



Ryan Larkin

and
the

addictive allure of illusions

By Chris Robinson

During the summer of 1958, 15-year-old Ryan Larkin, his brother and friends were playing on a boat in a lake. Something went dreadfully wrong and Larkin's brother died. "It was a terrible boating accident. I was unable to save him. I was on the boat and was physically unable to save his life. I felt terrible and missed him greatly," Larkin would later say. The death of his brother quietly fractured the Larkin family. Something changed. "I was always the goofy little guy, and they figured I goofed up again." Nothing was ever said, but he felt his family's scorching eyes. Larkin, a man who could bring beautiful images to life, could not save the life dearest to him.

More than cocaine and alcohol addiction, the downfall of animator Ryan Larkin—from a one-time protégé of Norman McLaren and creator of one of the most influ-

ential animation films of all time, *Walking* (1968), to living on welfare in a Montreal mission house, panhandling for spending money—began that summer day in 1958. Ryan Larkin grew up in Dorval, a suburb of Montreal. His father was an airplane mechanic and his mother worked as a secretary. He proved early on to be a special child. By the age of 10, he was already making oil paintings and at 13 was accepted into the prestigious Montreal School of Fine Arts. Larkin excelled at the school and with the help of his father landed a job at the NFB. He initially worked as an animator on instructional films for the army and navy. While the content of the films was not particularly inspiring, the overall experience was pivotal for Larkin. "Ryan's first assignments," says former head of English animation, Robert Verrall, "involved the talents of René Jodoin, Sidney Goldsmith, Kaj Pindal and others, not bad company for a 19-year-old apprentice. Such programs

were part of the NFB mandate and allowed the hiring and training of people who would otherwise not have seen the inside of the place.”

At the urging of Wolf Koenig, Norman McLaren began holding after-hours sessions for young NFB artists like Larkin. Within these sessions, the artists were given a roll of 16-mm film to shoot whatever they wanted. Animation came as naturally to Larkin as drawing. “Norman said I had natural control of timing and pacing over any given object,” he says. At the same time, Larkin developed a unique technique involving stop-frame action and charcoal. Using a dense sheet of paper, he was able to draw deeply into the paper with charcoal and still erase it. Larkin made a one-minute test film called *Cityscape* (1966) utilizing this new technique.

People at the Board noticed *Cityscape* and were taken by its originality. McLaren approached Board producers and asked that Larkin be given carte blanche to make any film using the charcoal technique. “They said, ‘Here’s a budget. You’ve got three months to make any film,’” remembers Larkin. “One of Norman’s friends presented me with a solo flute piece called *Syrinx* by Claude Debussy.” Using the flute piece, Larkin then turned to the Greek myth about Pan. *Syrinx* received excellent reviews and won awards all over the world including the grand prize at a children’s festival in Iran.

After *Syrinx*, Larkin put in a proposal to do a film based on sketches he had drawn of people walking around. The proposal was accepted and Larkin was given a year to do the project. However, dreading the thought of repeating himself, the film took two years as Larkin took time perfecting new techniques. “I was developing my Oriental brush work with water colours and human figures and the way that anatomy works, expressions of human behaviour, how funny people look sometimes when they’re trying to impress each other with certain movements. I had mirrors in my little office and I would go through certain motions with my own body.” In concentrating on motion and the details of the figures, Larkin abandoned background movement for a blank white screen.

The result of this two-year project was *Walking* (1968), one of the most celebrated animation films ever made. Using a combination of line drawing and colour wash, Larkin observes the movements of a variety of urban char-

acters. He weaves colours and sounds with an extraordinarily detailed visualization of faces, bodies, gestures and postures. Following *Walking*, which received an Oscar nomination, Larkin once again returned to NFB public-service films before being loaned out to a Vancouver art school. For eight months, he ran an animation workshop. During his stay, Larkin met a group of street musicians. “There was a whole little gang of them with their own children and stuff, hippies I guess, really good musicians.” The encounter led to his next film, *Street Musique* (1972).



