

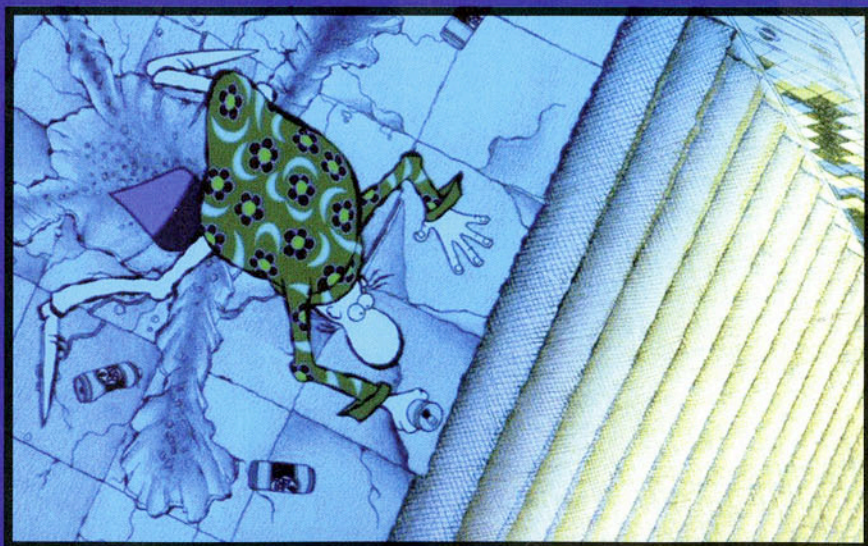
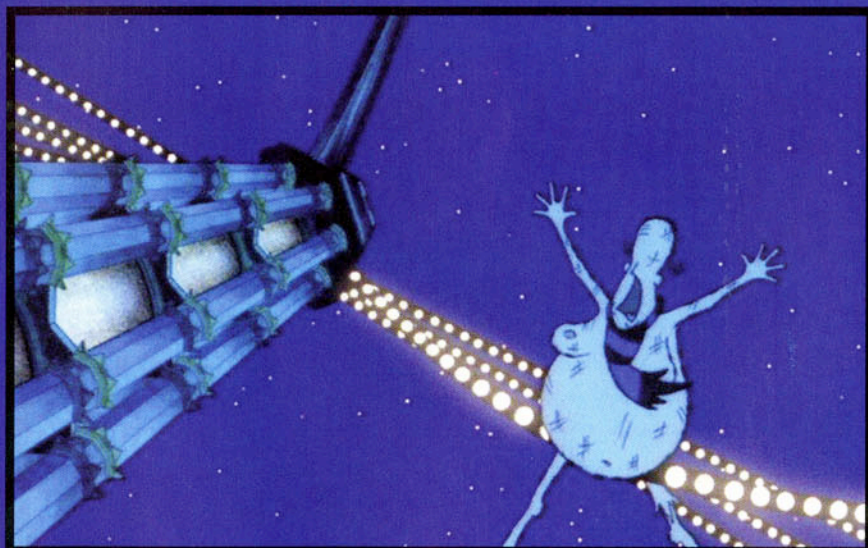
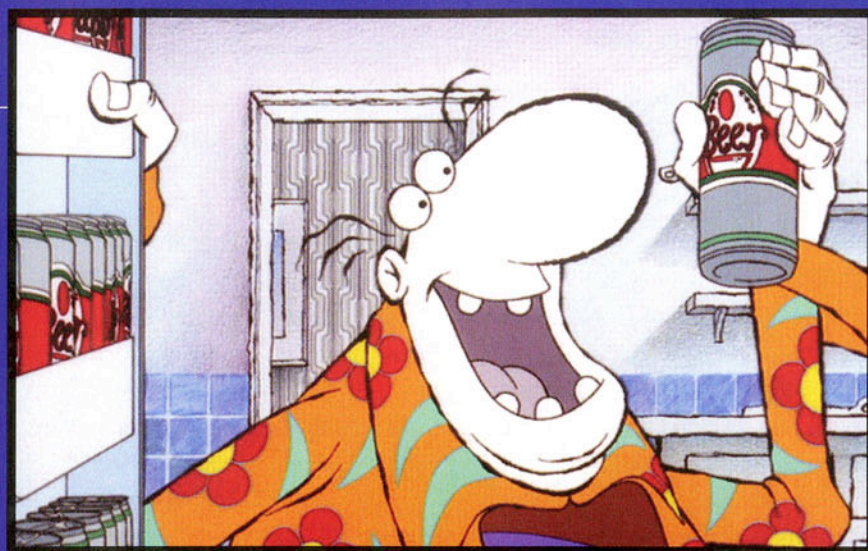
Belle- Raiser

