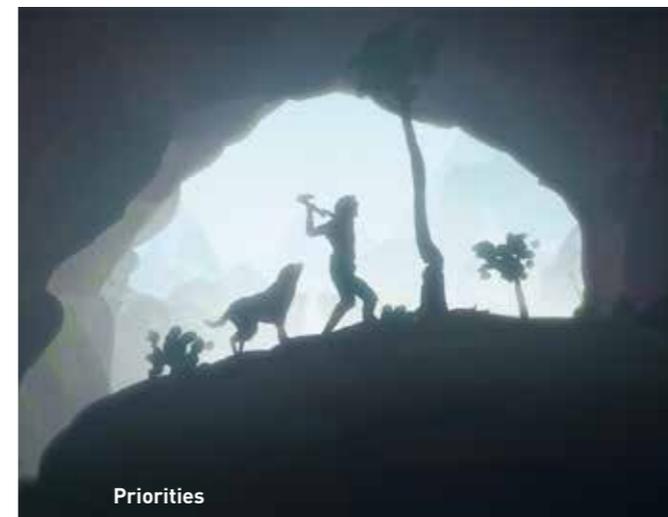
Gints Zilbalodis is a young animator and director who already has considerable experience in the field. After several shorts that gained recognition at film festivals and on the internet, he began an independent, feature-length project of his own, the animated film *Projām / Away*. The first part of the project, titled *Oāze / Oasis*, premiered in 2017 and introduced audiences to the hero of the story, whose adventures now continue in the full-length version. However, Zilbalodis emphasises that *Oasis* was only an excerpt of the whole story; it has now been completely reworked and no longer exists as a stand-alone entity.

Zilbalodis has chosen to work alone because he wishes to learn all of the aspects of film production; besides, working alone simply seemed easier and cheaper at the time. When asked, after three and a half

years of work, whether he still believes this to be the case, 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. This is one of the reasons why Zilbalodis has focused on animation – it is a technique that can be learned independently (as he has done himself) and lends itself well to working with a small team where he does not need to fear losing his original creative ideas. However, now that he has accumulated some experience and established various contacts, Zilbalodis is considering doing his next project together with a small team in Latvia or abroad.

Having tried his hand at classic animation, Zilbalodis has now turned to 3D computer animation, because it lets him use the camera as if in a feature film yet still retain the endless possibilities provided by animation. Thus he can create a setting that exists somewhere between a real and stylised environment. In *Away*, there is an emphasis on camera movement, creating the impression that the action has been filmed by a camera operator even though the animated characters do not lay any claim to being realistic – the shadowless, featureless figures perform against a realistic background of, for example, clouds or other natural landscapes.

Zilbalodis does not wish to say much about his future plans; he prefers to immerse himself in a single project and wait for the next project to appear on its own. Seeing how his style has developed, one can expect that Zilbalodis' future work will likely gravitate towards magical realism and the abstract rather than the depiction of reality.



Priorities

Most-significant films:

Projām / Away

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

- A boy wakes up in the desert next to a downed airplane. A mysterious monster emerges from the wreck and starts pursuing the boy. His only salvation is an oasis, but it's too lonely to live there for very long. One day the boy finds an orphaned bird, teaches it to fly, and soon both of them are ready to head out into the world to look for others like them.

- **Contrechamp Award at the Annecy Festival / Total of 11 awards Screened at 60+ festivals / Annie Award nomination for best music**

Prioritātes / Priorities

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

- A story about a young man, who is fighting for survival, and his dog, who is only fighting for his master's attention.

Aqua

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

- A cat wakes up in the middle of the ocean and must extricate itself from this complicated, scary situation.



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After winning the Contrechamp Award at the Annecy Festival, *Away* has been screened at more than 60 film festivals and won 11 more awards. The film will be seen at theatres in France and will soon also appear in Poland, Portugal, Italy, Japan and several other countries, including on *Amazon Prime* and other VOD platforms in the United States. In the meantime, Zilbalodis is already working on his next film, *Straume / Flow*, which he plans to finish in 2023. The main 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. Zilbalodis emphasises that this will not be a continuation of *Away*, despite addressing similar themes, such as the loneliness of living in modern society.

In a way, however, the protagonist in *Flow* again resembles its author – as already known, Zilbalodis created *Away* at a leisurely tempo and mostly by himself, but, once the film was finished and began showing at festivals, he very soon ended up travelling around most of the world and meeting countless people. Needless to say, it was a radical change of pace for the filmmaker, who quickly had to become accustomed to new experiences, and he wished to document and analyse these feelings in a new film. When asked whether he plans to work with a larger team this time around,

Zilbalodis answers affirmatively, adding that it will nevertheless be a relatively small team and he will do most of the creative work himself. One of the reasons he mentions for this is that the technique he uses is unusual and not many people are acquainted with it. Right now, director and producer Matiss Kaža has joined him and is helping to write the scenario and produce the film.

Flow will be made in a graphically stylised 3D animation technique, similarly to *Away*, during the creation of which Zilbalodis learned many new strategies for making an even more detailed and lifelike animated environment. Music will also play a large role in this film and is being written alongside the creation of the film itself. *Flow* has been supported by the Culture Capital Foundation of Latvia, and the team is interested in collaborating with international partners. ■

Work in progress:

Straume / Flow

3D animation, feature, young adults, no dialogue

■ At a time when the world is rapidly succumbing to floods, a cat must learn to survive even though he is very afraid of water.



“*Flow* will be made in a graphically stylised 3D animation technique, similarly to *Away*, during the creation of which Zilbalodis learned many new strategies for making an even more detailed and lifelike animated environment

Signe Baumann

My Love Affair with Marriage



Signe Baumann is a Latvian living in the United States. Although she 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 themes. 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. Baumann 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.

Baumann 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, this popular series was followed by her first feature-length animated film, *Rocks In My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014). In it, she combined characters drawn in the classical animation technique with a filmed background made of papier mâché. It has a first-person narrative recorded by Baumann herself; her voice in combination with the film's general ironic mood creates the kind of

closeness one enjoys with a conversation partner who is able to laugh about herself and life's difficulties.