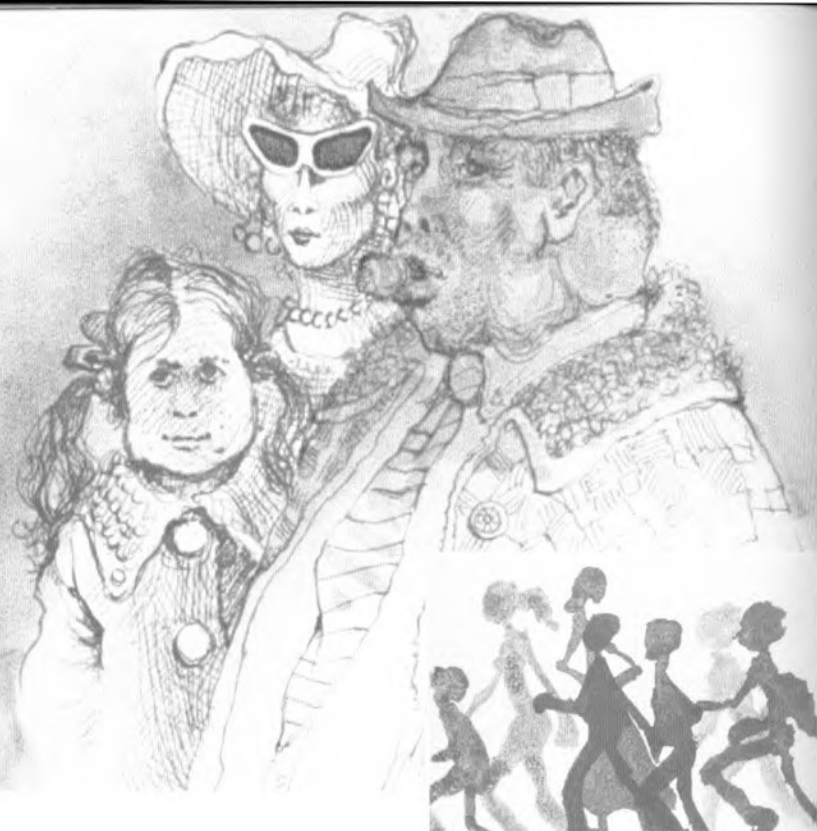
Ryan Larkin then...

“I was always the goofy little guy, and they figured I goofed up again.”

- Ryan Larkin



Scenes from *Walking*



Very much a film in search of itself, *Street Musique* opens with live-action footage of two street musicians, before changing into a staggeringly animated stream-of-consciousness piece. One of the most dazzling scenes comes in segment two with a series of extraordinary landscape impressionist paintings. The film ends rather awkwardly with the last image stopping to wait for the music. "What happened was, I ran out of ideas and I didn't know how to end the film, so I just ended it on a strange little character, wiggling away in his little dance."

Following *Street Musique*, Larkin was assigned to a feature film that the Board was working on called *Running Time* (1974). Larkin was asked to do three short animation sequences combining the actors with animation images. However, *Running Time* soon turned into a nightmare for Larkin. "I was trapped into it for four years because the executive producers kept putting it on the shelf, then there were endless committee meetings. I was getting pissed off because I was on hold. I had no other budgets or work to do." Frustrated, Larkin began working at home on his next project, *Ding Bat Rap*.

About a year later, thanks to new English producer, Derek Lamb, Larkin received a budget for *Ding Bat Rap*, but he continued to work at home. "I told my producers to trust me, I was working on the project, so they sent me my cheques by taxi." Larkin paid for the cab. His producer,

David Verrall, was given the task of bringing Larkin back into the fold. "I spent an exceptional amount of time and effort in trying to re-enable Ryan as a filmmaker here." Verrall actually managed to lure Larkin back to the NFB building for a while by giving him access to one of the new animation cameras. Eventually, Larkin, either bored or stressed, would disappear for long stretches, only to be further behind when he reappeared. In the end, Verrall reluctantly gave up.

