

## Animators Unearthed: *Tower Bawher* by Theodore Ushev

In this month's Animators Unearthed, Chris Robinson profiles the influences behind Theodore Ushev's *Tower Bawher*.

Influenced by Russian constructivist artists like Dziga Vertov and the Stenberg Brothers, and featuring the dynamic score *Time, Forward* by Russian composer Georgy Sviridov (which Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin also used effectively in his short film, *The Heart of the World*) a litany of lines, shapes, colors and sounds storm across and around the screen of Theodore Ushev's *Tower Bawher*. They go up. They go down. They come together and just as quickly fall apart. *Tower Bawher* is an intense existentialist film about our often frustrating and restless drive to fight through the muddle and clutter of mediocrity and suppression in search of *the stuff* that makes us. In the end, though, the paradox is that no matter how far we climb, seek, or find, everything falls apart. Things come together, but only for a moment. That's the route of the ride.

Incredibly, *Tower Bawher* (For the record, bawher is a bit of a nonsense word. "Tower in Russian is *baschnia*," Ushev explains. "But because of the Cyrillic alphabet, a foreigner will read it like *bawhr*, so *Tower Bawher* was perfect (Bauhaus, Bauer... ) was made in just a few weeks. "I start doing it one night in April [2005]. I was in a deep depression. My movie [Ushev was making a children's film for the National Film Board of Canada] was not going well." During a particularly restless night, Ushev woke up and remembered an idea he had to use the score, *Time, Forward*, by Russian composer, Georgy Sviridov. "For many years," remembers Ushev, "this piece was the music for the evening news of the Soviet state TV. This program was broadcast every Friday."

While the television hummed in the background, Ushev's father worked on his own personal drawings and paintings, and also on more conventional propaganda posters that he made solely to earn a living. The memories of these Friday nights struck a chord with Ushev. "It was like an absurdist stage decoration. Before the news, there was usually a Russian children's program on. Typically it featured very, very slow Russian animations like Norstein's *Hedgehog in the Fog*. I'd fall asleep immediately. Then, suddenly, I'd be awakened by the uplifting Sviridov music, with turning globes, and the lines of the dynamic building of Communism."

And so it was during a sleepless night in April that Ushev decided to make the movie. Five weeks later the finished film found its way to my desk. "I was not able to sleep during the entire process. It was like being in a trance, like I travelled back 30 years with a time machine. I didn't think about festivals, or if the movie will be finished. I was just diving into my memories, like a 'Cartesian theater.' It was like a letter. I was in a hurry to show it to my father, because I planned to make a short vacation in Bulgaria. It was done for him."

Before Ushev hit the road back to Bulgaria, he showed the film to producer Marc Bertrand of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Bertrand liked the film immediately. "Théo showed me the film with the Sviridov music," recalls Bertrand, "and I was really moved by the perfect 'marriage' between the picture and the music. Théo was working at the NFB Studio at the time on *Tzaritza* [the aforementioned children's film], so he was not eligible for a FAP [Filmmakers Assistance Programme] grant." When Bertrand asked Ushev what he planned on doing with *Tower*, Ushev had no answer. "My only goal was to show it to my father." Bertrand convinced him to finish the film with the NFB. "It felt natural," adds Bertrand, "to finish the film in the best condition possible and to finally produce it." Ushev agreed.

Bertrand showed the film around the NFB and everyone was impressed. There was just one problem — no one could determine who owned the copyrights to the music. Sviridov died in 1998 and, according to a Copyright Canada document, dated Sept. 13, 2005: "the person who inherited his copyright has since passed away... (and) that the copyright entitlement over the works of Sviridov is the object of a dispute before the Russian civil courts that will not be resolved for some time yet." After Copyright Canada rejected the application, the NFB decided to negotiate directly with the Russians.

"It became a nightmare," says Ushev, "but the NFB helped me enormously. Their entire legal department was involved into the process. It is really incredible how difficult is to deal with the Russians. Everything that seems easy becomes complicated. So, even when the bureaucrats tease an artist, he cannot live without them. It is like a family, they hate each other, but cannot live without. And the next morning are in love again."

Fortunately, the copyright issues — which somehow seem appropriate for a film that, in part, deals with the uneasy relationship between art and state — were solved just in time for *Tower Bawher* to have its world premiere at the Ottawa 2005 International Animation Festival last September.

Ushev credits the NFB for more than just taking on *Tower Bawher*: "Before starting at the NFB, animation was a hobby for me. I made Internet movies, put them online and forgot about them. Suddenly I felt responsible. I couldn't do this movie if I was not working at NFB. If there were not people at the NFB like Marcel Jean, Marc Bertrand, Christine Noël, and Michèle Bélanger, it couldn't happen."

"*Tower Bawher* was a therapy," admits Ushev, who moved to Canada from Bulgaria in 1999. "I did it to cure myself from my memories. Every child of an artist tries to escape from his mighty shadow, and to create his own world. And almost no child can do it."

*Tower* is more than just a search for self and an ode to a father. It is also a tribute to those artists who continually struggle to escape from the ominous and numbing shadows of bureaucracy and censorship. It's appropriate that *Tower Bawher* has become an NFB film. For more than 60 years, the NFB has struggled, successfully and unsuccessfully, with that precarious relationship between artist

and bureaucrat. And, really, it's the struggle that counts. It's the struggle that's life.

I'm a big fan of coincidence. As I sit here writing this text on Jan. 31, 2006, a package just arrived. Inside is Ushev's latest NFB film, *The Man Who Waited*. Including his upcoming children's film, this is Ushev's third film in under a year. Based on a Franz Kafka story, *The Man Who Waited* continues Ushev's quest for truth. It's like the man said: "I can't go on, I'll go on."

*Chris Robinson has been with the Ottawa International Animation Festival since 1991. A noted animation critic, curator and historian, he has become a leading expert on Canadian and international independent animation. His acclaimed OIAF programming has been regarded as both thoughtful and provocative. In May 2004, Robinson was the recipient of the President's Award given by the New York chapter of animators for contributions to the promotion of independent animation.*

*His books include Between Genius and Utter Illiteracy: A Story of Estonian Animation, Ottawa Senators: Great Stories from the NHL's First Dynasty, Unsung Heroes of Animation, Great Left Wingers, and Stole This From a Hockey Card: A Philosophy of Hockey, Doug Harvey, Identity & Booze.*

*An anthology of Robinson's [Animation Pimp](#) columns will be published in 2006. He is currently working on Fathers of Night, a novel about angels, devils and everything in-between. Robinson lives in Ottawa with his wife, Kelly, and son, Jarvis.*

---

© 1996 - 2006 AWN, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced without the written consent of AWN, Inc.