

Chris Landreth

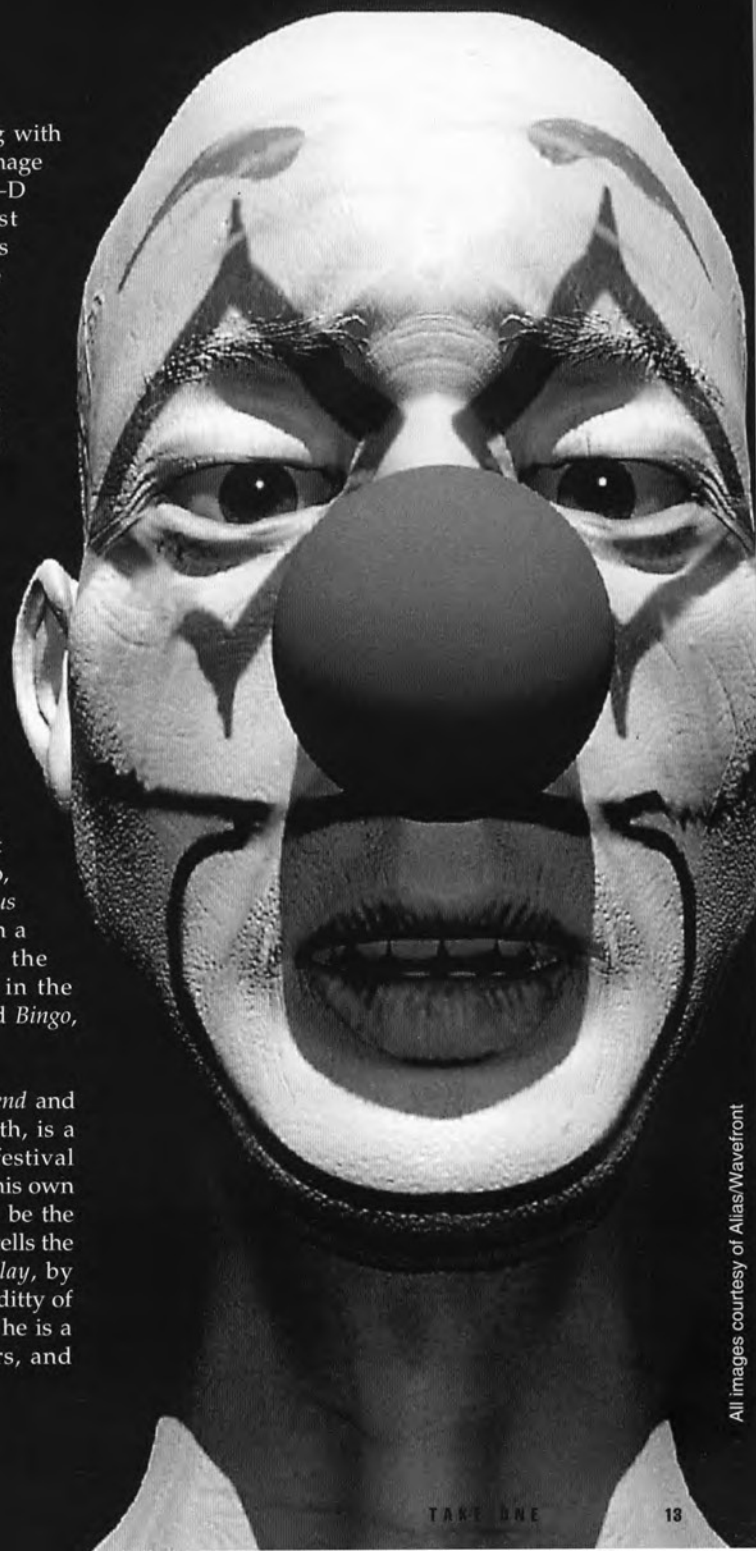
by Cynthia Amsden

Alias/Wavefront (Toronto and Santa Barbara), along with Side Effects (Toronto) and Discreet Logic and Softimage (both in Montreal) lead the world in 2-D and 3-D graphics technology. Alias/Wavefront's latest software contribution is MAYA, which allows animators to quickly and intuitively interact with the characters as digital puppets. Chris Landreth's *Bingo* is a five-minute animated short that demonstrates the new features of this software. MAYA focuses on furthering the quest for realistic hair and cloth, two items which have notoriously looked artificial in the past. An advanced model of the software permits 2-D/3-D integration. This allows 3-D objects to be added into live-action scenes and place real objects into a 3-D world. This software replaces its earlier achievement of PowerAnimator, which is what Landreth used to produce his Oscar-nominated short, *the end*.

