

In Retrospect: 2012 Los Angeles Animation Festival

By Kelly Lake

Each year, the city of Los Angeles hosts over sixty film festivals, ranging from smaller niche exhibitions to large-scale ones like AFI Fest, Los Angeles Film Festival, and other high-profile, heavily-sponsored events. Given the city's festival tradition, it's hard to believe that the Los Angeles Animation Festival, dedicated to the showcase of a medium so centralized to the metropolitan area, is only in its third year. For animation enthusiasts, opportunities to attend exhibitions like Ottawa, Hiroshima, or Annecy are cost and time-prohibitive, and special programs like the recent UPA series at LACMA are scarce. The Los Angeles Animation Festival (LAAF) helped to fill the prominent void of animation programming for Angelinos last March, offering a variety of animated features and shorts, many of which flickered on the screen in near-extinct 35mm, or glowed in glorious Blu-Ray.

LAAF is an inherently nostalgic festival, which, according to festival co-founder and programmer John Andrews, showcases older animated films that "deserve the big screen treatment" once again. With the exception of Bibo Bergeron's *A Monster in Paris* (2011) — which premiered on the West Coast at LAAF—and the short films submitted for competition, the five-day program consisted of films like *Fantastic Planet* (1973), the Fleischer Brothers' 1939 classic *Gulliver's Travels* (co-sponsored by ASIFA Hollywood), the heart-wrenching *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), and the always audacious *Team America: World Police* (2004), featuring stars and puppeteers in-person at its midnight screening. The festival commenced with an opening night party featuring a performance by female rockers Nylon Pink and remarks from emcee Tom Kenny, an animation aficionado and voice actor best known for his portrayal of SpongeBob Squarepants. Kenny wasn't the only animation mainstay to attend LAAF—in addition to festival honoree Bill Plympton, Cartoon Brew founder Jerry Beck, and renowned puppeteers the Chiodo Brothers, director Brad Bird appeared alongside actors Eli Marienthal and Christopher McDonald for a special charity screening of 1999's beloved *The Iron Giant*, with proceeds benefiting the Alzheimer's Foundation of America.

Bird, who recently transitioned to live-action filmmaking with *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (2011), spent the majority of his career in television and feature animation, and stressed the importance of traditional animation in today's film industry during a post-screening Q&A. Not only did Bird acknowledge that he would "welcome the opportunity" to direct another traditionally-animated feature, but he shared an anecdote about Pixar President Edwin Catmull, who allegedly saved hand-drawn animation from eradication at CalArts, calling it "the foundation of all animation." The *Iron Giant* screening concluded with a reunion of those crew members present in the audience at the art deco-style Regent Showcase.

Festival organizers John Andrews and Miles Flanagan acknowledge the challenges of coordinating an exhibition like LAAF, but also recognize its importance to the animation community. "It's like creating something from nothing," said Flanagan, a British-born director with extensive experience in animation and music production, "but it's fun, and much-needed, too." Andrews is a former MTV Animation executive who oversaw production on programs including *Beavis & Butt-Head* (1993-1997), *Aeon Flux* (1991-1992, 1995), and *Daria* (1997-2001). He currently produces at Six Point Harness, one of the festival's major sponsors, along with LA Weekly, DUCK Studios, Liquid Television (which enjoyed its own retrospective after the *Iron Giant* screening), ASIFA Hollywood, and more. Along with festival Creative Director Sean Lennon, Flanagan and Andrews organize LAAF—everything from procuring prints to maintaining the exhibition space—and rely on volunteers to assist during the five-day fest. "We like to screen 35mm when possible," Andrews said, attesting to one of the festival's major strengths, especially since 35mm screenings of animated features are especially rare in today's digital production culture.

However, LAAF also embraces digital technology, as one of the festival's major highlights, the Thursday evening Blu-Ray screening of 1988 cyberpunk classic *Akira* (1988), was a particularly stunning viewing experience. Onscreen, post-apocalyptic Tokyo glimmered with vibrant colors and a level of visual clarity unfamiliar to *Akira* fans whose exposure to the film likely extended only to videotape, and

Shoji Yamashiro's pulsating score rattled the nearly-sold out Regent. Additionally, the screened version of *Akira*—one of Lennon's selections—was subtitled, in place of the poorly-dubbed edition more commonly screened for the public. As a bonus, a video introduction by Lennon preceded the screening, along with several short films.

Although LAAF certainly shows a proclivity for traditional animation (as was evidenced by the atmosphere at *The Iron Giant* screening), it also celebrates computer animation, hosting a special *Shrek* (2001) program in honor of the 10th anniversary of the film's Oscar win. An afternoon CalArts retrospective also showcased early works from BFA and MFA students from the school's Character and Experimental Animation programs, including Pixar pioneers John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, and Pete Docter. Still, LAAF maintains a more nostalgic, independent bent, perhaps best illustrated (so to speak) by festival honoree Bill Plympton who, according to Andrews, "personifies the independent spirit." Plympton, a cartoonist with an extensive filmography of renowned independent shorts, appeared in-person at several screenings, including that of his 1992 feature *The Tune* and *Adventures in Plymptoons* (2011), a new documentary about his life and work directed by Alexia Anastasio.

Animation historian and UCLA lecturer Tom Sito believes that LAAF is an important festival, not only for the animation community, but for Los Angeles at large, saying, "It's important for us in Hollywood to celebrate why Hollywood is the animation capital of the world. When you don't live here, you're always obsessing about Hollywood, but we who live here frequently ignore what makes this place so special...When you pass KTLA on Van Ness, do you know you are passing Termite Terrace, where Bugs Bunny was born? Or when you pass Melrose and Larchmont, you pass the site of Spumco, where *Ren & Stimpy* was created?" Sito hopes that in the future, the festival will tackle computer animation more prominently, but is also interested to see a Klasky-Csupo retrospective "and more rare classic features like *Dirty Duck* (1975), *The Point!* (1971), and *Rock & Rule* (1983)."

LAAF is an important festival for animation aficionados, but is especially important for those with limited animation exposure. Because of the festival's nostalgic aura and programming selection, it caters to hard-core fans, but also serves as an educational experience for those seeing films like *Fantastic Planet* or *Akira* for the first time. For Andrews and Flanagan, organizing a festival like LAAF can be arduous, but, like animation itself, the outcome typically justifies the long hours of hard work. "It's fun. We get to meet so many cool people, so many new people," said Flanagan, "and we're glad to be putting on a show."

*Mediascape would like to thank John Andrews, Miles Flanagan, and Judy Merrick for their assistance and participation.



Author bio:

Kelly Lake is a M.A. student in Cinema & Media Studies at UCLA and also works in the animation industry. Her research interests include animation history/practice, digital media literacy, film technology, and experimental cinema. She is a graduate of Westminister College in New Wilmington, PA.



In Retrospect: Los Angeles Animation Festival 2012 by Kelly Lake is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)