

Richard
Condie

A Night At The Opera

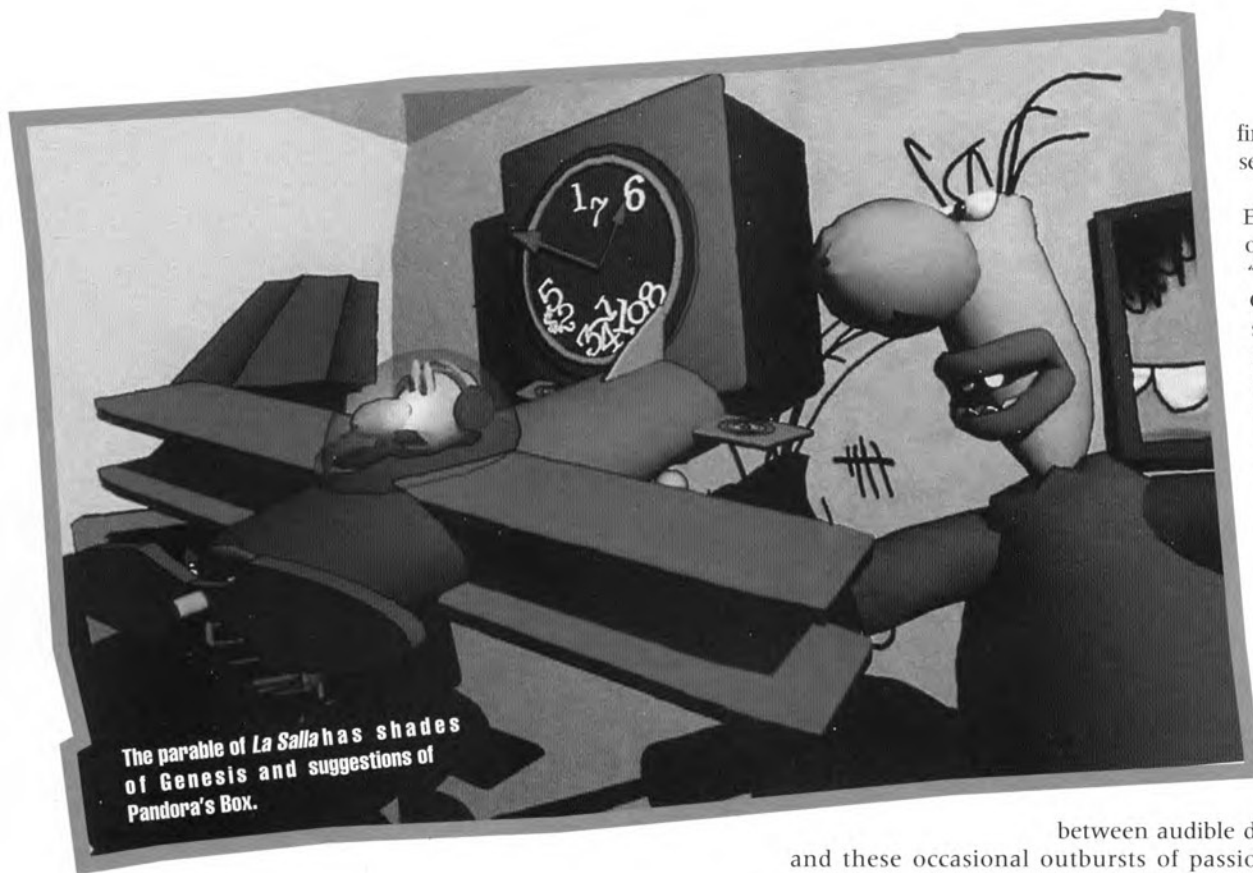
RICHARD CONDIE'S **La Salla**

by Pamela Cuthbert

All photos courtesy of the National Film Board

The films of Richard Condie have been called bizarre, personal, powerful and surreal. They have garnered the 55-year-old director two Academy Award nominations. Just back from the Oscars (where his latest film, *La Salla*, was in the running), Condie reveals himself as an artist at once intensely devoted to his work and exhausted by it. "It takes so much out of you," he says. "This last one took, from beginning to end, maybe three-and-one-half to four years in chronological time. It seemed to take about eight years out of my lifespan." The Oscar experience, by comparison to the filmmaking experience, was not arduous. It was Condie's second visit to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion and he says, "I *didn't* expect. I went in there very dispassionately. I've seen movie stars crying and all that kind of stuff, but I was just satisfied with being on the list."

