Fantôme : The first 10 years by Harvey Deneroff



Georges Lacroix and Renato of Fântome with their International Emmy Award for Insektors. © Fântome. Ltd.

antôme Animation, based in Paris, has found considerable success of late with its 3-D computer animated TV series, Insektors, which went on the air shortly after **ReBoot** started airing in the U.S. and Canada. While ABC network has canceled **ReBoot**, Insektors continues to be shown on France's Canal + cable network and on France 3; it is also broadcast in 20 other countries around the world, including Japan, Korea, Australia, Great Britain and Italy. It also won an International Emmy Award in 1994, in the "Children and Young People" category — the first for a French animated show.

"Fantôme," company cofounder Georges Lacroix points out, actually consists of two companies. One is Fantôme Animation, a production house which creates projects and raises the money ; the other is Fantôme, a production facility, that also works for others on TV commercials.

"From the very first," Lacroix recalled, "we declared that Fantôme was a creative studio specializing in 3-D computer animation. We also started it with the dream of eventually making a full-length animated feature film, just like **Toy Story**."

At the time, such dreams seemed far away, not only for Fantôme, but for other computer animation studios around the world, who were hampered by an expensive and often limited technology. "Back then," Lacroix jokingly points out, "it was only possible to animate a few spheres and cubes. Today, the way is very open."

Fantôme initially concentrated on what Lacroix calls the "reality market" — special effects, commercials, corporate logos, etc. "Stepby-step, though, we started to do character animation" and started making its own films in 1987, with *Sio Benbor*, a parody of a Japanese movie ; this was followed by *Sio Benbor II*, which spoofed John Lasseter's computer animation classic, *Luxo Jr*.

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Geometric Fables

These led to *Les Fables Geometriques* (Geometric Fables), a series of 50 two minute shorts made for TV over a period of 3 years (1989-92). These shows, featuring songs and narration by Pierre Perret, were freely adapted from Jean De La Fontaine's and Aesop's Fables. Though not a fullblown show, *Les Fables Geometriques* lays claim to being the first 3-D computer animated TV series.

The show's geometry is reflected in the familiar characters, who are rendered in basic geometric forms of threedimensional squares, spheres and triangles, enlivened with highly



Insektors

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saturated primary colors. In this, Fantôme made the best of a low budget and limited technology.

The show also served as a shakedown cruise for more ambitious projects to come. As Lacroix points out, it was a learning experience. "We were learning how to animate, to use the software and the hardware; and most importantly, learning how to instill a sense of teamwork in our staff.

"Animation has a long history and," he notes, "we didn't want to reinvent the wheel, because a lot of companies did [conventional] animation and we didn't want to do that. But our tools were new. It was like when the saxophone was first introduced into the orchestra. When that happened, they didn't throw away the pianos, violins and the other instruments. But still, you have to know how to play the saxophone and it took us three years to learn it."

Insektors

In 1991, as production of *Les Fables Geometriques* was winding down, development began on *Insektors*, a considerably more ambitious project, which creates a lively insect world in which the forces of light and color battle with a somber monochromatic one, in the guise of the happy-go-lucky Joyces and the gloomy Yuks..

Actual production did not really start until 1993. Over the next two

years, Fantôme made 26 thirteen minute episodes (essentially 13 half hour shows) and may start on another 26 episodes next year.

I asked Lacroix if there was any particular reasons they selected insects for their characters. He noted that, "Four years ago, when we started our planning, we had anticipate the probable to evolution of the technology available to us, in terms of both hardware and software. At the time, we were not able to raise enough money to do very sophisticated animation, say in the style of Superman or Batman, where you had figures with muscles and other anatomical details. Nor could we do something like a Tex Avery cartoon, because of the expense involved.

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"One of the reasons we chose insects is simply because they were easier to animate. For instance, they did not require muscles and they made lip synch simpler ; it's easier just to have the mouth move like a box, without having to purse their lips to whistle or to smile and show their teeth. Those are things we can handle when we get bigger !

"Essentially, we decided not to ask to the computer to do more than it could do. Instead, we concentrated on finding some good stories. We just wanted kids to laugh and feel comfortable with those damned insects. That was and is our main goal."

Insektors cost "close to \$10 million, including development costs. But," Lacroix points out, "that compares to \$37 million spent on

making *Toy Story* (plus \$20 million for marketing). We spent about \$1 million on development, while *ReBoot* spent \$8 million, though their goal was to produce 26 minutes of animation a month."

"Computer animation technology," he notes, "has evolved greatly, as has the skills of our artists. Today's software is more viable, more interactive and more ergonomic. And today's computers are becoming both cheaper and more powerful.

"Perhaps," Lacroix feels, "we can call our first 10 years a developmental decade. And perhaps we can say that the next 10 years (knock wood) will be a time to tell stories and forget about the time when computers were cold, impersonal and expensive."

In asking Lacroix about what he liked about *Insektors*, he replies that, "like Woody Allen might say, if you could imagine what I had in my head, you would be very disappointed by what you see. But I am very proud of the many talented people here at Fantôme. I like, in particular, the rendering.

Some of the episodes also have good animation.

A Tool to Let Us Dream

"Don't forget, we need to stay very modest, because we have to learn. We are at the very start of a huge and powerful tool that can let us dream.



Insektors

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"Quite modestly, we are at a point somewhat akin to where Disney was when **Steamboat Willie** came out — although **Steamboat Willie** is much better than **Insektors.** That's how I feel.

I'm proud of the people here. I'm proud of certain episodes. And I'm proud when you see a kid laughing. When that happens, we win, because they don't care if it's done by a computer. When you catch the soul of a character or background, you forget the technique."

We are at the very start of a huge and powerful tool that can let us dream.

I mentioned to Lacroix that when I first saw *Insektors*, it reminded me of the pioneering efforts of the Polish-French animator Ladislas Starewicz, whose early puppet films, such as *The Cameraman's Revenge* (Russia, 1912), also featured insects.

Lacroix was flattered by the comparison, "because I love his films. But the difference between Starewicz and us is that he was much better and more realistic. After all, he was an entomologist. We have been to his home, near Paris, where you can see how passionate he was about insects.

"Frankly, although I love Starewicz and his films, he was not our original inspiration, as we took a very pragmatic approach to the world of the insect. But in a way, you are right, because in one way we feel like we're doing puppet films. And in that area Starewicz is a major figure."

Besides planning for a new season of *Insektors*, Fantôme is now working on a new series,

which has the working title of *Spaceship Earth*. Lacroix classifies it as an "edutainment" series, which will consist of 260 two-minute episodes. "It's about the Earth's voyage around the sun, which will provide the viewer with a window on our solar system." They are also getting set to do an *Insektors* Christmas special. And perhaps, in the not too distant future, Fantôme's dream of making a feature will be not too far off.



Insektors

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Harvey Deneroff, in addition to his duties as Editor of Animation World Magazine, edits and publishes The Animation Report, an industry newsletter, which has taken over operation of the annual Ojai Animation Conference.

