

In Betweening Canadian Animation
(work-in-progress excerpt from forthcoming book,
Looking For a Place to Happen: In Search of
Canadian Animation)

By Chris Robinson

Between January and March 2007, writer Chris Robinson (also Artistic Director of the Ottawa International Animation Festival) travelled across the country interviewing studio executives for a Canadian Heritage report on the animation industry. Along the way, Robinson interviewed animators in Vancouver, Calgary, Halifax, Toronto and Montreal for his forthcoming book, *Looking for A Place to Happen: In Search of Canadian Animation* (John Libbey Publishing, September 2008). The book, dedicated to the late animator, Helen Hill, will fuse memoir, criticism and interviews as Robinson delves into Canadian animation, art, creativity, depression and death.

The following are the unedited travel notes from Robinson's stop in Montreal, where he interviewed animators Alison Loader, Munro Ferguson, Chris Hinton, Malcolm Sutherland, Craig Welch, Michele Cournoyer, Theodore Ushev, Janet Perlman, Diane Obomsawin, Stephen Woloshen, Martine Chartrand, Nicholas Brault, Claude Cloutier, Chris Landreth and Toril Kove.

So yeah, booze is under control, but not the mood. No doubt I have depression. No fucking doubt. The fact that I understood some of what Arthur Lipsett had experienced pretty much convinced me. Kelly knows. She wants me to get help. I always refused medication, but maybe there is no choice. Yet why did my mood lighten the moment I left the house? Ha... cover of Newsweek in train station has feature on men and depression. I bought it.

When I'm irritable, I am very capable of no return. Not entirely convinced I'm suicidal, but I have an explosive temper and could hurt/kill in a flash. Fortunately... I guess I usually just verbally abuse. Just like Mom did to me. Maybe that's the way I should have approached her.

When Jarvis was getting diagnosed as ADD, the doctor said repeatedly, "It's not his fault." On the way to the train station, Kelly said, "It's not your fault." I almost cried right there. Why does she

keep trying? I have done nothing to deserve it. 99% of the rest would have ditched me ages ago. But is it the choices I've made that fuel the depression or do I make those choices when I'm with, as Winston Churchill called it, "the black dog."

Something has to change. If I'm a car, I've had a lot of close calls...too many. An accident, a bad one, is inevitable if this keeps up.

Arriving in Montreal. There's my favourite sight, the Farine Five Roses sign. It's a big old factory and the red neon sign is a lonely beacon from a time past. Then there's Costco. I wonder if that wingnut old goalie Gilles Gratton works there. He thought he was a Spanish conquistador in a past life. Also had one of the coolest goalie masks ever.

Spent the night at Theo's house. Svetla always makes a big dinner. We ate and watched the NFB win Oscars. *The Danish Poet* wasn't one of my faves, but it was the best in the category. Was a strong year in animation shorts, but yet again the Academy screwed up. I assure Theo that our Lipsett film has no remote chance for an Oscar. Hell, it won't even win in Ottawa.

We bus to the NFB. What a fucking wasteland. It's far out from downtown facing the highway and surrounded by car dealerships. The building itself could be confused with any old factory. Feel like we're heading to work – just needs some smoke from the chimney. Sure, the inside is more important than the outside. Besides they make auteur not assembly line films.

I can write just about anywhere. With new technologies animators can stay at home too. One day the NFB will probably head that way. Sell off the building and move to smaller digs. But, hey, I like the people there and I think they can make fun of it all too. Still, freaks me out to see Maral at the NFB. She was such an important part of the OIAF's turnaround.

Anyway, after my Canadian Heritage-related meeting with NFB producers, I recorded the Lipsett script for Theo. Was strange reading it aloud. Some of the passages were completely me, taken from my life, but now they were Lipsett's and Theo's, too. And the fact that my words mesh so well with Lipsett's, well, it's a bit fucking alarming to be honest. I'm not suicidal, but will I be? Will the frustration of my moods, temper, and cynicism eventually push me to the brink? Probably. Strange how this Lipsett adventure is connected to Larkin. If Larkin was about booze and confronting it, Lipsett is the next step: facing the other demon that was suppressed by the booze 'demon'. But where does the depression end and I begin? How much did having Harrison, returning to the

OIAF full time, writing two books in a few months and now this report... how heavy is the impact? My moods weren't so bad the year before all this. This is the challenge yet again: where am I in the mix?

What about this animation community? Is this where I should be? I don't really care how the films are made, technically speaking. I don't give a shit about the craft. I'm attracted to the people and, I guess, their ideas. Or am I? Is this just feeding? What have I given back? That's too harsh. I've given a lot. I pushed the OIAF down a harder road, stuck to my 'indie' guns instead of showing the same ol' popular shit. Yeah... okay... there's been give and take. Who knows what the next director will bring?

