



Cuppa

Coffee

## Brews Up a Special Blend of Animation

By Paul Eichhorn

When people think about animation today, most get a mental image of computer nerds working their magic on super-computers. That image certainly doesn't apply to Toronto-based Cuppa Coffee Animation. True, the firm has computers and utilizes some of the latest software programs, but the animation it does is noticeably low-tech and people creating it are more artists than tech-heads.

"The backbone of our company is the artists that we employ," explains Cuppa Coffee president and executive producer, Adam Shaheen, who comes from an artistic background. He has a fine arts degree and began his career as an illustrator and photographer. His initial professional work was creating hard copy-based photo collages for advertisements, book jackets, CD covers and magazine images. These artistic roots continue to thrive at Cuppa Coffee today. "I hire artists, not tech-heads. It's true that we do use technology in our work but we're creatively driven." Shaheen adds that it's people's minds generating animation, not machines. Cuppa Coffee's studios are located in a converted warehouse space that also houses art galleries, artist-run collectives and visual art magazines. Even its offices reveal its artistic side with walls plastered with images and objects from previous projects. These wall displays reflect the unique nature of Cuppa Coffee's animation style.

Instead of using traditional cel animation or high-tech CGI, Cuppa Coffee works with everything from puppets and clay figures to live-action footage to rotoscoped scratching on film. This mixed-media animation is later digitized. That's when the

firm embraces technology and the combination has resulted in unique look that Cuppa Coffee describes in its marketing materials as "Cuppaesque." A good example of the firm's work was showcased in an ad for Coca-Cola. The piece began as a five-foot-long boxy wooden sculpture of the company's logo created by sculptor Rich Borge. It was then taken apart and the firm experimented with ways to animate it. These images were then mixed with live-action footage and hand-drawn icons all moving within a series of boxes from the original sculpture.

Cuppa Coffee's low-tech approach was used to pitch and later win the job of creating the opening titles for David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ*. During a tour of the 12,000-square-foot studio space, Shaheen points out a large wooden panel with small boxes containing various elements from the film, including a computer circuit board, an illustration of a human spine and maps. This collage was lit up and placed in a studio when it was pitched to Cronenberg. The film titles are a combination of elements from this piece, which were initially digitized and then put onto film. The final product is subtle yet powerful, especially when combined with Howard Shore's hypnotic, dream-like score.

In its early years, Cuppa Coffee worked primarily on TV station identifications or fillers for MuchMusic, Teletoon and CBC programs such as *Comics*. The firm now does the majority of its work for U.S.-based clients including Nickelodeon, ESPN, The Disney Channel, Turner Classic Movies and HBO. A major coup for Shaheen and his team was being able to animate the HBO educational children's game show *Crashbox*. The series creators, Planet Grande, asked Cuppa Coffee to animate 13 hours of programming in just seven months. Shaheen admits it was a challenge after working primarily on short format projects. *Crashbox* takes place in a computer. Children are led through various games such as Super Pooper Scooper, "a true or false" about zoology. Each game uses different types of animation ranging from puppetry to live-action sequences. Shaheen says the firm is currently pitching new TV series projects. "There's been a mood change in the business. More people are looking to the mixed media, live-action animation we do."

Cuppa Coffee does very little work in Canada these days. Shaheen recalls how a U.S. sales representative told him about a project being shopped around by a Canadian broadcaster to American animators. Ironically, Shaheen had unsuccessfully pitched for the same project for a lower budget back home. He admits there's still a feeling among some Canadians that better work is being done south of the border. This sort of experience doesn't bruise Cuppa Coffee's ego. It has received dozens of awards worldwide and Shaheen proudly says clients "love what we do." For instance, Cuppa Coffee recently worked on several animated bumpers and interstitials for HBO titles including *Cool Tips That'll Make You Hip!*, *Smart Mouth with Dora Smarmy* and *Who Knew?* Elaine Brown, creative director of new channel development for HBO, says Cuppa Coffee was a natural choice to do these 30-second fillers after working on *Crashbox*. "They are very talented and collaborative and give 200 per cent on everything they do. They give it a lot of thought and deliver something extra and something exceptional. Their animation is very distinct and fresh. It's cutting edge."

Shaheen emphasizes that Cuppa Coffee has won over clients such as HBO because of its multitalented group of 26 freelancers. He says using freelancers opens up a huge body of talent. People still have time to work on personal projects. For instance, Shaheen encourages his people to make personal film projects that can be submitted in film festivals. He says this keeps their creative juices flowing and ultimately shows up in work they do at Cuppa Coffee. "We're an experimental company always using new styles and techniques." ●