

# Come and See

## EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

It's difficult to summarize Estonian animation in a few words except perhaps to say, expect the unexpected. Estonian animation has been called philosophical, surreal, strange, absurd, political, childlike, provocative, and witty. However, there is no confusion over the results. Estonia's animation films are considered among the finest and they have won awards throughout the world. International Film Festivals regularly honour Estonian animation in retrospective and tribute screenings. Estonian animation is being taught in art schools and can be found on video shelves as far as in North America. Estonia's impact in animation is so wide spread that you can even spot its influence in U.S commercial and artistic films such as *The Rugrats Movie* and *Real Monsters*. Most recently an English language book was published covering the roots and legacy of Estonian animation.

Estonian animation dates back to the early 1930s and a film entitled *The Adventures of Juku The Dog*. However, Estonian animation really begins with Elbert Tuganov's founding of a puppet animation division of Tallinnfilm in the 1950s. In the 1970s, Rein Raamat established a drawn animation division (*Joonisfilm*) within *Tallinnfilm*. Raamat was the first Estonian animator to achieve international success. His most notable films included *Big Tyll*, about a mythological Estonian character, and *Hell*, using three drawings by Estonian artist, Eduard Viiralt as its starting point. During this period a number of artists emerged at Joonisfilm, most notably Priit Pärn, Mati Kütt, Janno Põldma, Heiki Ernits, Rao Heidmets, and later Hardi Volmer and Riho Unt. Most of these artists were not classically trained and had roots more in newspaper cartoons and surrealist art. These new men, led by Priit Pärn, would become the voices of Estonian animation's future.

Priit Pärn is, without doubt, the most famous of Estonian animators. In contrast to Raamat's meticulous style of drawing, Pärn's work appears primitive and minimal. His early works *Triangle* and *Breakfast on The Grass* were considered revolutionary for their blunt depiction of modern Soviet life. Despite some initial problems with the censor, *Breakfast on the Grass* went on to win awards around the world and is now considered a master achievement of international animation. Pärn's other award winning films include *Hotel E*, which takes a serious look at what independence for Estonian would mean. *1895* is a masterpiece co-directed with Janno Põldma that examines the history of cinema, while *The Night of the Carrots* examines both the cult of celebrity and IT world. Spring 2003 saw the release of Pärn's latest film, *Karl and Marilyn*.

As the Soviet system collapsed, a crisis ensued at many of the state funded studios, many of which failed to make the adjustment from a state system to the global marketplace. Surprisingly, this was not the case in Estonia. In 1990s, the *Nukufilm* and *Joonisfilm* divisions of *Tallinnfilm* were closed and then reopened as independent studios under the management of the animators. Since then a number of new directors have emerged

including Mati Kütt, who has produced a series of films that address ecological issues: *Smoked Sprat Baked in the Sun*, *Little Lilly* and *Button's Odyssey*. Janno Põldma has worked in both puppet and drawn animation. With humour and complexity, his films *Birthday*, *Brothers and Sisters*, and most recently, *On the Possibility of Love*, attempt to uncover the essence of childhood and family.

Ülo Pikkov has had international success with his films *Bermuda* and *The Headless Horseman*. Priit Tender's films *Gravitation* and *Viola, and Mont Blanc* have won several awards at international festivals, while Kasper Jancis' *Weitzenberg Street* has received wide critical and popular acclaim.

To fund independent films today the studios have increasingly turned to making commercials and TV shows. In particular, Heiki Ernits and Janno Põldma of Joonisfilm have created a series of a successful children's production including: *Tom and Fluffy*, *Lotte*, *Concert for Carrotpie*, and *Ladybird's Christmas*. *Ladybird's Christmas* was not only critically acclaimed, but was also a phenomenal success in Estonian cinemas. Joonisfilm is currently seeking production partners for an adult animation series by Priit Pärn called *Frank and Wendy*.

At *Nukufilm*, Riho Unt and Hardi Volmer have had success with their decidedly adult puppet films like *The War*, which depicts the Russian-German battle over Estonia, and the comical *Spring Fly* based on the work of Estonian writer Anton Hansen Tammsaare. Rao Heidmets has also made some significant puppet films including *Noblesse Oblige* and *Papa Carlo's Theatre*. Riho Unt recently completed another adaptation of a Tammsaare short story, called *Having Soul*. Most recently, Mait Laas' *Journey to Nirvana*, won a major prize at the Oberhausen Film Festival.

While *Nukufilm* and *Joonisfilm* remain the major producers of animation in Estonia, they are by no means alone. A *Film Estonia* provides service work for international productions, while *Multifilm* is a multi media driven studio that has tried their hand at television pilots. In addition to a handful of animators working in their own environments, new Estonian animations are also coming out of schools like Finland's Turku Arts Academy (where Priit Pärn teaches), and the Estonian Art Institute (under the tutelage of Riho Unt and Hardi Volmer).

With culture becoming increasingly bland, predictable and unified, Estonian animation remains one of those rare delicacies; a voice with the ability to entertain, provoke and surprise us. Estonian animation shows us that indigenous expression is not only possible, but is also an essential ingredient of global culture.

Eesti Joonisfilm: <http://www.joonisfilm.ee/>

Eesti Nukufilm: <http://www.nukufilm.ee/>

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