For her upcoming project, *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts*, Baumann is using the same animation technique but has expanded it. The voices of the film's thirty characters have been recorded by actors from New York, including Matthew Modine, who has worked with Hollywood heavyweights such as Stanley Kubrick and Christopher Nolan. *My Love Affair...* 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 fulfilment. The main hero, Zelma, sincerely believes that the meaning of life lies in love and that there's an "other half", or soul mate, for everyone. But she always ends up in a dead end. *My Love Affair...* is a study about myths, reality and femininity.

Baumann began work on *My Love Affair...* already in September 2015 and plans to finish the film in early 2021. She remembers that just writing the scenario 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 will set the film apart from others about similar themes. Baumann 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 will play a major role in *My Love Affair...*

Three mythological figures (sirens, to be exact) will 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 song," says Baumann.

The project is quite extensive and involved. According to the film's website, it will be 95 minutes long, feature 29 speaking roles and 200–300 non-speaking roles, and involve the work of 43 actors from the United States and Latvia. In order to prepare, Baumann 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 animation 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. Although the technique used in this film is similar to that in *Rocks In My Pockets*, Baumann believes that artists must nevertheless continue to develop their style and challenge themselves, which made it even more difficult for her to teach her style to others.

The biggest challenge, however, has been attracting financing for the project. *My Love Affair...* received support from 1562 people through a *Kickstarter* campaign and has also received support from national grants, but Baumann is still seeking private sponsors in order to finish 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.



My Love Affair with Marriage



My Love Affair with Marriage



Birth



Rocks in My Pockets



My Love Affair with Marriage

Recent film:

Akmeņi manās kabatās / Rocks in My Pockets

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.

Coming soon:

Mans laulību projekts / My Love Affair with Marriage

Stop motion papier mâché, drawn animation, 95 min, 2021, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogues

■ In her search for true love, a fiery young woman with a wild imagination journeys through several marriages – some real, some imaginary – while confronting pressures from society and her own biology, all of which influences her moods and behaviour.



Signe Baumane

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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 *My Favorite War / Mans mīlākais karš*, which tells about her childhood and youth in the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This newest film by Burkovska-Jacobsen makes use of both animated and documentary materials. It continues the collaboration between the *Bivrost Film&TV* studio in Norway and the *Ego Media* studio in Latvia, also engaging Latvian animation specialists from *Tritone Studio*. Approximately 80% of the film is animated, with the rest consisting of archival materials or contemporary documentary footage. Burkovska-Jacobsen has chosen to rely on the language of animation, because it most precisely portrays people, events or environments that remain only in the memory. Most of the film is created in a digital-application style, but episodes and scenes depicting different eras, other people's stories or the protagonist's own imagination are created using 3D animation. The task of the documentary materials also depends on the content of each specific episode. The contemporary footage provides a summary of preceding scenes, and the archival materials illustrate features of the era that the director wishes to emphasise in each particular setting. In several instances, archival footage is combined with animation in a single frame, as if the protagonist were watching a television programme or sitting in a movie theatre. Svein Nyhus (Norway) is the main artist for *My Favorite War*; the animation is created by animators from Latvia. ■



Coming soon:

Mans mīlākais karš / My Favorite War

Classic animation with documentary footage, 80 min, 2020, Latvia/Norway, adults, dialogues

■ An animated documentary film with an anti-war message for a global audience. The plot line follows the director's own development as a person, from a playful childhood fascination to an independent and critical attitude towards the destructive evil of war and armed conflict. The action takes place during the director's childhood and youth in Kurzeme, on the far western edge of the Soviet Union. The film makes use of a wide range of stories, memories and facts about the Second World War in Kurzeme, with a main focus on the experiences of the civilian population. The film thus reflects two periods in Latvian history: 1944-1945 in Kurzeme and the 1970s-1980s during the Soviet era. The film's premiere is planned for autumn 2019.



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Atom Art

Atom Art is an award-winning 2D animation studio established in 2001 and based in Riga, Latvia. Over the years, it has grown from a four-to five-person animation studio to a company with more than 30 people on its staff. However, the main team has stayed the same. Atom Art is known for its auteur short films and animated films for children.

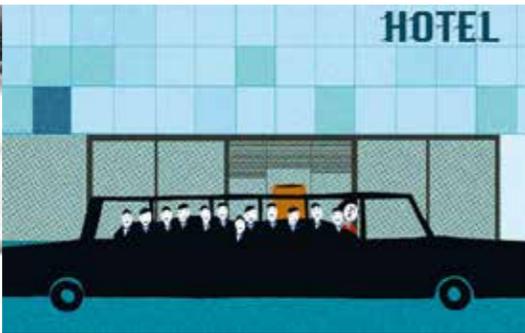
The studio works in a variety of animation genres: magical realism, animated documentary, musical, absurd, children's film and others. The studio mainly

works in the computer cut-out animation technique, but films are also made by traditional drawing, drawing on glass, sand animation, animation with charcoal and even puppet animation.

Atom Art is currently producing three new films from the *Shammies* miniseries, Edmunds Jansons' new auteur film *Guard of Honor* and also *Kafka in Love*, a short film made with the sand animation technique by Zane Oborenko. A new feature film, *Born in the Jungle*, is in development.



Kafka in Love



Choir Tour



Ursus

■ The Atom Art studio is led by producer Sabīne Andersone and director Edmunds Jansons. The studio's third core member is the lead animator Mārtiņš Dūmiņš. Creative decisions are made as a team. Although the presence of the producer and creative director are a ubiquitous part of any film made at Atom Art, invited directors are nevertheless given much creative freedom.

The studio began working with auteur animated short films, first of all Jansons' own films but later also involving artist Reinis Pētersons, Ivo Briedis, Lizete Upīte and Zane Oborenko. Atom Art is now able to support

itself by fully devoting itself to auteur animated films, a point it has reached after many years of trying to balance between short 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 groups became super popular, and people asked them how they did it. So art-housey, doing such totally crazy, nutty things... 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 that that's even more profitable than trying to be commercial. Over time, the small auteur films put out by our studio bring in a lot more, in terms of satisfaction and sometimes even financially, because they continue to be shown."