Back in the 1980s, Chris Landreth, a postgraduate student in engineering, was faced with an employment dilemma—work for the American military because no one else could utilize his talents or find work in some unrelated field. Landreth created for himself a third option. He made his way up to Canada. That this country is a power base for comedy and animation hardly comes as a surprise: both stem from the nature of observation—one verbal, the other graphic. It was, therefore, inevitable that Landreth would find his way to Alias/Wavefront in Toronto, although there is a delicious reverse-flow irony to the idea of us taking one of the best of them. Nor is it surprising that within a year of arriving at Alias, he was working on *the end*, the seven-minute wonder that was nominated for an Oscar in the animated short film category. Then in June 1998, he delivered *Bingo*, which has again been lining the mantelpiece with awards.

Of the five pieces that Landreth has completed to date, *the end* and *Bingo* are his most notable. *the end*, also written by Landreth, is a tongue-eloquently-lodged-in-cheek satire on animation festival films. It focuses on an animator who becomes a participant in his own work as he and his drawn characters parry over what would be the best ending. "I do not exist for your animation," one character tells the animator. *Bingo* is based on a short play, *Disregard This Play*, by Chicago's Neo-Futurist Theater Company. The story is a little ditty of existentialist hell in which the central character, Dave, is told he is a clown. At first he denies, then he argues, then he dispairs, and ultimately, he concedes.

Bingo





the end: "I would rather have the control than it be in the hands of people who may not have artistic integrity as their highest priority." —Chris Landreth

The usual path leading to animation in the Great White North is through Toronto's Sheridan College. Landreth arrived via a less conventional route. Born in Hartford, Conn., he was studying thermal dynamics and fluid mechanics at the University of Illinois when he realized his studies were a pipeline to working in the military. Juxtapose that foresight with the hindsight of the content of *Bingo* and a serious dissonance occurs. A computer-animation course opened up at the University of Illinois and, as Landreth explains from the slick po-mo Alias/Wavefront offices on King Street East in Toronto, his decision to enrol in it sounds almost whimsical. His first film, a two-minute demo piece called *The Listener*, grew from this course as part of the process of learning about animation software.

Upon completion eight years ago, he was hired by the North Carolina Supercomputing Center (NCSC) where he blended his understanding of science and his ability to animate. "I was doing scientific visualization. Scientists who worked at various universities around the Raleigh-Durham area would use the NCSC as a resource for doing computations for their own piece of science. I would work with them as an animator and an artist to visual their data." His second film, *Caustic Sky*, and third, *Data Driven: The Story of Franz K.*, both came out of NCSC, except *Data Driven* incorporated a character as a method by which to test software. Three years later, Alias/Wavefront invited him to Canada to act "as an on-site client" to test its software which is currently being used by DreamWorks SKG, Pixar, Pacific Data Images, The Walt Disney Co. and Industrial Light & Magic.

At first blush, Landreth's job description appears less glamorous than that of someone like Steve Williams of Absolute Pandemonium in San Francisco. Any school child

worth his weight in fast-food burgers knows Williams's shape-shifting T-1000 from *Terminator 2* or his T-Rexes from *Jurassic Park*. None of them know Landreth's Bingo the Clown. Williams works on a 137-minute canvas while Landreth works in a six-minute format. Williams has the glory and Landreth has the freedom. Ironically, the feature-length format offers "a lot less playroom. Right now, it costs a lot of money to do something like *Antz* or *A Bug's Life*, so you have investors and a stake in producing something that will be a box-office success. You don't have the freedom to experiment with a new kind of storytelling," Landreth explains.

Landreth is keenly aware of what is going on in the assembly line of Hollywood. "In the case of *Antz*, Pacific Data Images is barely making \$100 million, which is a lot of money, but it is just meeting expectations. Pixar's *A Bug's Life* is, to date, going to clear \$300 million, if it hasn't already, and even with that kind of monstrous revenue, they have a business model that is just being fulfilled. If they had made \$200 million, things would be a lot more problematic." On a more visceral level, it's a matter of control. "I would rather have the control than it be in the hands of people who may not have artistic integrity as their highest priority," says Landreth. His films test the software and create demos which help Alias/Wavefront sell its product to a hungry market. "A project like *Bingo* does both of those things. From the company's standpoint, it was to show what the software could do. My personal goal was to tell a cool story and create a piece of art out of it."