Who knows why *La Salla* made the list? The Academy is plenty mysterious when it comes to its selection process. But a safe bet to explain the nomination is the singular, brilliant vision that drives the eight-minute film, from its oddly pastoral beginning (cows, green backdrop in a picture frame) to the climax, when its nameless hero with an oversized nose declares: "Moments ago, I had everything. Now there's a cow in my nose."



find those films very self-indulgent."

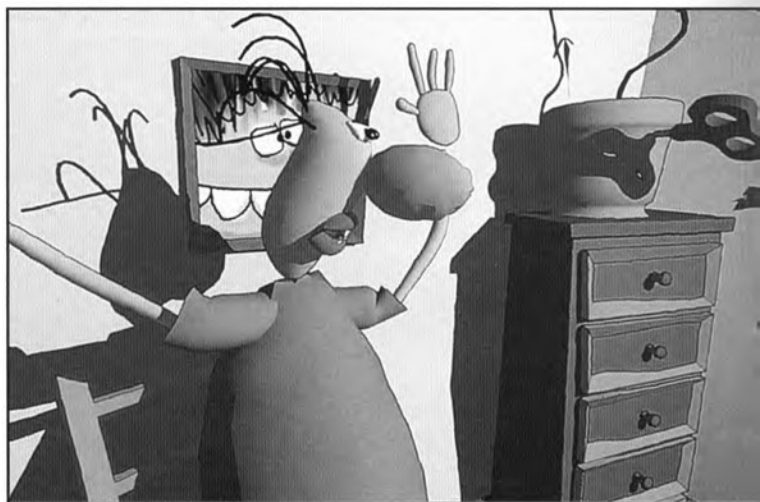
Even the mention of the word "personal" sends Condie into a similar spin, muttering about François Truffaut's *Day for Night* or Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*, and how he does not like "those films." Only when it is spelled out that "personal" does not connote navel-gazer, does he relax a bit. I wish I could see him, because

between audible drags on a cigarette and these occasional outbursts of passion, the filmmaker sounds so understated he might be in a state of half-sleep. I wonder: Are his eyes open when he's on the phone?

The amateur musician, with four film scores under his belt and a singing credit on *The Cat Came Back*, rarely works professionally in music because it "started getting uptight as soon as I started earning money." What instruments does he play? "Everything I could think of: guitars, keyboard, samplers, banging things—anything."

The parable of *La Salla* has shades of Genesis and suggestions of Pandora's Box. The music, through a very loose connection, reflects the only two operas Condie likes: *La Bohème* and *Tosca*. When the storyboard was complete, Condie says he went to see Patrick Godfrey, the film's music and sound editor, in search of "a Puccini-type sound."

Oscar-nominee *La Salla*. "Moments ago, I had everything. Now there's a cow in my nose."



All dialogue is subtitled, translated from the original (and grammatically correct) Italian. Condie is not Italian—he doesn't even speak the language—but it seemed the obvious choice for a comic opera, which is one of the many ways to describe *La Salla*. Hallucinatory allegory is another.

A boy, in his room of wondrous toys (a babbling bottle, a fish on wheels, a cannon that shoots toy cows) plays with all the attention span of a two-year-old. He happily moves from one distraction to another. In the background is a black door with a devilish mask on it, behind which is Temptation. At first, and bathing in the pleasure of his familiar and most-loved *jouets*, he ignores the ultra-red apple the door offers him. The apple successfully seduces him, however, and with machismo, he defies Temptation, crying out: "I'll show you are powerless against me." Fool. Headless fool, actually.