By this time, Larkin had become a cocaine addict. "The cocaine was giving me incredible insights into human behaviour and very acute sensitivities towards what constituted human behaviour." But, with the high, came the low. The neurological stimulation gave way to backlash. A flood of ideas drowns the mind. Larkin discovered a confidence he never knew, but the pace of the magic locked him into a fantasy world. A magician trapped within the allure of his illusions, he was no longer able to work.

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- Larkin



Ryan Larkin now.

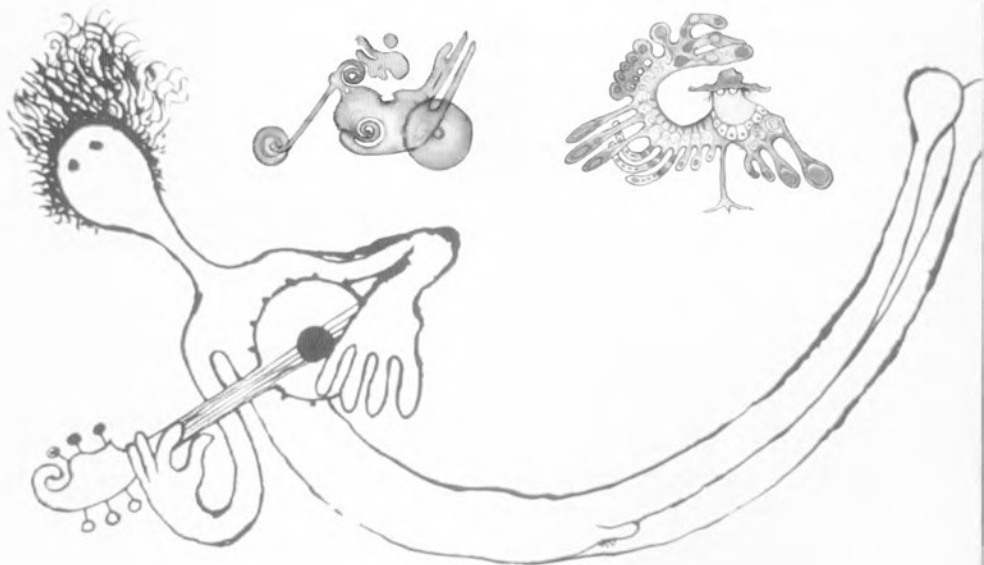
Never one to forget an encore, in 1975 Larkin was invited to create a mural for the NFB. What he drew was likely not what it had envisioned—an adolescent with an erection who may or may not have been ejaculating. The mural was 20 by 15 feet. “It was meant to be a satirical commentary on masculinity because at the time there was a year-long festival going on about women’s rights. It was supposed to be comic relief from all their self-conscious seriousness.” Ryan Larkin’s tenure at the NFB ended.

After a brief period in the late 1970s working in the private sector, Larkin was finished with the film industry. “I realized that even though I had made some good films, I was not a good filmmaker. I couldn’t meet deadlines.

“Other people were pouring out bullshit.” - Larkin



Other people were pouring out bullshit. I was becoming disheartened with the whole process of films; I was getting paid a salary for junk films.” The 1980s found Larkin, now coke free and focused on painting and sculpture, starting over again. But his generosity with people—especially junkies—came back to haunt him. Friends in need of a fix stole paintings, drawings and sculptures. By the 1990s, Larkin was penniless and homeless. He lived on the streets of Montreal briefly



before moving into the Old Brewery Mission where he currently resides. Virtually all of his art is now gone, pawned for dope, tricks or whatever was needed to survive. He now carries only what he can: a few clothes, some books and his little pop bottle for his daily beers. Many people have tried to help him over the years, but Larkin is either unwilling or unable to change.

When you watch *Walking* and *Street Musique*, they seem to foreshadow his *flâneur* existence. The lack of structure, the random, carefree nature of his films seems to mirror his own refusal of order in life. His days consist of a regular shift outside a Montreal restaurant where he performs mime, dances and draws for change. Would life for Ryan Larkin be any better if he had remained a court artist at the NFB? Larkin may not have a home, he may not have a job, but he remains an artist. This is not to say that Larkin is content with his life. He isn’t, and still suffers from alcoholism and bouts of depression. Whatever may happen down the road, though, Larkin has left the world with a quartet of passionate, delicate visual poems. Beyond that, he makes life better, if only for a second, for those walking, weary souls on St. Laurent Street. Is that so bad?

