Calgary 3-D short film wins prestigious award

Seven-minute animation Skeleton Girl took two and a half years to complete, at a cost of $100,000.

Based on the math alone, it doesn't sound like the most bountiful of pursuits.

Toiling away in their Calgary studio, the filmmakers behind the seven-minute 3-D, stop-motion short Skeleton Girl, once logged in an eight-and-a-half-hour day that resulted in 17 seconds of screen time.

Fiddling with silicone models, camera angels and lighting for hours on end to achieve a few seconds of footage may seem unusually painstaking to some, perhaps even tedious.

But not for co-director and co-producer Leo Wieser.

"A lot of people when they get into the animation, they say, 'Oh my God I hate this,' " Wieser says. "But, for me, is was very Zen-like. You just set the clock, know that you're in there for the day and don't have anything else booked. Just go and do it and play music."

The music, in case you're wondering, was usually opera. Wagner was a favourite, although Wieser would also listen to TED Talks apps on his iPhone, which offered motivational speeches about creativity and new media. Whatever the inspiration was, it worked.

Skeleton Girl, a seven-minute film about an orphan's adventures in a graveyard, premiered in late April at New York City's Be Film: The Underground Film Festival, where it won a prestigious award for best first 3-D film. It's the first offering from Calgary-based Bleeding Art

Industries, a company that has specialized in mechanical special effects for film and TV for nearly 20 years.

Skeleton Girl was co-directed and co-written by Steve Hanulik and is considered groundbreaking for 3-D shorts in its use of constructed silicone models and physical sets rather than computer-generated animation.

While Wieser, who has a background in special effects and theatre design, can't say for sure if it's the first stop-motion 3-D short film to ever use constructed models, he has not been able to find another one.

"To our knowledge, when we started this process two and a half years ago, there was no such thing as a silicone stop-animation puppet," he says. "We were kind of the first in a lot of things. Or we were very early any ways."

Skeleton Girl is a cautionary tale about an orphan named Millicent who steals a valuable gem from an abandoned cemetery. It was inspired by Wieser's childhood experiences at his grandparents' house in England. While he presumably didn't steal gems from the dead, he did stay at a spooky old house with a cemetery behind it.

"I remember going to bed at night," he said. "We were up right in the top attic, which is the room that Millicent is in. I just remember laying awake at night and listening to the sounds, the owls in the cemetery and all that kind of stuff."

Finally complete after two and a half years of work and a cost of $100,000, producers are sending it to film festivals, particularly those that are Oscar-qualifying.

"Even though we hadn't shot our own film before, we figured it out and learned as we went," says executive producer Becky Scott. "We were just pulling out expertise that we had for years and putting it into this one project. That's not to say there wasn't a lot of learning. We had a lot of technical issues and a lot of issues with 3-D, which we hadn't done before. That was another reason it took so long, just figuring that out. Now we've learned and can move on."

Moving on means more similarly themed shorts to put into an eventual anthology. While a future feature film isn't out of the question, Scott says they are happy with this format for now.

"This festival in New York is all short films," she says. "It was so cool. They were so diverse. You can do so much in a short-film format. It's a little intense burst of something and then it's done."

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