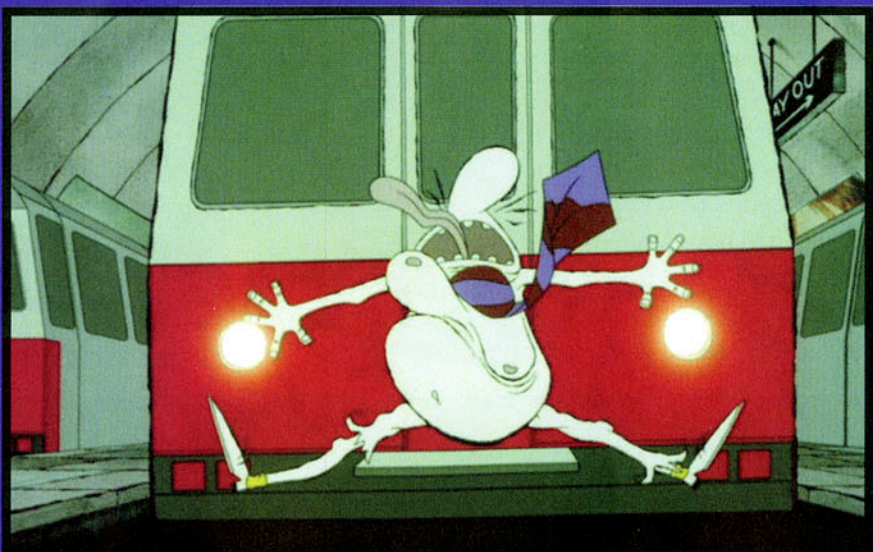
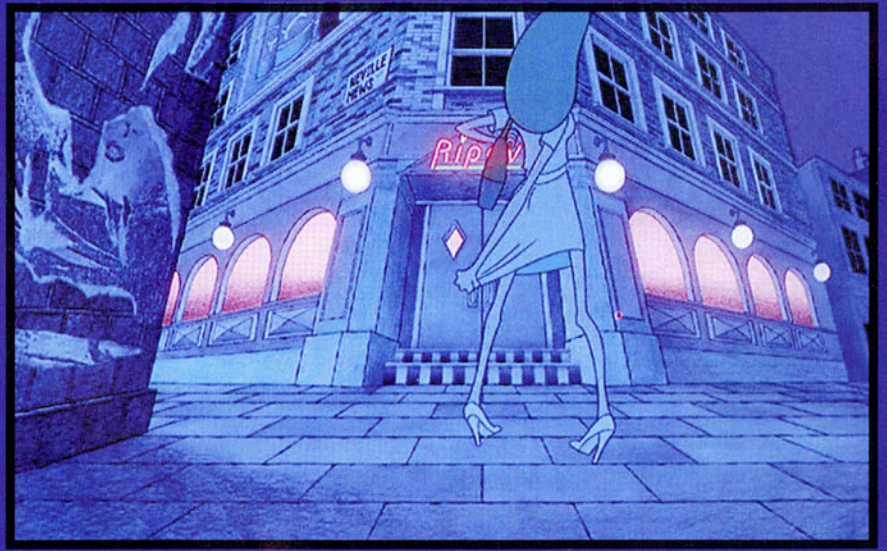
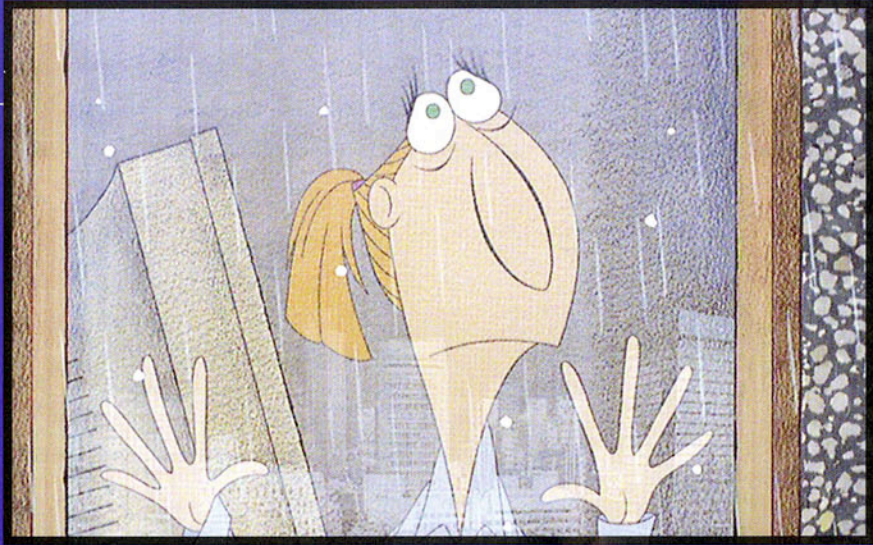
Stephen Cavalier reports back on the rostrum camera's last stand, at the screening of Neil Boyle's *The Last Belle*



The screening of Neil Boyle's 20-minute short film *The Last Belle* at this year's London Film Festival was a significant event – and not just for fans of great 2D animation and funny cartoons. That

the film took 15 years to make and that director and animator Boyle is a protégé of the legendary Richard Williams make this noteworthy, but more remarkable is the fact that, as far as is known, this is the last film that will be made with the truly traditional animation pipeline: drawn on to paper, traced and painted on to cell and filmed on a rostrum camera. >>





I can confirm that these 35,000 hand-drawn, hand-painted cels add up to a beautifully made, funny and bittersweet story which could possibly be described as the missing link between Chuck Jones and Richard Curtis.