The studio's second direction of activity revolves around producing children's animated films. Atom Art has developed children's projects in a variety of formats, from the *Shammies* preschool miniseries and the *Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness* television special to the feature-length film *Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs*. *Born in the Jungle*, the new feature film currently in development, is a story about a Latvian adventurer's family living in the Venezuelan jungle in the mid-20th century.

"We see children's cinema 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 work, we keep in mind that we are parents ourselves and want to create something our children will enjoy. At the present moment, we're seeing that there's no limit for films made with such an approach; they're appreciated all over the world." (Sabīne Andersone and Edmunds Jansons)



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



■ **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 main producer for all the important projects at Atom Art. Although she is the main financial manager, she is one of the most creative people at Atom Art.



■ **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 has collaborated with Atom Art on a feature film. This collaboration continues with the development of their next feature film together.



■ **Ieva Vaickovska** is the production manager of film projects at Atom Art and also the manager of all kinds of other projects at the studio. She is the right hand of the producers and directors.



■ **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.



Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness



Guard of Honor



Shammies

Most-significant films:

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

The Shammies / Lupatiņi

Edmunds Jansons, digital cut-outs, Latvia, preschool-aged children, dialogue in English / Latvian

- The *Shammies* are an animated cross-media project for preschool-aged children about discovering the world through children's games, fantasy and wordplay. In the upcoming 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.

Pigtail and Mr. Sleeplessness / Bize un Nečuļa

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.



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Coming Soon:

Guard of Honor / Goda sardze

Edmunds Jansons, 2D computer animation, 5 min, 2020, 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?

Kafka in Love / Iemīlējies Kafka

Zane Oborenko, sand animation, 10 min, 2022, 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.

Work in progress:

Born in the Jungle / Laimes bērni

Edmunds Jansons, cut-outs, 2D computer animation, 70 min, 2023, universal, dialogues

- Chalky is a fragile-looking Latvian girl who lives at the foot of Devil's Mountain in the Venezuelan jungle. One day her stepfather disappears, and Chalky, overcoming her fear, embarks on a rescue mission, getting involved in unimaginable adventures that force her to grow up quickly.



Born in the Jungle

We think and work internationally

Atom Art produces films not only on a local level but also on a European and global level. Participation in international industry forums plays a very important role in the studio's development. *Atom Art* tries to appear at Cartoon Forum, Cartoon Movie and CEE Forum every year – such activities influence and cultivate the studio's

competitiveness on the national as well as international stage. The studio directors, for their part, keep current by actively watching the newest animated films at film festivals around the world. "We follow current events and trends in film because it's inspiring – if you see that you don't need to pander to anything, then you become more courageous in your creative expression," says Sabīne Andersone.



***Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs* is a film for the whole family based on the book by award-winning author Luīze Pastore. It's a summer adventure story that takes place in the Riga suburb of Maskačka. Jacob, a boy from central Riga, arrives to spend the summer with his relatives on the outskirts of the city.**



Edmunds Jansons about working on the film:

This is my first feature-length film, but the team consists of almost the same people I've been working with for years on short films. I think the main difference with feature-length films is related to distribution – the

formats and requirements are completely different. The way in which a film reaches the viewer through a movie theatre's repertoire is much simpler than it is for short films.

Jacob and Mimmi... is a family film, a children's film, and that means it's not really auteuristic experimentation in which I wander off on my own

artistic endeavours and do only things I'm interested in myself. For example, short films, on the other hand, are interesting for viewers precisely because the best of them are complete auteur cinema, even exotic in a way – another person is expressing him- or herself, and I'm able to observe what that looks like. Whereas the full-length format demands that I know how it works, how viewers will respond to it. My goal is not to entertain, or *only* to entertain; it's important for me to understand my audience. If this type of film does not lead to emotional teamwork with the audience – no matter whether it's a sigh, laughter or tears – then, I believe, it doesn't work. A film must resonate. ■



Jacob, Mimmi and the Talking Dogs

Rija Films

The Rija film studio was established in 1995; its main activities are film production, the 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 Saulītis 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 Sorcière*, which went on to win ten international prizes. The global attention Rija 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 23 years of work: the shorts *To Swallow a Toad / Norīt krupi* (dir. Jurgis Krāsons, 2010), *When Apples Roll / Kad āboli ripo* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis,) and *Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures / Dziedošais Hugo un viņa neticamie piedzīvojumi* (dir. Reinis Kalnaellis, 2010) 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, 2010), script and art by Indra Sprōģe, music by well-known Latvian musician Renārs Kaupers) has become very popular, with almost 13 million views on YouTube. ▶



Lote from Gadgetville



For many years now, *Rija* has been actively participating in co-productions. According to director Vilnis Kalnaellis, the studio first develops a project and then attracts co-producers, selecting them based on their experience and previous work. One significant project was 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*, will come out in 2019, premiering in the Generation competition at the Berlinale.

Rija specialises in classic animation technique, in which a team of professionals bring to life the ideas of a director and/or artist. The forthcoming film *Apple Pie Lullaby / Ābolrauša šūpuļdziesma* is being created using the *Maya* 3D programme, with a 2D version developed later for the film's composition and colourisation. Last year, *Rija* worked on two feature-length animated films, one short and one documentary. The studio has 25 employees working with animated films. ■



Lotte and the Lost Dragons



The Golden Horse

Most-significant films:

Sieviete / The Woman

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.

Joka pēc alfabēts / Funny Alphabet

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.



The Woman



Singing Hugo and his Incredible Adventures



Crazy Fox

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.

Kirikou et la Sorcière / Kirikou and the Sorceress

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

Recent films:

Trakā lapsa / Crazy Fox

Agnese Aizpuriete, classic animation, 7 min, 2019, children, no dialogue

- Crazy Fox has wandered into a seaside village, where she experiences all sorts of unusual and alarming things: she saves a snail, eats too many pears, jumps around on a trampoline and becomes friends with a mermaid by helping her to escape from an aquarium.

