



MONKEY BUSINESS

KATRYNA STORACE MEETS MARTIN BONNIČI
 – WRITER, DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER OF
 ‘TELE-MONKEY’, THE FIRST LOCALLY PRODUCED
 STEREOSCOPIC-3D ANIMATED SHORT FILM

Photography by Gerald Manduca – www.photoanddesignstudio.com

Martin Bonniči is no rookie when it comes to film-making. He has been actively involved in the audio-visual industry for a while: several years of working in post-production animation with a local production house have helped him garner the experience he needed to embark on an ambitious project much closer to his heart. Over a coffee and roll-up cigarette, he talks to me animatedly about *Tele-Monkey*. “*Tele-Monkey* is an experiment. The idea was to write up a very simple story that could be entertaining. It is a test to see how far we can push animation locally. It is also a film in Stereoscopic 3D – which is easier to attempt in animation than in live action.”

Now working as a freelancer, *Tele-Monkey* is a project Martin has nurtured from its conception, and which he is finally seeing through to its conclusion. “It all started with the writing, about four years ago,” he tells me. “Writing, note-taking, revisiting... Eventually, I finalised the screenplay. I assembled a team, taking my time to choose the right people. We put together the project, applied for funding, and when this came through, we got started. Production began in July 2010, when the character of Joe – the monkey – was fully prepared to be animated.”

Tele-Monkey is a short animated film of about six minutes. It revolves around the character of Joe, who is obsessed with searching for the hidden meaning behind the widespread advertising and teleshopping that clutter his life. Joe inhabits a world that fuses together elements of Time Square, Chinese housing estates, and Malta, with some of the towering buildings having features found exclusively in Valletta’s architecture. Everywhere he goes, everywhere he looks, Joe is confronted by signs trying to sell him something. In the end, his quest ends with an answer to

his questions, despite this not being the answer he was looking for.

As far as animation goes, *Tele-Monkey* is the first of its kind to be produced exclusively in Malta. “It is a first on a lot of levels,” Martin points out. “There are eight people working on the project – it’s the first time we’ve had such a diverse team working together on an animated project. We’re all professionals in the industry. Animation is usually very in-house, more of a one-man project in Malta. It is also the first Stereoscopic 3D project – we haven’t seen anything of the sort done before, especially of this quality.” ▶



Martin Bonnici
Writer, Director and Producer

Tele-Monkey is also the first animated short film to have benefitted from the Malta Film Fund – a much-needed boost which helped move the project out of its conceptual phase and into actual production. “When we got accepted by the Malta Film Fund, it was kind of scary,” admits Martin. “It meant that we actually had to get started. It was a big learning process, and involved a large element of personal sacrifice. We got only a third of the project financed so we all had to keep our day jobs to help fund the rest. Everyone involved has worked at half their usual rates, deferring payment until later. We also got sponsored by three local companies, Beagle Works, Studio 7 and iTV Shopping. Short films never recoup all the money spent though... but it’s a good calling card to show what we’re capable of producing.”

Martin is adamant that the work he and his colleagues are producing should contribute to setting the bar for the level of work that is produced locally. “My end goal,” he explains, “is to play a part in expanding the film-making industry. A project like *Tele-Monkey* is meant to prove that we can reach beyond national limitations. It’s still a first step – there are still areas we need to improve – but it’s a great stepping stone, and we’ve received good feedback.”

The biggest drawback, he finds, is the general lack of standards under which the audio-visual industry operates. This tends to jeopardise the quality of what is produced, and reduces Malta’s chances of competing with a foreign market. “The local industry needs to professionalise and open up more,” he says. “Bigger investment in quality is needed. TV stations have little or no standards – they will accept anything as long as they’re filling their airtime. If you take foreign stations – the BBC, for example – it has a whole list of standards, which are very difficult to meet. This obviously improves the quality of what appears on the station. This lack of standards puts us at a disadvantage because anyone can produce an animation, for example, and get it aired on TV.”

Tele-Monkey will be screened for the first time at the Empire Cinemas in Carnival of this year – www.tele-monkey.com

Is this situation worsened by the fact that there is a general lack of critical filters in place to help with enforcing such standards? “In the creative field, anything goes,” Martin replies quite bluntly. “Take newspaper reviews, for example – they offer a summary, but no professional opinions are given, there is no real criticism. To give a more specific example: *The Devil’s Double* is a really awful film, but was hailed as a ‘blockbuster’ by some critics because it was filmed largely in Malta. If it’s not a blockbuster, let’s not call it one. Let’s call it what it is,” he says with some exasperation.

Indeed, for someone who sticks his neck out striving to achieve quality, Martin is irked by the overall laissez-faire attitude often shown in this regard, which he feels can only achieve mediocre results. “It really gets to me when people use the phrase ‘tajjeb għal Malta,’ he explains. “We shouldn’t be setting our own standards. We’re part of a global community, and if they have standards we should try to reach them. Here in Malta, it is a constant fight between the few that want to achieve better standards and those who are happy with what they have.”

Despite Martin’s professional approach to what he does, he acknowledges that he is bound by several limitations. “The biggest problem with a project of this kind is time. It’s a big leap of faith. There’s always an element of risk. We couldn’t dedicate a block of time to work on *Tele-Monkey* full-time for, say, four months at a stretch. You need to find a balance between commercial work and creative, artistic projects. Ultimately you must ask yourself: will I make enough money to be able to pay for those things not covered by funding?” By the look on Martin’s face, this is more of a rhetorical question than anything else.

Now that the project is nearing completion, has the risk started to pay off? “I’m finally seeing the scenes coming together and thinking to myself, ‘it’s working,’” he says. “I can’t wait to finish it now, and to move on to something new.” **G**



From left to right: Ivan Saliba, lead 3D artist; Aleksander Bundalo, sound designer; Michael Quinton and Alex Spiteri from *Spooky Monkey*, composers; Matthew Grima Connell, production designer; and Benji Borg, lead animator