The film, concerning a sweet central female character and the blind date from hell, features some great 'drunk' animation and some particularly impressive blubbery man-breast animation. Boyle says he enjoyed animating this grotesque character, as in his commercial work he's usually called on to produce more restrained and subtle stuff and that this project was a way to let off steam and be a bit more 'cartoony'. "According to my assistant animator, Bella Bremner," Boyle commented, "the man-breasts got bigger and more blubbery with each scene we did."

When I asked Boyle about his film's affectionate portrayal of London, he told me every shot in the film is based on a real place and that he is a huge fan of films and books where the location is as big a character as the people. Boyle states he loves Dickens' writing which is, "permeated with London's atmosphere," and his favourite film director is David Lean who repeatedly mixed together character and location.

"The desert in *Lawrence of Arabia* is as important to the meaning of the film as the character of Lawrence himself. I love all that stuff."

According to Boyle, the project was created on paper, pencil, paint and film partly for aesthetic reasons – for the warm, handcrafted feel – and partly for the "sheer sensual joy of getting paint under our fingernails and graphite smeared up the sides of our hands." But mostly he wanted the chance to go through the old processes with veterans of the craft, to see what could be usefully taken forward into the modern digital age. "The myth," he says, "often

perpetuated by software suppliers, is that some kind of digital streamlined process is always cheaper and faster. But I've found sometimes the older processes to be much more efficient. To my mind, the best way forward is to take the best from both worlds, and be open to both the 'high-tech' and the 'low-tech'."



01 Director Neil Boyle with hapless protagonist Wally

02 From left to right: Mark Naisbitt (co-animator and layout artist), Samantha Spacey (tracer), Rebecca Neville (co-producer), Roy Naisbitt (Underground sequence designer), Bella Bremner (assistant animator), and Neil Boyle.



The lady from Chromacolour who took Boyle's order for Xerox Cel was so surprised



that “she nearly fell off her chair.” Boyle elaborates, “I needed a final order of about 12,000 and they tracked down about 12,200 gathering dust in their storeroom, so I finished just by the skin of my teeth! Finding the people to work on the film was no problem at all though – people seemed to flock to get the chance to work in a traditional way.”

In Japan 2D animation never really went away, because they make 2D films in contemporary styles that feel exciting to young people. I asked Boyle if he thought it was possible for 2D to reinvent itself in the West in this way. “Absolutely,” was his response. All it would take, he thinks, would be one or two very well scripted and lovingly-crafted films for 2D to bounce back. He also agrees with the view that general audiences couldn’t really give a monkey’s whether a film’s 2D or CG or stop-motion; a great script and engaging characters are what counts.

As one of the best in the business Boyle has been very lucky to have had constant employment as a 2D animator so has never really been tempted to make the jump to 3D. As a director on commercials however he has worked with a lot of 3D animators, and from a directorial point of view he believes there’s not a lot of difference between the two: “You’re always looking to give the illusion of life, the illusion of weight, character, personality, clarity, and all that stuff.”

As someone closely associated with the legendary Richard Williams, I wondered if people sometimes made the comparison between the 15 years it took Boyle to make *The Last Belle* and Williams decades of trying to finish *The Thief and the Cobbler*. Boyle stated that people had made this comparison but he didn’t feel it. The only similarity to him is that “both films took so darn long because of the struggle to raise finance.”

As for the future, Boyle’s ideas include a half-hour Christmas special that he’s scripting, and a feature film idea he’s developing with another director, Kirk Hendry. “Who knows which will happen first,” Boyle wonders, “... anyone got any cash out there?!” **IMG**

OTHER FAMOUS ANIMATED BELLES

It’s not just the technique that’s antiquated – *Imagine’s* had a delve through the cavities of its mind and found there’s a few other Belles kicking around toon town.

> BELLE, BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Of course. This 1991 Walt Disney film was the first animated film to ever be nominated at the Oscars for Best Picture, (although *Silence of the Lambs* ultimately swiped the gong). Such is Belle’s far-reaching consequence that she is an official Disney Princess, an accolade other book-nosing lamb-charmers can only dream of.

7/10 – HELL’S BELLE



> BELL, THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

Another Disney classic (this time 1996) and also with something of a hot girl/ugly guy central plotline. While some might see Quasimodo as the main star, really, where would the workman be without his tools? And whilst the bell ringing is lovely, let’s not forget the vital role the bell tower plays in rescuing Esmeralda and destroying Frollo.

8/10 – BELLE’S ANGEL

> SOUTHERN BELLE (VIDEO GAME)

That’s right! The 3D train simulation game from 1986 – the first available for home computers, moved train spotting into the 21st century way before people were even thinking about the 21st century. The badass Southern Belle required drivers to keep to speed regulations and arrive on time. **10/10 – LIKE A BAT OUT OF BELLE**