Lote un pazudušie pūķi / Lotte and the Lost Dragons

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.

Coming soon:

Ābolrauša šūpuļdziesma / Apple Pie Lullaby

Reinis Kalnaellis, classic animation, 65 min, 2020, 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.



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Studio Locomotive

The *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 most 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 director of *Studio Locomotive* is producer Roberts Vinovskis, who has been active in the film industry since the early 1990s. The studio has mainly worked with live action films, but recently animation has begun playing a larger role as well. “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 independent director Nils Skapāns’ plasticine animated short film *Cat in the Bag / Kaķis maisā* (2013). This was followed by a collaboration with internationally recognised, New York-based director Signe Baumane for her full-length film *Rocks in My Pockets / Akmeņi manās kabatās* (2014). As the minority partner in the co-production, *Studio Locomotive* was responsible for the film’s distribution in Latvia, where attracting audiences is a challenge. Vinovskis comments:

“The film’s theme is quite specific. It was clear from the outset that this wasn’t going to be a box-office hit. But as a producer, it’s precisely these kinds of projects that interest me; that’s where the adrenaline is. And, considering all of that, the film has done very well in Latvia. In the global context, too, the film has had visibility – more than 200 festivals. The world premiere of this film was the first time in the history of the Karlovy Vary festival that an animated film was included in the official selection.”

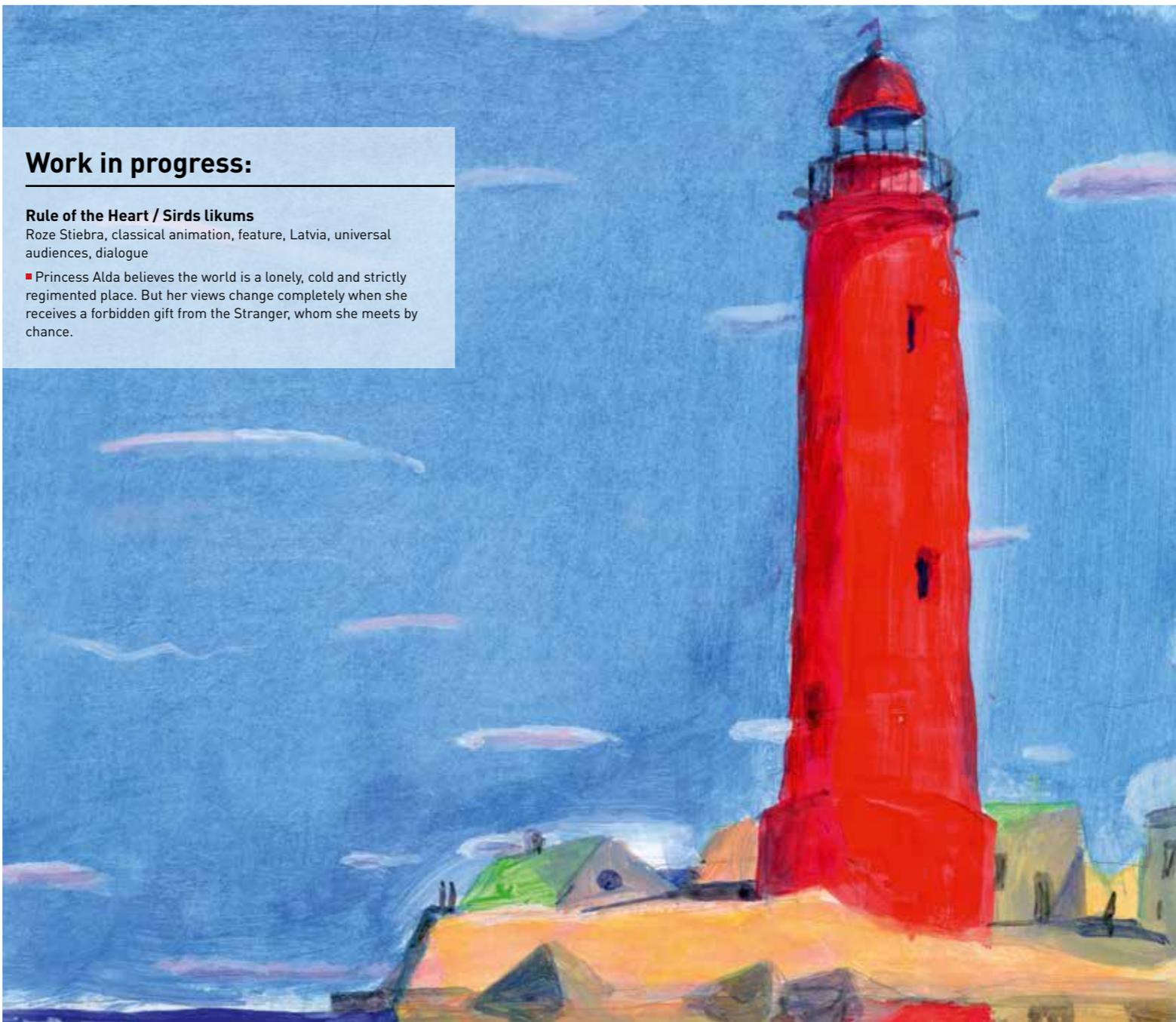
As Latvia’s centenary approached, *Studio Locomotive* ▶



worked on *Before the Day Breaks / Saule brauca debesīs*, whose director, Roze Stiebra, received the Latvian National Film Award for lifetime achievement while work on the film was still underway. Although it was the 66th film in her career, this was the first film Stiebra had made in almost a decade. It was also the first time the studio had brought together such a large team – thirty people – needed to create a full-length animated film. “I don’t know which higher powers stood by us,” says Vinovskis, “but we were able to put together a team that was entirely from Latvia, in spite of the fact that there aren’t all that many animators in Latvia.”

