

August 27, 2010

## Computer Animation, Made by Hand

By JOHN ANDERSON

WYNNEWOOD, Pa.

NO one's four-legged friends were harmed during the making of "My Dog Tulip," but the roar of Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's untethered Jack Russell suggests that two-legged strangers might not fare so well.

"Oh, Oscar, stop," Sandra Fierlinger said, opening the door to the couple's tree-shrouded cottage on the Main Line, outside Philadelphia. "He'll be fine, as soon as you get to the other side of the room."

He wasn't, it turned out. But even the menacing Oscar couldn't distract from the room itself: a bank of computer monitors stretched across half the width of the house; beneath them a phalanx of custom-made computers and hard drives crowded one another along the floor. Here the couple put into motion J. R. Ackerley's 1956 memoir about his late-life "romance" with a German shepherd, taking computer animation into an orbit both new and retrograde: computerized yet hand drawn.

Which didn't quite make sense until Mr. Fierlinger sat down at what he calls his light table: as his digital "pen" moved across the horizontal surface, a line drawing appeared on the vertical screen, creating the "motion" of two existing images that, when run at 24 frames per second, will be cinema. About 60,000 drawings went into "Tulip." But no paper. Or plastic.

Opening on Sept. 1 at [Film Forum](#) in the South Village, "My Dog Tulip" features the voices of [Christopher Plummer](#) as Ackerley, the writer and longtime [BBC](#) radio host; [Lynn Redgrave](#), who died in May, as his nettlesome sister; and [Isabella Rossellini](#) as a kindly veterinarian. As it happens, nearly everyone involved is a dog lover: the Fierlingers have Gracie, a mix of shepherd and corgi, and Oscar (whose electronically adjusted voice was used when an aggressive bark was called for). Mr. Plummer said in a telephone interview that he grew up around dogs and "prefers them to a lot of humans," while Ms. Rossellini said that, of course, she is "a huge dog person."

"I even raise dogs for the blind," she said via e-mail, adding: "The drawings for the animation are very charming, don't you think so? I love their work."

That work has won the Fierlingers a Peabody Award ("Still Life With Animated Dogs," 2001), and Mr. Fierlinger earned an Oscar nomination for best animated short in 1980 for "It's So Nice to Have a Wolf Around the House." Anyone who's grown up watching "Teeny Little Super Guy" segments on "Sesame Street" has been watching a Fierlinger creation.

Ms. Fierlinger, 55, who has a fine-arts background, adapted her skills to coloring her husband's sketches. "I paint with layers, just as I would with traditional animation," she said. "I make my own brushes and mix my own colors, just as if it were a paper background. But I do it all on the computer."

Unlike studio cartoons, which often involve computer-generated imagery, the Fierlingers' work is hands-on, sort of. What's eliminated is wasted motion: the shuffling of paper, the sharpening of pencils, the setting up of shots. That it still took them three years to make "My Dog Tulip" almost seems surprising. It certainly gave Mr. Plummer pause.

"He said, 'I was told it's going to take you three years to do this,'" Mr. Fierlinger, 74, recalled, "and I said, 'Yes, at least.' He said, 'I'm going to be dead by then, I'll never get to see it.' I told him: 'I'm roughly about your age, so if you think you're going to be dead, then so am I, and it will never get done. You won't miss anything.' When we met again last year in Toronto, we agreed the time had gone so fast."

The heart of "My Dog Tulip" is Mr. Ackerley's story of his late-middle-age relationship with an Alsatian named Tulip. Bittersweet, heartfelt and rendered in an eccentric, expressive style, the movie seems poised to draw dog-loving moviegoers like beagles to bacon. (New Yorker Films, the distributor, is doing grass-roots promotion to dog walkers, vets, pet food stores and bookstores; [New York Review of Books Classics](#) is reissuing the Ackerley book.)

But Mr. Fierlinger's story could be a movie too — and was, actually, in his animated autobiographical 1995 film "[Drawn From Memory](#)." The child of Czech diplomats, he was born in Japan, relocated to the United States as a youngster and then shipped to Czechoslovakia, where his uncle, Zdenek Fierlinger, became the country's first postwar prime minister, while his father worked in the top echelons of the Soviet puppet government. A boarding-school classmate of Václav Havel's and a member (at least genealogically) of the ruling elite, Mr. Fierlinger fled to America shortly after his father's death in 1967.

The Fierlingers use French software called TVPaint; the director Nina Paley, whose "[Sita Sings the Blues](#)" was a breakthrough in personalized computer animation, uses the more popular Flash.

"There are many ways to use Flash," she said, "the most common being with 'motion tweens': creating a virtual puppet, and having Flash automatically move the pieces from place to place. That's commonly called 'cutout style.' But you can also use Flash to draw every single frame from scratch if you want. I used a combination in 'Sita': mostly cutout style, but also some straight-ahead-style hand-drawing straight into the program." She also "did some paintings on paper, which I scanned in."

Not so at Chez Fierlinger, where the forward-thinking animators are cutting themselves loose not just from graphite and cameras but also from traditional avenues of financing and distribution: a children's film they wanted to make — and are in fact making — centers on Joshua Slocum, the first man to sail around the world solo. It was turned down for financing by the public-television production arm ITVS.

"We thought we could do whatever we wanted," said Mr. Fierlinger, who is returning to his teaching job at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) this term. "Everything we've done for [PBS](#) has been a success. But they said, 'We can't see why children would want to watch this for an hour.'"

So they're doing it in installments, like a graphic novel, and selling it online. "We realize we could do this all on the Internet, for the [iPad](#) or similar devices," Mr.

Fierlinger said. "We don't need a distributor. We don't even need actors. And the technology is developing so fast that by the time we're done, there are things we'll be using that people aren't even talking about now."