After another day of Heritage work, I hook up with Janet Perlman. Her dog Felix is great. Won't leave me alone the entire time I'm interviewing her. Sometimes informal interviews don't work well. I rely on improv and inspiring the subject. This one doesn't work so well.

Nearing the end. Burned out. I'm a wimp. No booze, smokes, or drugs. Yet I'm exhausted. The industry stuff is exhausting. No morals. Everyone racing without asking "why?". The assault of images and product. Why? 'Cause the consumer demands it. Always the answer. Fuck the consumer. Since when do people know what's good for them? Sure, on one hand we are a society more in touch with people, but which people? We speak with friends in another country but still don't know our neighbours. I just see these industry folks in a race to nowhere. No one questions, says it's too much. They have to move or become irrelevant. I get the fear to a degree, but what is it a fear of? Do we ever sit back and calculate just what it is we'd be losing? I've seen far more content indie animators than industry types. I mean really, aside from STUFF what do you lose? Kelly and I live on modest salaries. What will a bigger job give us? Home theatre system? Bigger bathroom? Who the fuck cares? Death ain't no prettier for the rich.

I dunno. Maybe I'm being too difficult, longing for a time past. When I was a kid, sure, we dreamed of hockey jerseys, games, proper equipment; and today you can get it all so easily... too easily. It's not special. No more thinking involved. No more creativity. Just money. But hell, maybe the indies are just losers. They'd love to have TV show audiences. Course they can live without it. TV people can't.

I wonder how many of these people have depression. There's a lot of depression in animation and a few alcoholics. Creative folks are prone to mental illness as it is. During my Spectra session I had a mild touch of a sensation that resembled the panic attacks I had

back in 1999. This is not good and it tells me that I'm close to burn out. And for what? No one will like this book cause it's self-centred and not some dull fucking conventional linear history/story. Well, fuck you. I suspect the publisher won't be pleased either. Sure, it's self-centred. Should I pretend to be silent, that all this is happening naturally, objectively. This is a story about people in a time, in a country doing what they do. This is a record of experience. Canada. Canadian animation through my eyes. This is me, once again using this experience to learn about these people, this country, and about myself. How do these things affect me and vice-versa? An identity crisis. Middle age. Perhaps I need, like Odysseus, to go away to find my house. It's cornball and simplistic, but if Larkin and Lipsett showed me my demons, Helen Hill showed me my angel. She made me seriously question my life, my decisions. This doesn't mean becoming an anarchist or hippie. That's not me. But her love of Paul, of family, community and friends really slapped me awake. I have a family I've neglected and been afraid of. I've done everything to destroy this family I helped create. Why? I don't know. Fear of childhood and that car wreck of a family? I don't know how to love. It requires losing oneself or giving in and I'm afraid. I've already been afraid because my self, however miserable, was all I had. I had no family so I turned inward. I've gotten better and certainly depression is playing the devil. But you spent hours getting there, not quite late, and now you have to make some choices. I don't want my boys to grow up the same way I did. They won't, because their mother is warm, loving and giving. But their father is not; or only when he feels like it. I need to change that course now. It won't be easy.

How does it relate to animation? Animation has been this gift. It's helped me define, find, gauge myself. I feel a kinship with indies 'cause I'm doing it my way, too. BUT what I'm lacking and seeking is pleasure. I am not enjoying my life and I don't know why.

Exhausted, I ask the guy at EA Sports if he ever sits back and asks, "Why?". He speaks with pride about his four-year-old because she can play a tennis video game. He gives me the "bringing people together" line. Korean and Canadian kids coming together through internet play. But, so what? How meaningful is this engagement? I leave, question unanswered but satisfied with myself for asking. Cab it to meet Craig Welch. Wasn't sure what to expect. Someone said he's grumpy. We meet at his exhibition. I step into another world gone by. Beautiful paintings of dead birds in a music shop where they fix and make violins. Fifty thousand violins just hanging there. We head off to this crazy space. It's a café connected to a funeral home. The funeral home is unlike anything you've ever seen. No curtains, just windows. Looks like a trendy nightclub. The café next door overlooks the inside of the funeral home. Through a crack in the café's curtain I can see everything. Craig is excited by

it all. So am I. I could sit back, have a coffee and watch a service, see a corpse. We're gonna get along fine. After we talk film, we talk hockey. He's a sports fan. Surprises me. Plays pool with Normand Roger every week. Normand is a hockey fan. I'm happy to hear this. Now we have a topic we can share. The meeting with Craig brings me up. Here's a world where I belong. Craig is unique. Unafraid to be himself, unable to be anything else. Craig and I head down St. Denis to Sherbrooke where he leaves me, and I carry on to the Cinémathèque Québécoise.