Having successfully finished the animation process for *Before the Day Breaks*, the studio began working on its next challenge, namely, the first Latvian feature-length animated film for adults. Baumanes newest film, *My Love Affair with Marriage / Mans laulību projekts*, will premiere in late 2021 and is being created as a majority co-production with the United States. Vinovskis is hopeful about the result: “There’s a lot of interest from festivals as well as sales agents. There’s no doubt that this film of Signe’s will be no less successful with audiences than her previous one. In fact, this film might in a way even be easier for viewers. The manner of narration and the director’s style remain very similar, but this one has a lot of music and acting; it’s almost something of a musical. And the theme is more universal – it’s no longer about depression but instead about marriage and gender stereotypes, about the roles of the man and woman in the family and in society. It’s a theme that addresses 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.”

When the studio finishes this current project, *Studio Locomotive* plans to provide animation services or perhaps take on another large project with the aim of maintaining the professional team it has painstakingly put together. At the moment, *Studio Locomotive* is working on a new feature by Roze Stiebra, *Rule of the Heart*. In this project, Stiebra has paired up with Aleksejs Naumovs, one of the most important painters of recent decades in Latvia. ■



Work in progress:

Rule of the Heart / Sirds likums

Roze Stiebra, classical animation, 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.

Most-significant films:

Akmeņi manās kabatās / Rocks in My Pockets

Signe Baumanes, stopmotion, drawn and papier mâché animation, 88 min, 2014, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian

Saule brauca debesīs / Before the Day Breaks

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

- The Sun and Moon have a baby, and mummies arrive to welcome the Daughter of the Sun. Amid the joyous crowds, no one notices that the Daughter has disappeared, and everyone is suddenly stunned to see an empty cradle. However strong the Sun and Moon are, they cannot find their Daughter nor bring her back home. It turns out they need a human being! And so Nabašnieks, along with a little girl and her young brother who were among the mummies just a short while ago, volunteer to help and go out into the big, wide world to find the Daughter of the Sun and bring her home.

Coming soon:

Mans laulību projekts / My Love Affair with Marriage

Signe Baumanes, stopmotion papier mâché, drawn animation, 95 min, 2021, Latvia / United States, adults, dialogue in English and Latvian





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Animācijas Brigāde

For the love of puppets

Director Jānis Cimmermanis and human orchestra (as well as scriptwriter, producer, artist, even composer) 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 Rīga Film Studio established a puppet department, the group working there has been very close. Generations have come and



Work in progress:

Lielais Indriķis / Henry the Great

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, feature, 2022, universal audiences, 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.

gone; the appearance of the puppets and the 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 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). 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. ■



Most-significant films:

Ki-ke-ri-gū! / Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Arnolds Burovs, puppet animation, 10 min, 1966, children, no dialogue

■ This, the first Latvian puppet animation film, is based on motifs from folk tales and tells about a poor farmer with a magical mill. When the rich master steals the mill, the farmer’s dog and rooster prepare for battle.

Bimini

Arnolds Burovs, puppet animation, 19 min, 1981, universal, no dialogue

■ Based on Heinrich Heine’s poem, this film traces humanity’s longing for beauty and fulfilment, as expressed through a song about the legendary island of Bimini and its magical well whose waters revive a person’s strength and youth.

Pieminekļis / Monument

Jānis Cimmermanis, puppet animation, 5 min, 1991, universal, no dialogue

■ Every Soviet city of importance had one – a monument to the Communist leader Lenin. Here, the filmmakers use a monument that does not hold together as a metaphor for the collapsing Soviet Union.

Lidojam?! / Let’s Fly?! (from the Munk and Lemmy series)

Nils Skapāns, puppet animation, 6 min, 1994, children, no dialogues

■ The strange creatures Munk and Lemmy encounter very human problems and attempts at solving them. Here, they try to help their friend the rabbit, who is unable to reach the fruit he desires.

Meža Sargi / Forest Guards

Māris Brinkmanis, puppet animation, 12 min, 2014, children, no dialogue

■ On his walk, the Forester finds a pile of garbage discarded in the woods. His pets – a dog, a cat and a mouse – are angry. On his next walk, the Forester sees that a citizen is polluting the forest. However, nothing can be done because the Forester is an old man and his shotgun is charged with only a cork. The Forester’s pets, together with forest animals, decide to teach the citizen a lesson.

Eži un lielpilsēta / Hedgehogs and the City

Ēvalds Lācis, puppet animation, 10 min, 2013, children, no dialogue

■ One spring morning, the animals wake up from their winter slumber to find that a city has replaced their forest. They realise they will need to find new strategies for surviving, and it turns out that the hedgehogs take to capitalism quite naturally.



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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 “Lielais Kristaps” Latvian national film award for best debut, and the experience inspired her to continue creating films. Rīdūze’s films *Firefly / Jāntārpiņš* (2002), *Acorn Boy / Zīlūks* (2010) and *Little Ruddy / Sārtulis* (2014) have taken part in the competition at the Berlin Film Festival. Her 13th and most recent film, *Dusty / Puteklis*, was released in 2019. Rīdūze is already working on her next short, *Angry Bag / Dusmu kule*.

Much of Rīdūze’s work has been inspired by classic Latvian literature, which has not lost its currency in



Dusty

Work in progress:

Dusmukule / Angry Bag

Puppet animation, 20 min, 2021, primary-school-aged children

■ 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.



Angry Bag

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, in the film 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 her newest film, *Dusty*. “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.” ■



Firefly



Pea children

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 / Jāntārpiņš

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 / Zīlūks

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.

Recent films:

Dusty / 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.

Zirņa bērni / Pea children

Puppet animation, 12 min, 2019, preschool-age children, no dialogue

■ 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.



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Wings and Oars

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 Canadians and Estonians. *Electrician's Day / Elektriķa diena* (2018) is Leščovs' tenth animated film, not counting shorter films and intermedia projects, such as projections in collaboration with the Orbita collective of poets.

Electrician's Day is a monochrome film that calls to mind Leščovs' other recent films; although made in various different techniques, they share the same tonality – as do the sketches of his travels that he likes to make using coffee and black tea instead of ink. The film is drawn with brown India ink on paper and contains only a few colourful elements.

