

Animated short lands Montrealers second Oscar nod

T'CHA DUNLEVY

Montrealers Chris Lavis and Maciek Szczerbowski are going back to the Oscars with a magical ode to their adoptive hometown. Their enchanting NFB production *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* is nominated for best animated short film.

“It feels terrific, I have to admit it,” Lavis said Thursday morning, just hours after the announcement. “It was a five-year journey to make this film. You don’t make a film for that kind of validation at the end, but we worked really hard on it.”

Featuring a twinkling instrumental score by their longtime friend and collaborator Patrick Watson and a heartfelt voice performance by Colm Feore, the film tells the story of a destitute boy living in the streets of St-Henri in early 20th-century Montreal. He is offered a way out when he encounters a down-on-her-luck girl who weeps pearls of sorrow at night. The next morning, he brings them to a scheming pawnbroker and is faced with a moral quandary.

Watson assembled an orchestra of musicians including Arcade Fire’s Richard Reed Parry on upright bass, Godspeed You! Black Emperor’s Sophie Trudeau on violin, Brad Barr on guitar and Rebecca Foon on cello. Lavis also highlights the contributions of art director Brigitte Henry and many other talented Montrealers to the project.

“The way a story takes shape is mysterious,” Szczerbowski said. “I guess we wanted to repay a cultural debt to the city we live in, to use all the nourishment we’ve got from the sickeningly amazing art scene around us, all our talented friends and collaborators.”

“We (also) reached deep into the well of history and art,” Lavis said. “There are elements of our love of Mordecai Richler and Gabrielle Roy in this, even though it’s an original story. We wanted to add to that continuum of fables about Montreal.”

The streets are imbued with “mystery and fantasy that we’re sometimes too depressed to notice,” Szczerbowski noted. He



Montrealers Maciek Szczerbowski, left, and Chris Lavis at the NFB offices in Montreal on Thursday. Their NFB film, *The Girl Who Cried Pearls*, has been nominated for an Oscar. ALLEN MCINNIS

and Lavis were each inspired by their young daughters, whom they wanted to make “hyper-aware of the fantastical nature of this city and what it’s like to live in a place filled with mythology and an original identity.”

The two first went to the Academy Awards in 2008 with their NFB animated short *Madame Tutli-Putli*, which screened at the Cannes Film Festival the year before.

“It’s weird going back, for sure,” Szczerbowski said. “The first time we were there, our friend Phil Tippet — an amazing artist responsible for some of our favourite scenes in *Star Wars* — said, ‘Don’t forget to have all the fun you can

because you’ll never be back here again.’ So we did.”

Realizing that they are, indeed, going back is “completely surreal,” he added.

Like *Madame Tutli-Putli*, *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* was made using stop-motion animation, which Szczerbowski calls “a painstaking process — that pretty much describes it. I would even say mind-numbing pain.”

The punishment paid off. *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* is a visually stunning film using real puppets that are moved a little at a time and photographed frame by frame. The effect is both enchantingly real and otherworldly.

Adding to the film’s mystique and, surprisingly, its emotional texture is the fact that through most of story, the puppets’ faces don’t change. Again, the filmmakers point to their daughters’ influence.

“The style of puppetry here is very much inspired by playing with our kids and seeing the magical way they related to the puppets,” Lavis said. “We realized the puppets have incredible power, even without their mouths moving.”

AT A GLANCE

The 98th Academy Awards take place on Sunday, March 15. *The Girl Who Cried Pearls* can be streamed for free at nfb.ca

Author and ‘agitator’ Engler guilty of harassing officer, judge rules

PAUL CHERRY

Yves Engler, the Montreal author and self-described “agitator,” was found guilty Friday of harassing an investigator with the Montreal police hate-crimes division last year by arranging to have her email box flooded with messages from his followers.

Quebec Court Judge Guylaine Rivest found Engler, 46, guilty of obstructing the work of Det.-Sgt. Francesca Crivello and two counts of harassment.

Early last year, Crivello was investigating a complaint alleging Engler harassed a Toronto woman

on X, formerly known as Twitter, over a disagreement about the Israel-Hamas war.

Engler was also charged with harassing the woman, but that charge was withdrawn in July.

During Engler’s trial, Crivello told the court he was “cordial” with her when she contacted him and told him he was being investigated. She said they discussed the possibility of turning himself in at a Montreal police station. Engler has been arrested in the past at protests and appeared to know the drill.

The following morning, Crivello said, she noticed that her work email



Yves Engler

inbox was being bombarded with messages from people across Canada, mostly with the heading: “Drop charges against author Yves Engler.”

Crivello told the court she “saw

this as intimidation because I was still working on my investigation.”

She also said she received more than 1,000 messages the first day alone.

Christopher Audy, a Montreal police expert on social media, testified at Engler’s trial that the emails seemed to have been generated from a website run by Engler that included a form letter with Crivello’s email address.

“It was very difficult to work under these conditions. Audy described (the messages) as aggressive,” the judge said on Friday.

“The accused knew he was followed by many people on all of his

social media accounts. He knew that his request would be carried out by many due to his notoriety on social media.

“He had the intention of obstructing the work of the peace officer by the reception of all those emails referencing the charges he was facing, or at least he could have foreseen it with a high degree of certainty.”

The case will enter the sentencing stage in March.

Before his trial began, Engler hoped to run as a candidate for the leadership of the NDP, but in December he said the federal party disqualified his candidacy.

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