

## Small Wonders – The Oscar Nominated Animated Shorts



Adam Tawfik

*Adam Tawfik brings us his rundown of the Best Animated Short nominees before the Academy Awards this Sunday!*

The short film categories at the Academy Awards are the equivalent of say, a yodeling category at the Grammys. Let's suppose that one of these lucky recipients spotted a hot piece of booty and used as their pick-up line, "Hey babe, I'm an Oscar winner!" That sexy hypothetical person would probably perk up and ask, "What for?" Still invigorated by the enthusiasm, our winner would reply "For my animated short." The fizzle's gone! Outside of a few art house venues—like the Cable Car which is presenting 2013's Oscar nominated animated shorts this week—and (theoretically) the Academy voters, these films don't get much attention.

Granted, this is my first time watching Oscar nominated animated shorts (so I have no frame of reference really), but on the whole, I must confess that I felt underwhelmed by the choices. Out of those nominees, only the UK-produced stop-motion *Head Over Heels* was stellar. The film, which is about a middle-aged couple who have a strange predicament with gravity, is equally adept in conveying the humorous misadventures and ultimate poignancy of their situation. I must also

commend filmmakers Timothy Reckart and Fodhla Cronin O'Reilly for their use of puppets whose presence in animation is sadly diminishing; indeed this art form provided the husband and the wife a great range of expressiveness (particularly around the eyes) that the characters in the other films lacked.

Somewhat surprisingly, the other film I liked was also stop-motion, a form I usually find to be unwieldy. *Fresh Guacamole* by PES, has a very simple premise. In two minutes, it simply presents the act of preparing guacamole, but does it with a surrealistic flair, substituting the ingredients with such objects as grenades (for avocados), red die (for peppers), and white die (for garlic). Although not quite the cinematic achievement of *Head Over Heels*, *Fresh Guacamole* does at least have some quirky charm.

Charm is something of which the other three have none. Some might think they have charm, but as far as I'm concerned, they're simply laden in sentimentality. *Maggie Simpson in the Longest Daycare*, the least crappy of the three, starts off strong with an acerbic backbone (à la *The Simpsons*), but quickly veers into sopiness when it becomes about Maggie's efforts to save a caterpillar from the clutches of a serial insect-killing bully.

*Adam and Dog* and *Paperman*, however, were disasters from the onset, although one of these two most is likely to win the Oscar because of their big-name backers. *Adam and Dog*, which was about a wild dog's bonding with humans, at least tried to tell an existentially profound story, but unlike *Head Over Heels*, it did not have a strong sense of character and was bogged down by several dull intervals. Its 2D frames are gorgeous like a Japanese landscape, but the 3D drawings leave little to be desired.

*Paperman*, however, is the real train wreck. Telling the story of two city office workers who fall in love at first sight at the train station, and get reunited via magical paper airplanes. *Paperman* was a dreary, gooey mess, an archetypal Disney narrative really, from the beginning to end. I was amazed by the lackluster animation, especially considering this was produced by Disney, yet it seems to me to reek of the stodgy Pixar drawing style.

This program also contained three bonus award-winning animated shorts. Just as I was about to claim that Europeans made more sophisticated and intelligent animations, the UK-made *The Gruffalo's Child* proved me dead wrong. For twenty-something mind numbingly dull minutes, we follow a Gruffalo child (voiced by underrated character actress Shirley Henderson), a mythical creature that looks like a

cross between a mammoth and a buffalo, go on a soul-searching (theoretically) quest in the dead of winter to find the Big Bad Mouse. To be fair, I must commend the animators for their richly detailed, lifelike rendering of snow, but that's all the praise I have for this mawkish trifle. It's certainly not enough to recompense the grave injustice done to the cast, who are arguably some of the best thespians Britain has to offer right now. Helena Bonham Carter's excellent voice is completely wasted in the sizable, but superfluous role of the mother of the frightened squirrels who narrates the stories, while several of the other actors like Rob Bryden and Robbie Coltraine don't have the chance to make an impression in small and unmemorable parts.

*Abiogenesis*, a New-Zealand production, is one that I admire more than like. Made on a low budget with a tiny crew, it shows us a strange machine which looks like a mishmash of C3PO, R2D2, and Lightsabers from *Star Wars*, inhabiting a barren planet, beautifying it with vegetation. It had an innovative use of sound and evocatively austere animation, yet somehow, the film as a whole left me cold.

A significant part of my disappointment with the nominees stems from the fact that the non-Oscar nominated film blew those five flicks, in terms of animation and narrative, out of the park. *Dripped*, a seven-minute triumphal French production, directed by Leo Verrier is pure artistic genius both in terms of narrative and animation. Beginning with a noirish vista of Paris, we are introduced to our protagonist, a middle aged Parisian art thief (paintings specifically), whose latest heist at a museum exhibition on Cubism. The film evokes (and more importantly maintains) a blissfully anarchic tone, as we witness the thief both figuratively and literally consume and inhabit the masterpieces he steals, in some excellently conceived montages like when the art thief, seemingly trapped on all sides by the police, ingeniously transforms himself into a Cubist spider who crawls up the wall of the building. Quite frankly, *Dripped* provides one of the most intelligent and humorous visual renderings of several of the most influential European art movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which propel a humorous and droll narrative. I feel compelled to also praise Pablo Pico, the maestro of the jazzy score which played a large role in enhancing the absurdity, chicness, and Frenchness of the film (every other film in this line up had that same generic pseudo-classical score with a chorus of flutes predictably popping up every few minutes or so). *Dripped* is worth the price of admission alone.

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