Vive l’animation!

Festival of animated shorts produced by students at French school, MICA starts today

By Michael Sragow
THE BALTIMORE SUN

The French cartoon that won the Oscar for best animated short this year, “Logorama,” is a giddy nightmarish chase that whips nonstop surprise and a horrible beauty from a vision of corporate logos and trademark characters taking over the Earth and all creation.

Talk to the founders of the “Festival Image” that starts today at Maryland Institute College of Art — including Sylvain Chomet, deputy director of the Alliance Francaise de Washington, and Laurence Arcadias, co-chair of MICA’s animation program — and you feel there was something fated about French cartoonists tackling America’s advertising culture and remolding it into a vision of apocalypse. (And then winning an Oscar from admiring Americans.)

For Arcadias, U.S. animation’s studio system, with its “assembly-line” productivity, “promotes group projects to the detriment of the individual,” while “the French system promotes the author, the artist.”

“Festival Image,” a showcase for inventive shorts from MICA and from the French computer-graphics school Supinfocom, hopes to foster a healthy back-and-forth among ambitious young talents from the U.S. and France. The festival also salutes the arts and crafts of illustration and comic books — along with animation, all parts of “sequential art” and all, as Chomet puts it, “not just part of a trend, but part of a phenomenon in France.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, it became the norm for academies such as Goblins School of the Image (aka Golbis) to turn out animation graduates who filled the ranks of American companies like Disney and DreamWorks. But international feature-cartoon hits from French directors, including Michel Ocelot’s “Kirikou and the Sorceress,” Sylvain Chomet’s “The Triplets of Belleville” and Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud’s “Persepolis,” have inspired many animators to stay put in a country that also values experimental shorts.

Arcadias credits “the French government and a strong funding system” for helping to integrate the production and the appreciation of animation into “the broader French culture,” so audiences are more likely to respond to “a wider range of styles.” She tries to foster an enlightened eclecticism in her classes. “Festival Image” offers a celebratory extension of her philosophy.

Chomet says, “The project makes a lot of sense for the Alliance Francaise, too.” He says there’s such vitality in French animation that “every year brings a new auteur.” The slate of “Festival Image” has put together a persuasive case for it. My favorites from Supinfocom include the deliriously musical and uproarious “Musciotherapist,” about the monkey director of an asylum who is driven insane by the lunatic animals in the kitchen; it’s as if Sam Raimi collaborated with Rube Goldberg and Busby Berkeley. My favorites among the MICA movies include “A Story From North America,” a batty, homey folk song about xenophobic power and empathy starring a boy, his father and a spider.

My top pick is Supinfocom’s “Versus,” a virtuoso samurai-slapstick tale of two medieval Japanese armies resorting to kumikaze leaps and cannon fire to win a mountain island between two craggy borders.

But there’s nothing else that’s “Versus” about “Festival Image.” As a cultural exchange and an exhibition of talent from two countries, it should be an undiluted plus.

michael.sragow@baltsun.com

If you go

“Festival Image” starts at 7:30 p.m. today at the Main Building of MICA, 1300 W. Mount Royal Ave., and continues through April 25. The film program screens 7 p.m. Wednesday in Room 110 of the Main Building; admission is free. Go to mica.edu for updated and complete details.
Image from "A Story From North America," by Garrett Davis and Kirsten Lepore, shown at "Festival Image" at Maryland Institute College of Art.