Leščovs animated films are figural; for the most part, they centre around a clear, albeit paradox-rich, fable told in laconic, pictorial form. His themes revolve around border situations where opposites meet: sleep and wakefulness, clarity and intoxication, life and death, meeting and parting. *Electrician's Day* focuses on the fragile border between what we call the mind and what we call madness. The action takes place in a psychiatric hospital. Medical institutions are often used in cinema to portray a social model in which to observe the relationship between power and normality and the influence habits and assigned roles have on our sense of self. In this film, too, hospital wards and hallways become a setting for a battle for identity. The main character, an electrician, receives a serious jolt of electricity while working on the hospital's wiring. He wakes up inside the hospital, where it seems he has lain for quite some time. Day follows day, and it becomes ever harder for him to imagine life outside the hospital.

When asked "Do you, as an animation director, have an obligation to speak about problems in society?" Leščovs explains his position: I don't like the word "obligation" in this context. There's status as a citizen, respect, self-awareness, responsibility, honour. I don't think it's right to link obligation with forms of artistic expression. Let's leave that word for our political representatives, the servants of the people. ■

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.



Electrician's Day

Work in progress:

Winter Landscape with Skaters / Ziemas ainava ar slidotājiem

■ Vladimirs Leščovs on his upcoming film: "It's an animated short film with the working title *Winter Landscape with Skaters / Ziemas ainava ar slidotājiem*. It tells about early interests, hobbies and childhood dreams that were left by the wayside only to 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."



Rainy Days



Villa Antropoff



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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. 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. “I have a tough time with materials and techniques, because almost all of the techniques interest me. I see something at a festival, and ahhh, I want to try that, too! But time and resources are a different matter, and the lack of both usually leads me back to computer cut-out animation,” he admits.

And yet, Vītols nevertheless 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 animated film *Garden of Fetish*, which became the first part of a self-reflective meditation, the animated film trilogy *Garden of Fetish / Fetišu dārzs* (2006), *Eclipse / Aptumsums* (2010) and *The End / Beigas* (2018), made specifically to be shown at an art gallery. The final film of this Gallery Trilogy, *The End*, was visually inspired by David Hockney’s painting *A Bigger Splash* and captures that superficial vibration of the vision of an affluent life.

Vītols made all three films in the triptych in a relatively short time and without a script or storyboard in the traditional sense. He believes such tools are necessary if several people are working on a film together; however, with his auteur form of animation, “there is no need for communicative intermediaries between the brain and the hands that execute the work.” In place of a script, 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-scènes. “It’s hard for me to imagine how one might use words to describe a black bubble with tentacles so that the result is just as powerful as what you see in an animated film on screen. But that’s the eternal problem with animated films – they’re difficult to describe, and besides, the description usually has to be done already during the project stage, long before anything appears on screen,” says Vītols.



His latest film, *The Swan Maiden / Gulbju jaunava*, is based on the story of Kārlis Skalbe. Until now, the work of this classic Latvian author has been cinematized only by the animation masters Arnolds Burovs and Roze Stiebra. When asked whether viewers should expect something radical this time, Vītols says: “I hope it won’t be anything radical, because I had already been reaching out towards Skalbe for many years until it all finally came together. I like the challenge of cinematizing a work in which all of its beautiful essence – the reason why I’m doing it – is written between the lines.”

Vītols is currently working on his first feature-length animated film with Studija Kokles, his recently founded family-based studio. ■



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Most-significant films:

Minotaurus / Minotaur

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 mythical figures who are occupied with their own ambitions.

Aptumsums / Eclipse

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.

Velna Fudži / Devil's Fuji

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.

Fetišu dārzs / Garden of Fetish

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.

Recent films:

Gulbju jaunava / The Swan Maiden

Digital animation / original technique, 14.30 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.

Beigas / The End

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

■ The heavenly Count Pilādzis 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.

Work in progress:

Northern Star / Ziemeļu zvaigzne

2D animation, feature, Studija Kokles

■ The young doctor Nicolaus Himsler embarks on a Grand Tour of Europe in order to defeat the ignorant young man in himself and bring the world back to Riga.

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. One of these films, *Vilma Doesn't Work Today / Vilma šodien nestrādā* (2007), was her first short to attract global attention; it was followed by *The Kiosk / Kiosks* (2013), one of the most popular Latvian animated films of the past decade. After that, Melece headed to Lucerne, where her next film, *Analysis Paralysis*, premiered. The film is now also being screened 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 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..." ■



The Kiosk

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 Paralyze

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.



Anete Melece

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Lizete Upīte

Lizete Upīte has studied at the Baltic Film and Media School in Estonia, the Escola Superior Artística do Porto in Portugal, La Poudrière 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 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 studio film *Une nuit sur le lac / A Night on the Lake*, made while she was a fourth-year student at La Poudrière. She is currently in France again, at a residency and working on the short film *Rīgas cerīni / Riga's Lilac*. "The animation community in France is very large; it's very easy to find someone to share experiences with. Elsewhere, you often get the feeling that animation is more like a hobby, but in France it feels like a real job, real work, because there are more animation directors here," she says.

Riga's Lilac is a co-production with the French studio *Papy3D Productions*; the Latvian studio *Atom Art* is the



Riga's Lilac

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. ■

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.

Nakts pastaigas / Night Walks

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.

Rīgas Cerīni / Riga's Lilac

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

■ 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.



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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' upcoming 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:

Kā es atmetu smēķēšanu / How I Gave Up Smoking

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.

Norīt krupi / To Swallow a Toad

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.

Melnā kaste / Black Box

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.

Coming soon:

Trubā / In the Pipe

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 form 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 *Māci mani, Degunlāci! / Teach Me, Nose-Bear* (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.