There are two venues for films like *Bingo* and *the end*. The first is computer-graphic trade shows and conferences where potential customers and colleagues can see it. "You could call them geek fests; a community of people I've known for years and something like *Bingo* or *the end* is very integral." Then

there are the film festivals. Landreth is a veteran of the circuit. "Bingo is going to the festivals. It was at Sundance (I didn't even submit it, they asked for the film to be there) and the Toronto Worldwide Short Film Festival." It was also at the Aspen Short Film Festival, where it won the award for best animation, and it was at the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival, where it won the Best Short Film.

Admittedly, shorts, particularly animated shorts, are "ghettoized" at a feature-film event. But there are advantages. Landreth gets new ideas from independent filmmakers, and he likes the reactions of the *humana genuinus* to his *humana virtualis*. "You get more of a sense that there's novelty. They look at *Bingo* and it's like nothing they've seen, so there's a sense of disorientation combined with a sense of wonder." He confesses to enjoying the two opposing reactions equally. It would be fair to say Landreth has a dark side except that notion was mainstreamed by Darth Vader years ago; and Landreth, with his long hair pulled into a ponytail, doesn't even pretend to wear a virtual suit. However, the Canadian CGI industry swirling around him is very corporate. "It's not just a bunch of samurai computer animators out there, at least for these larger shops. That sort of thing can happen in very small, boutique studios." He has his "guilty pleasures in animation" like Disney's *Aladdin* and his drums—African, he specifies—so there is no inadvertent imagery of him in a garage with a snare drum. And he draws. "Analogue-based stuff...you know, pencil and ink. An absolutely necessary thing to do. You've got to get away from the keyboard."

Still, *Bingo* is itchy. "Itchy?" He slowly repeats the term as if it is somehow alien in the smooth, cold and *uber*-coded world of animation. "Like it makes people uncomfortable or that it's dark or that it's edgy? I don't know what you mean by itchy. Do you mean that there's a dark, uncomfortable, disturbing element?" Landreth could host a Kafkaesque house party with the aplomb of Martha Stewart. He then, very delicately, explains the inner message in *Bingo*. The delicacy comes from his historical reference which, while frighteningly apt, is a less-than-politically-correct invocation. "There's a quote from Adolf Hitler where he says, 'if one tells a lie, a shrewd lie, and one tells it repeatedly, forcefully, unremittingly, people can be led to believe that heaven is hell and hell is heaven. The more outrageous the lie, the more likely people will believe it.' I've always been struck by that comment because it is a kind of brazen evil, and second it's unfortunately been an accurate perception in history." This he imparts just in case there is the likelihood of *Bingo* ever being shown at a children's birthday party.

Bingo and MAYA software beget the chicken-and-egg question. A film of this metaphorical nature could not have been executed in Disney's classical cartoon style. "MAYA software is capable of a great deal of realism, and realism is an aspect of what I think gives *Bingo* a lot of power. CGI has the ability to exaggerate reality to bring in an element of caricature that live action can't do. At the same time, it brings in realism that traditional animation can't do to create a world where you can express the psychological element of a character."

Landreth is more comfortable answering questions that don't delve into the abstracts of his art. For instance, he's enthusiastic about describing his favourite character in *Bingo* which is,

unexpectedly, the most diminutive—the little girl with the popping balloons. She is "the most baffling mix of innocence and menace." But he didn't envision her, *per se*. She arrived on the screen by default. Her balloons had to pop at the ear level of the seated adult character, Dave. Therefore, the balloons had to stay low; therefore, it had to be a short person carrying them; therefore, it was a little girl. A deductive piece of cake.

In spite of the highly technical orientation of CGI and the intensely mechanical background of some of the animators, the point of computer animation is artistically based, which is not to say that the objective of CGI is to duplicate photorealism. "I mean, the animation in *Bingo* has photorealistic elements, but I'm not trying to fool you into thinking that it's real actors up there. There's always some element of exaggeration or caricature or there's always some metaphor going on. That's where computer graphics really shines, as far as creating original animations with original concepts. It's not just trying to recreate reality. It exaggerates or twists it some way to drive home a story or a point."

A decade ago, Landreth might well have ended up with the U.S. military. As it stands now, while he has come a long, circuitous way from the University of Illinois, he has not yet been exposed to the hard, cold reality of the filmmaking street. He luxuriates in the ivory tower of Canadian software design. ♦

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