Scenes from *Street Musique*

Ryan

2004 14m *prod* Copper Heart Entertainment, NFB, *p* Steven Hoban, Jed DeCory, Karyn Nolan, Noah Segal, David Verrall, Marcy Page, Mark Smith, *d* Chris Landreth, *an* Robb Denovan, Sebastian Kapijimpanga, Paul Kohut, Jeff Panko, *ed* Allan Code, *mus* Fergus Marsh, Michael White, *narr and voices* Chris Landreth, Felicity Fanjoy, Derek Lamb, Ryan Larkin.

In 2000, I invited Ryan Larkin to serve as a member of the pre-selection committee for the Ottawa International Animation Festival. Chris Landreth was also on the committee. Neither Landreth nor the other committee members had any idea who this strange little man from Montreal was. On the last night of selection, I asked the committee members to show their films to one another. After Larkin's films *Street Musique* and *Walking* there was stunned silence. "You did these films!?" someone finally said. In a span of about 20 minutes, Ryan went from stranger to mythological hero. Everyone wanted to know what happened, what he was doing. We poured drinks and everyone gathered around Larkin as he recounted, often through tears, his downfall from golden boy at the NFB. Everyone was quiet. No one really knew what to say. Landreth didn't start planning *Ryan* until February 2001, but that July evening was the night the film began.

Landreth again uses Maya software (as he did in his Oscar®-nominated *the end* and *Bingo*) and does an extraordinary job recreating himself and Larkin as characters in the film. The interview between the two (taken from real interviews) takes place in an old, run-down cafeteria that looks like the waiting room for hell. An assortment of disfigured and, literally, broken characters occupy the space. Larkin's appearance is shocking. Landreth shows him as a fragile, incomplete person. We see the remains of what was once a face and

much of Larkin's body is twisted, busted or just not there. As Larkin reflects on his life, Landreth uses animation to create spaces and give psychological depth to the characters that simply would not be possible in live action. In one poignant scene (and there are many, including the moment when Landreth pulls out original drawings from *Walking* and shows them to an emotional Larkin), we meet Felicity, Larkin's old girlfriend. Seeing the two of them speaking face to face about what might have been is heart-breaking. It's hard to keep from crying when Ryan places his hand on Felicity's. His memories of their happy times together momentarily turn him into a younger, complete Larkin, with hippie threads and long hair, who comes to life in his award-winning film *Street Musique*. He is filled with joy and soon begins dancing with his creations.

The standout moment in the film occurs when Landreth (now wearing a halo of sorts) brings up Larkin's alcoholism. Larkin, the calm, reflective, scared, little boy, is caught off-guard. He claims that his beers are all that he has left. He doesn't want to become a tea drinker. Landreth tells him that he just wants to see him stay alive and return to filmmaking. Suddenly Larkin erupts. He stands up and takes on the appearance of a demon with red spikes jutting out of his face. Larkin berates everyone for his state. He has been robbed, and without money he has nothing. An intimidated Landreth backs off, his halo explodes and he wonders why he prodded Larkin in the first place.

The scene is powerful, mature and tense. The combination of Landreth's inventive character design fuelled by the raw, awkwardness that you could only get through a real, unscripted interview, gives this scene great intensity. This is life with all its dank, dark, dirty warts. This is the story of a real life gone astray.

Ryan is a film about failure. There is no happy ending. Landreth realizes that Larkin will not change, and the film ends

with him back working the street. But there is a glimmer of hope; Larkin may not have changed, but by knowing him, he seems to trigger change in others. By fusing innovative character design with an emotionally raw soundtrack, Landreth has delivered us into a deeper, richer psychological reality and shown us a Ryan Larkin that our eyes could never see.



Chris Robinson is the artistic director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival.