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Claymation altercation

Gorilla Cartoons drop their bizarre stop-motion opus *500 Pound Planet* on Montreal

by Rupert Bottenberg



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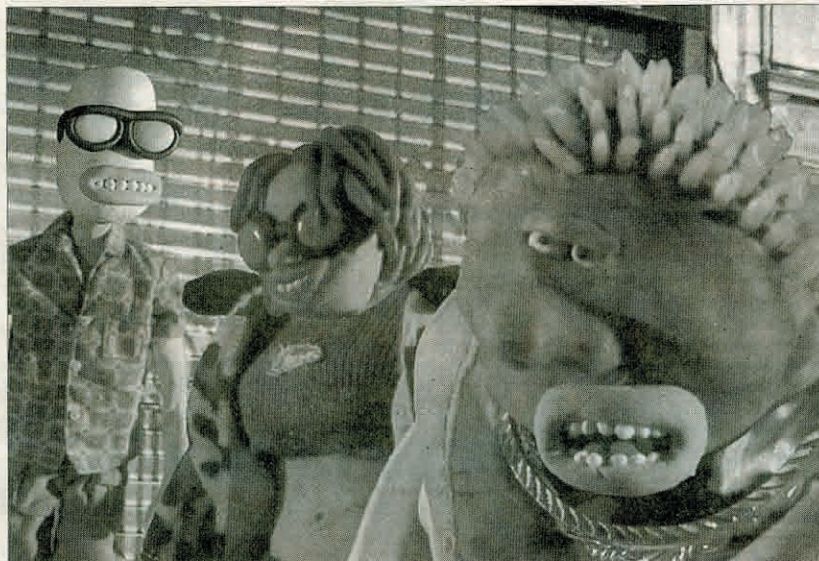
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Cover

Clay pidgin

>> Montreal's Gorilla Cartoons launch their animated oddity *500 Pound Planet*



Squishy hipsters: FROM 500 POUND PLANET

by RUPERT BOTTENBERG

Disney's taking a bath on their latest animated film *Treasure Planet*, and considering the numbers, that's no surprise. Four and a half years it took them, and that's with a technical staff of 350 animators and a budget of—wait for it—\$140-million (U.S.).

Local animation upstarts Gorilla Cartoons needn't fear the same disaster. With a staff of exactly two—Jesse Brown and Josh Dolgin—handling design, script, animation, music and the voices of the two main characters Spencer and Blue, it took two years and a \$16,000 Canada Council grant (blown in 10 minutes flat on snappy gear) to create their 45-minute stop-motion feature *500 Pound Planet*.

Brown calls it "*Twin Peaks* meets *The Muppet Show*," Dolgin prefers "a sci-fi hip hop documentary buddy flick—with sexy clay women." Both call it a gruelling, learn-by-the-seat-of-your-pants experience and a victory for animation as a DIY, underground medium.

"I thought, I bet you can pursue an animation project the same way you make an underground comic," recalls ex-Torontonian Brown of the project's genesis. "It needn't be this thing with a huge studio and a huge number of people. It was something that one or two people could do alone in their room, like a novel, or anything where you've got total control over the medium."

Or the medium has total control over you. Even for pros who have a solid script (Brown and Dolgin aren't, and didn't), stop-motion animation is a drawn-out process of photographing movement in tiny, tiny increments. Add to that a learning curve with the gear and the endless possibilities that computer editing and compositing afford an animator, and you can forget about anything resembling a deadline.

"We got that grant and thought we'd make an

eight-minute film in three months, and we made this 45-minute film in two years. That's what happens when that freedom takes over. We didn't know what the fuck we were getting into."

"And we didn't know how to do it," adds Dolgin. "We'd never done it before."

"And because there were no constraints like a producer or a budget," says Brown, "we bit off more than we could chew—but we just sat down and chewed it."

MUNDANE MEETS MYSTERIOUS

Chew on this, then. The film focuses on a pair of shifty play-dough hipsters named Blue and Spencer, voiced by Dolgin and Brown respectively. Hustling an unidentified substance for the cheerfully shady crime boss King Moses, the pair becomes entangled in the doings of an underground cabal of aliens, or mystics, or some weird bunch of creeps anyway. Freaky occurrences occur while the pair hang out, argue, chat with friends and check out a freestyle rap battle.

The mundane and the mysterious intermingle throughout *500 Pound Planet*, an effect that's magnified by the casual, candid conversations that Dolgin and Brown captured when their friends weren't looking. Spliced and diced, those natural, informal monologues make up the bulk of the film's "script."

"Our intention," says Brown, "was to make a movie that is a cartoon but doesn't sound like one—boink-boink and funny voices. It's as realistic as we could possibly get it. The effect we were going for was one where you forget it's a cartoon, where it almost feels like this happened, like a documentary or a Cassavetes film."

"Cartoons are the most artificial thing you can think of, totally fabricated imagery made with our hands. On the other side, you've got the sound that's absolutely authentic. Put together,

there's a tension between them. We're trying to take you from something very comfortable—'Oh, the conversation these characters are having is so familiar to me'—to something absolutely absurd or huge or insane."

Absurd, huge, insane—and largely unexplained. A lot of *500 Pound Planet* is left to the viewer's interpretation (which is where the David Lynch comparison kicks in). It's creepy and perplexing, which is how Brown and Dolgin like it.