Fittingly, they're screening an indie Canadian animation program. I meet Marco de Blois at the door. Marco programs animation at the Cinémathèque and is really a great champion of art and indie animation. He invites me to sit in on the screening, which has already begun. A number of animators are there; it's a good crowd. I've seen most of the films but enjoy Elise Simard's new film. Poetic, philosophical and poignant... especially for such a young person.

Somehow this is a fitting end to the day's journey: a small gathering of indie animators.

Malcolm Sutherland is another fascinating character. Has a rambling style. He's continually exploring. I love his awkward yet frank manner. A bit like Craig.

Theo, Maral and I go for food. Maral hands me a book called *The End of the Road*. She says reading it is like hanging out with me. Not sure what that means but want to know what it's like to hang out with me. We leave.

I'm supposed to go to the NFB on my last day but a snowstorm hits and I say fuck it. Also, I learn that Heritage wouldn't give me an extension for the first draft of the report. So this is it for industry. I cancel the Ottawa meetings. Will need to write. The book will have to pause while I purge this industry shit from my bowels. It's stressing me out. I'm not entirely sure what Heritage wants. I'm not convinced that they know. But will be glad to get rid of this. This book/journey will go on. I've missed animators in Toronto and Montreal, some in Vancouver.

Snow is pounding the city today. Will avoid going out till check out. Maybe hang in the "city underground" area. I should sleep, but can't.

April 17. Heritage project is done. Back in Montreal a month-and-a-half later to finish up these interviews. Different time. Decided to take some pills. Been a month. Seems to work. Haven't lost my cook. Still can't sleep well. Demons or whatever are still there, but

now they're not with me, they're outside the gate. I can feel them loitering, but they don't come in. I taste a moment of death fear but it passes rapidly. There is no obsessing over it. Passes as fast as it comes. Course, how much of this is real?

After spending an entire day at the NFB, I return for a morning interview with Michele Cournoyer. It's a bit awkward. Michele is like a sister to me. I was an inspiration for her film *Accordion*. We are both recovering alcoholics. It's our secret connection of sorts, maybe like Theo and I with depression or Martine and I with adoption. Anyhow, it's strange interviewing Michele about a film in which I played a small role .

Zooming from the NFB, I head downtown to meet Stephen Woloshen. I love this guy. Makes handmade films in his bedroom. The happiest guy I know. No grants – just uses money he makes as a driver on feature films to pay for his eclectic camera-less works. Just when I think the guy can go no further he tells me that because he and his girlfriend are expecting kid number two, he's got less room to work at home. So get this: he's set himself up in his car! The guy is making films IN HIS CAR. Good films, I should add. This guy is amazing. No waiting, moaning, hoping...just doing. Meeting Stephen always refreshes me.

Last up – appropriately it seems – is Chris Landreth. We were gonna meet in Toronto but Larkin died. Larkin fucked up our strange story, too. I quit drinking – partially inspired by Larkin – on February 13, 2001. I mentioned it to Chris once 'cause I thought he had started the Ryan film in February 2001. Well, he did me one better: he sent me an email dated February 13, 2001, that was the official beginning of the Ryan project. Oh, and yeah, Ryan fucked up 'cause he died on February 14. One day too late. Figures. Couldn't meet Chris in Toronto, but he called to say he was coming to Montreal for another Larkin tribute. Decided this was my chance to sit down with him.

As I wait for Chris, my final interview, a guy approaches me on the street. Says he can say thank you in any language. He's got an 8 x 11 sheet of paper with a list of translations. "Try me," he says. I laugh and say, "Okay, Estonian." He laughs. I got him. Give him a \$5 Starbucks gift card.

I'm nervous about seeing Chris. We haven't spoken face-to-face since Ottawa 2004, when Ryan was there giving us aggravation. I know that he and I have different takes on the deceased Mr. Larkin. Chris is more positive than I am. I sometimes wonder if it's genuine and naïve or if he's just protecting this 'star'. But maybe my own cynicism is naïve and faulty. I really don't know. Regardless, I like Chris. We're forever connected through this strange Larkin

experience. Whatever our beliefs, it's changed both our lives. We meet and embrace. After we move past the awkward Larkin talk, we talk about Chris' career and life and have a great conversation about his new film idea in development at the NFB. His face is glowing as he tells the story of his new film. It's good to see him so abuzz. Soon, Marcy Page and David Verrall from the NFB join us. The three of them are, appropriately, headed to the Larkin memorial at the Cinémathèque. I won't be joining them. Everyone seems to think I disapprove of the event. I don't. Larkin deserves a memorial. I just don't want to be around when people start elevating him again. They keep turning him into something he wasn't. Ironically, I guess the one to blame is me; I'm the guy who got the ball rolling so to speak. That was before I saw the demons. Larkin's life and death took on another dimension in the context of Helen Hill's murder. One gave, one took. As simple as that.

The four of us walk towards the Cinémathèque, where I've parked my car. We say our goodbyes. Chris and I embrace once more and I drive home feeling a lot better about things.