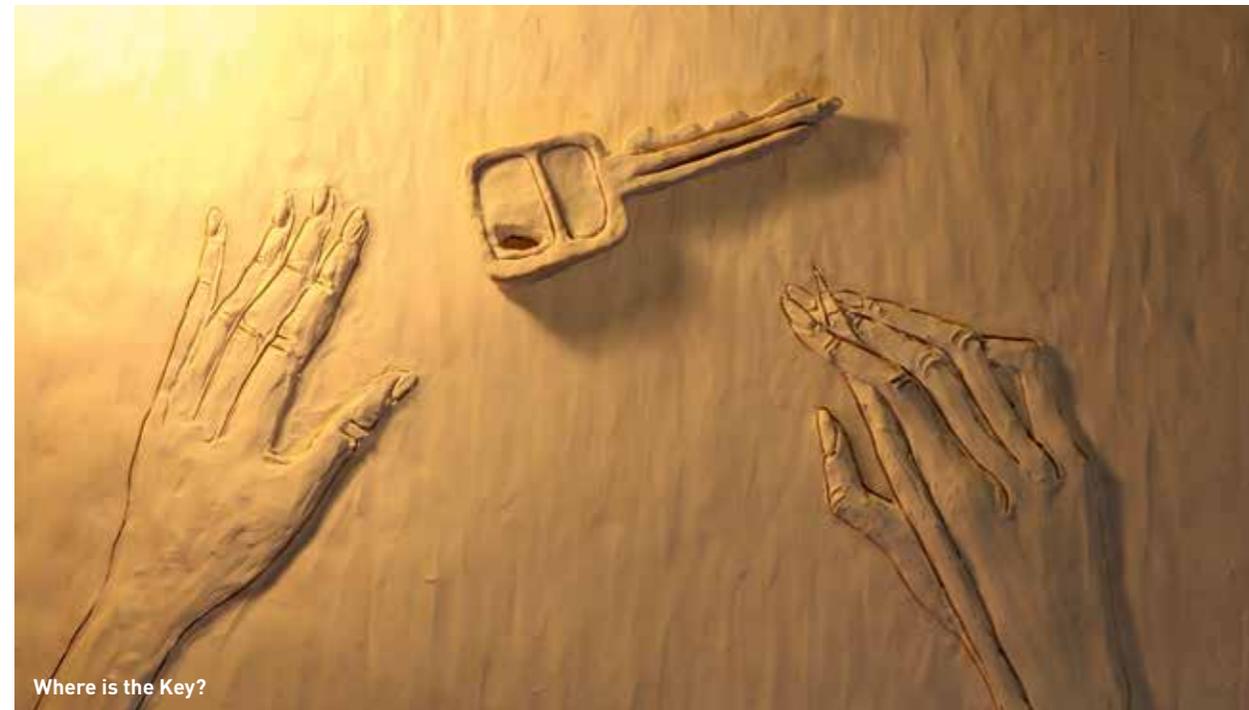
With its first project, *Teach Me, Nose-Bear!*, the studio tried out all possible animation techniques, gradually developing and defining its own specific style: a combination of classic animation, plasticine animation and chiaroscuro on various textured backgrounds. In an effort to find the best combination 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. ■



Introduction to an Epilogue



Awesome Beetle's Colors



Where is the Key?

Most-significant films:

ievads epilogam / Introduction to an Epilogue

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:

Kur manas atslēgas? / Where is the Key?

Classic and plasticine animation, 7 min, 2021, adults

■ A 2D and 3D allegorical animated film (music by 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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Nils Skapāns

Nils Skapāns is an independent puppet animation director as well as the scriptwriter, animator and often also the artist for his own films. He has made almost 40 short films to date, and in 2019 is working on two new challenges.

A self-educated director, Skapāns originally worked as 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, 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 *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 his most popular films have been made. "The *Animācijas Brigāde* studio follows a fairly uniform classical style, but I wanted to do something different. I understood that I needed to get away and do my own thing. And, well, plasticine is simply a very accessible and egalitarian material that any dabbler can work with, so I began using it," says Skapāns.

In those first years, Skapāns tried various puppet animation techniques and also a variety of genres, for a time even focusing on making animated films for adult audiences. In the end, however, he returned to plasticine animation and has since become a master of the art. With his films *Listen, Rabbit!... Daddy Goes*

to London / Redzi, Trusi!... Tētis brauc uz Londonu (2004) and *Wonderful Day / Burvīga diena* (2010), he also returned to the children's competition at the Berlin International Film Festival.

Around the same time, Skapāns began a collaboration with the *Studio Locomotive*, which produced four of his animated short films for children. He is currently producing films with *VFS Studio*. These projects include the film *All My Friends Are Dead / Visi mani draugi ir miruši*, which represents Skapāns' first foray into silicon puppet animation: "This is an opportunity to try out using silicon puppets, which I also plan on using in the second project I have going on at the moment, *The Nap / Diendusa*. And this project is special because of the fact that I'm collaborating with the young and promising animation enthusiast Anna Zača, who is also the head of the Latvian Animation Association."

As work continues on *The Nap*, the director and his producer, Uldis Cekulis, are consulting with children between the ages of seven and ten in order to create a script that's as exciting as possible for this children's sci-fi adventure film. ■



Most-significant films:

Klucānija / Brickannia

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.

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

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?

Burvīga diena / Wonderful Day

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.

Recent films:

Visi mani draugi ir miruši / All My Friends are Dead

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.

Work in progress:

Diendusa / The Nap

VFS Films, stop motion/puppet animation, 26 min, 2021, 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



Dramatic End

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 Rīga 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 after-school 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. Master of plasticine animation Nils Skapāns teaches master classes and workshops for people of all ages, for example, at his stop-motion technique courses at the Riga Art and Media Technical School. ■

Recent films by students:

Dramatic End / Dramatiskas beigas

Kerija Arne, 2D animation, 3 min, 2019, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

■ The participants in a ritual are performing with rhythmic energy. Suddenly, a vibrating sound comes from outside. The spectators hurry back to their places, and the dramatic ending can begin.

Moon of the Dead or: How I Stopped Panicking and Avoiding Reality / Miroņu mēness jeb: Kā es pārstāju baidīties un izvairīties no realitātes

Monta Andžejevska, 3D animation, 3 min, 2020, young adults

■ A massive zombie apocalypse surprises VR players. The fight appears comically difficult, especially if one of the players is new to the game.