"Isn't that the worst part of every science-fiction or horror film," asks Brown, "the contrived explanation at the end? It's so much better when you don't know what the hell it is. I think that's a more accurate reflection of real life. Especially being an anglophone in this city—you're walking around in a perpetual state of confusion. Well, I do, anyway. Josh speaks good French, he grew up here. But this is a strange place, and people are up to some weird, shady things here. Our characters in this film are trying to get somewhere—especially my character Spencer. He's trying to get some authority over the situation and understand what his game plan is. But he doesn't know shit."

POP, LOCK AND HEBRAIC

Adding to the familiar side of the equation are the photographic backgrounds on which Brown and Dolgin have deposited their squishy thespians. The snaps were taken around town and many will be immediately recognizable to Montrealers. An accent was placed on locales (and dialogue)

that would resonate with the Montreal Jewish community.

"There's a lot of talk in this city of preserving culture," says Brown indignantly, "but my culture in this city was destroyed. This city was like, the Brooklyn of Canada. My grandmother worked in a *shmata* factory on the Main. Jewish culture was vibrant here—not like in Toronto where it was WASP-ified. It was *Yiddishkeit*. When I came here, there was still this hangover, this echo of it that I responded to. In the time that I've been here—Karl's Shoes is in our movie, it burned down. Warsaw, they drive past. That's gone. Mordecai Richler is dead. It's this last little hiccup that's happening. It's all going away."

"We're really proud that we're premiering it at la Sala Rossa," notes Dolgin, "which used to be the Jewish Union Hall, where a lot of this city's Yiddish theatre and variety shows used to go down."

"I think it's as Jewish as we are," muses Brown, "in that there's that foundation, but we're not living in a *shtetl*. These other influences are naturally intertwined with it."

Those influences include the hip hop sensibility—in the music that Dolgin, as DJ So-Called, whipped up. In the freestyling of local MCs Blurum 13 and Bless and in a larger sense, in the found-material jones that informs the entire production.

"The clothes were all doll's clothes found in old thrift shops and Salvation Army stores," says Dolgin. "The props, too. That's the hip hop aesthetic, re-appropriating and re-contextualizing useless trash, taking things out of their context and creating amazing new things that nobody would ever have thought of. We did that with the clothes and the props and, in the opening scene, the sounds of weird chanting voices from old records I found."

MUTUAL CONTEMPT

The process of creating *500 Pound Planet* was certainly educational for Dolgin and Brown. Although they'd already made a short test version three years before with inferior technology (it won first prize at the McGill student-film screening) and a Planet Smashers video to boot, the feature taught them the ins and outs of stop-motion animation. It taught them the tricks of DIY filmmaking, it taught them about production and sound-synching and the rhythm of editing.

More than anything, though, it taught them to hate each other.

"There's a reason movies aren't co-directed," snarls Brown. "People talk about filmmaking as the last dictatorship—it's not a democracy, it's someone on high laying down the law. We had two dictators and no subjects."

The *Odd Couple* dynamic between the two did, by their own admission, push the product to greater creative heights. But it left them eager to push each other off cliffs of great heights as well. Dolgin describes Brown quite frankly as "fucking insane, a sociopathic control freak," while Brown notes that Dolgin is "useless in terms of anything involving any degree of organization or planning."

"Hopefully, Josh and I will never speak to each other again. The biggest curse would be if it was successful and we had to make more."

If that nightmare scenario does come to pass, the Gorilla guys are ready. "We're not indie warriors who'll say no if someone wants to put it on TV," sniffs Brown. "We're looking for an audience any way we can get it. But if this is too different for the people who hold the keys to broadcasting, there are so many under-exploited options now. Digital filmmaking allows anyone to make a movie, true, but once they've made one, they're only showing it to each other, other filmmakers."

"Now, with DVDs, people are more willing to buy movies and not just rent. Given that, I don't see why one can't pursue movies the way you would a record label. The costs are the same. The only thing that's missing is retail outlets. But you can combine record, comic and book shops who are willing, and promote it like you promote an album, going on the road and doing shows. Peo-



Gorilla tactics: DOLGIN AND BROWN

ple have a personal connection to bands and albums in a way that they never did with movies. I mean, they love movies, but movies don't love them back, it seems."

A note of warning from the *Mirror*: if *500 Pound Planet* does indeed "give you love," make sure you get down to the clinic for antibiotic shots within the week. ☺

"EDUCATIONAL" PREMIERE WITH SHORT CARTOONS AND DISCUSSION TONIGHT, THURSDAY, DEC. 12, AT MCGILL'S CULTURAL STUDIES BUILDING (3475 PEEL), 9PM, \$10. "DRUNKEN" PREMIERE AND LOFT PARTY, WITH DJS MANSPIRO, CASPER AND SO-CALLED, AT GORILLA CARTOONS STUDIO (1070 BLEURY, #420) ON FRIDAY, DEC. 13. "GALA" PREMIERE WITH KATIE MOORE AND HER COUNTRY GENTLEMEN, BLURUM 13 AND MAGIC BY JOSH DOLGIN AT LA SALA ROSSA ON SUNDAY, DEC. 15. ALL EVENTS AT 9PM, \$10