Judging from the sofa-sawing husband in *The Big Snit*, the aimless jester in *The Apprentice* and this fellow, Condie shows as much fondness for fools as he does disdain. Call it strength in building universal characters.

The parallels between Condie at work in his studio with his computer-animation gizmos, and *La Salla*'s hero at play in his room, have been drawn a few times by the press. Condie takes exception. Never mind the fact that his personal stamp is as bold as the lines of his vibrant images. Condie is determined to be entirely out of the frame. "In 1980 I made a film about procrastination and everybody thought it was about me," he says with disapproval, referring to the award-winning *Getting Started* which launched him into the limelight. "If you're really honest and the film is about everybody...." he trails off for a moment and returns with an emphatic: "I would never make a film that is just about me! I

La Salla is Condie's first libretto. He laughs at the word, and then talks with some audible nostalgia about where the score was written—"on a gently rocking sailboat." He was out with Godfrey on B.C.'s coast in the summer. "We couldn't work in the house so we went out in a sailboat and threw the anchor about 100 yards off of Saltspring Island. It was 25 degrees, very nice, and we just sort of made fake howling opera sounds across the water. I'm sure we could be sure heard from Seattle right up the coast."

The libretto was translated into Italian and then recorded by Jay Brazeau. Condie began animating the film. Godfrey would break down Jay's voice into frames and fax the results to Condie, who would then lip sync the character. When the picture was finished, they did the final run on the music and sound.

La Salla is the first computer-generated imagery film Condie has made, although he's had an Omega since 1987 and says he has "liked playing around with primitive art and music programs" for some time. Gradually, he became more and more enamoured of drawing on the computer. He started searching for a good 2-D program. Nothing. "There wasn't, and there still aren't, good 2-D programs and 3-D was just coming in," when he began *La Salla*. After a few years of experimenting and technological nightmares—that don't much interest Condie at this stage, but rather get underplayed by him as a necessary part of the process—Condie hooked up with Softimage and owner Daniel Langlois.

The film was done "99 per cent," says Condie, at Softimage, using Softimage 3-D (version 3.0) software. The only departure was to run the picture through two filters. "After the image was done, it looked a bit too hard-edged for me," he says. "I don't like the look of a lot of computer animation. So I tried to get it to look more like my old art work."

Adjusting to the new technique required a lobal shift for the filmmaker. "I kept making mistakes by thinking in old ways," he explains. "It's hard to say without circles and arrows and pictures, but I can say that I had to use the other side of my brain. I was used to using just the side that is intuitive. The logic side, the one that figures out sequential things, had atrophied after university, and I had to start using that again."

Does he now have a hankering to make a cel-animated film? "I'm split 50-50. It's just another technique." Condie remembers drawing since he "was very small." He can't recall any powerful urge to make films until he was 27. "I can't remember what triggered it. I know I was interested in, and continue to be interested in, music and sound and art together—and it seemed like film was the perfect combination."

We can all take pleasure in Condie's films, scratching our heads at his crazy narrative structures, laughing at his brilliant sense of humour—but he can't. Aside from an animated segment for the Imax film, *Heartland*, the idea of watching his work stirs a deep sense of horror in him. "No, God no! I would see all the mistakes, wondering

why I did that or didn't do this."

Condie likens the art of animation to whittling: "You refine and refine, and it drives you nuts." He's ruthless about when it's over: "The umbilical cord is cut as soon as the last stages of the process are done, and I don't have any feelings of either celebration or relief. It's over. I don't have any attachment to them at all. They're properties of the National Film Board."

What does Condie do with his time in between finishing one film and starting the process of a new one? "Oh, huge exhales and lying exhausted and staring at the air in front of my eyes," he says with a sigh. ■

The Big Snit. Condie likens the art of animation to whittling. "You refine and refine, and it drives you nuts."