Night Shift / Nakts maiņa

Linda Stūre, 2D classical animation, 3 min, 2019, Latvia, adults, no dialogue

■ A night-shift guard's nightly ritual of a game of Tetris is interrupted by unexpected technical issues. One of the surveillance cameras breaks down, and the game starts setting its own rules.



Moon of the Dead or: How I Stopped Panicking and Avoiding Reality



Night Shift

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Photo: Agnese Zeltiņa

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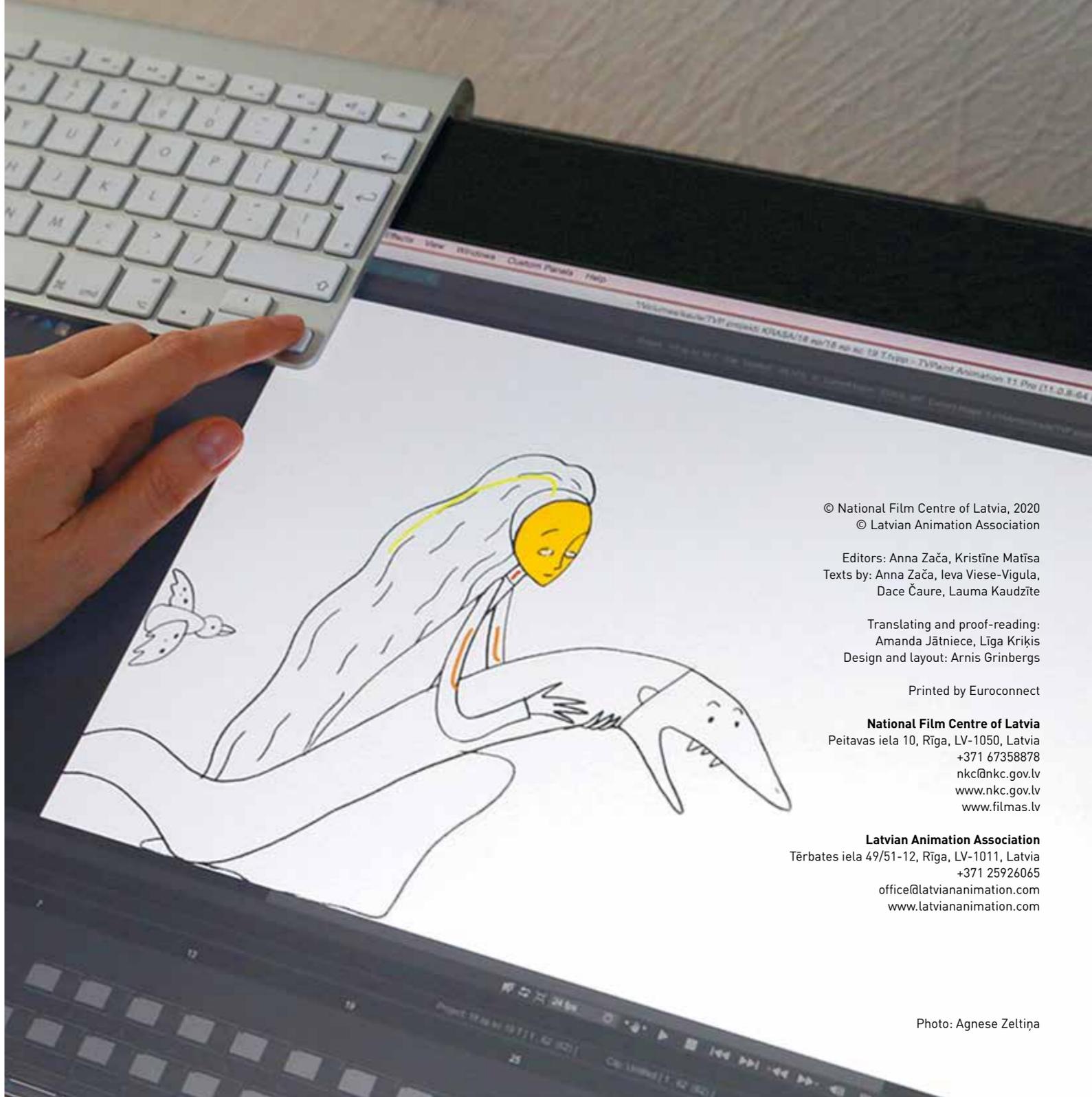
Cash Rebate

Latvia and its capital Riga provide great filmmaking opportunities characterised by accessibility, convenience, and the professionalism of the local film crews.

- Countless unexploited and diverse locations; rich architecture; stunning nature; four distinct seasons; cost-effective and reliable production; ease and flexibility in regards to securing filming permits; convenient travel routes by air, land or sea; access to Eurimages funding.

▪ **A cash rebate of up to 50%** of expenditures can be received on eligible production costs if the following two incentive schemes (20% or 25% each) are combined:

| Latvian Co-Financing Fund of the National Film Centre | Riga City Council co-financing programme Riga Film Fund |
|---|--|
| ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least 50% of the production funding should be confirmed upon application. • Services provided by private individuals or legal entities registered in Latvia are involved in the production of the film. • Costs are incurred through a Latvian production company. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature-length fiction films, animation and documentaries. • Film shooting takes place fully or partly in Latvia. • Minimum total budget: EUR 711 436 for feature-length fiction or animation films; EUR 142 287 for documentaries. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature-length fiction films or documentaries intended for theatrical or TV release. • Film shooting takes place fully or partly in Riga or any other location in Latvia. • Minimum total production budget: EUR 700 000. |
| ELIGIBLE EXPENSES | |
| <p>Production-related artistic, administrative and personnel costs; transport, location and equipment rentals; procurement; construction services; accommodation, catering, security, etc.</p> | |



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Front cover:

A film still from **Away** by Gints Zilbalodis
3D computer animation, 75 min, 2019



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