

*The Making of the Independent Short Film, Teatriños: Homenaxe ao mineral do repolo*

*(Little Theatres: Homage to the Mineral of Cabbage.)*

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Sometime in 2007, I decided to make my first short film. I chose the medium of stop motion puppetry for the film, and all sets, puppets, and decorations were created by hand. The film is about cabbage, and is based on Erín Moure's poem, *Homage to the Mineral of Cabbage*. The decision to make this film had been about a 10 years development, and this little cabbage film has since created many waves in my life.



I went to art school in the mid 1990s. I majored in Drawing and Painting at Ontario College of Art and Design (now OCAD University), and was mostly interested in trying out different media, or using old media in new ways. So while I painted with oils in the traditional way, on canvas and panels, I also painted with oils on plasticky architectural vellum; or on substrate-less acrylic layers, created by hand, so that the final painting looked like it was painted on a delicate, translucent skin. I took photography classes where I experimented either in the darkroom, or with polaroids and photocopiers, altering images in a way that would make them part painting, part sculpture, part photograph. Without ever using a computer, I thought of myself as a multimedia artist. I did not know how to use Photoshop or any other graphics program. I just wasn't that interested.

Early on in my last year of college, I was involved in an art show, with several of my paintings and mixed-media photography on display in the school's atrium. Coincidentally, the Art Director from a national kids' TV network, YTV, was in the building at that time, looking at Communications and Design students' portfolios, in search of a new junior designer for their On-Air Promotions department. He found the students' work too corporate and clean compared to the rough, edgy YTV style, but he did like my paintings and sculptural photography that happened to be on display at the time. I was contacted by the OCAD gallery curator, had an interview with YTV, and we collectively decided that it would be easier for a person with the right sort of creativity to learn the technical skills of Photoshop and Illustrator than it would be for a technical person to match the YTV aesthetic. Hired as a part time graphic designer before finishing my last year of art school, I entered into a fast-paced world of TV promotion, with tight deadlines on creativity, and an awful lot to learn. For a twenty-three year old art student, who had been struggling to make a living doing part-time clerical jobs, it was a very exciting time. Suddenly I was learning so many new things, spending my days with like-minded young, creative people, and getting paid a good salary.

And so, over the next couple of years I learned animation and graphic design on the job, learning mostly by watching my peers and asking questions. I learned software packages, animation techniques, became more and more technically savvy. Eventually, after the excitement of learning new things and getting paid for it wore off, I began to feel like I was moving further away from my creative roots. I felt like I had something to say as an artist, in my school days, and that this message had been lost, because I was no longer really expressing anything.

After two years at YTV I moved on to work at a post production company in Toronto. I shared an office with another graphic designer, and we both had our own artwork hanging on the



walls. On one project we were working with a well-known graphic designer from the US who saw my painting on our walls and said flippantly, “This is your painting? And they’re getting you to do this?” pointing to the plain-and-simple font-based ad for a national bank, that he himself was creative directing. I felt crushed by this idea of the mysterious artistic past that I had cut short. Though I was making a very good living at the time, who knows what could have happened if I had let myself just be an artist? Soon

after this encounter with the Creative Director, I quit my job to start a freelance career, so that I could stay in the same industry and make a living, yet have more control over my time. This question of “why am I no longer an artist?” finally drove me, years later, to begin planning my first short film.

In 2007 I was finally ready to begin, to commit to making a film. I had seen many short animated films by filmmakers who took on the task of writing their films themselves, to the detriment of the final project. Though I enjoy writing and had taken many writing courses in the past, I knew what my limitations were. I was not yet ready to write my own screenplay. I knew what sort of general message I wanted to convey, and wanted to find a poem that would express this more professionally than I could. As well, the element of collaboration is a significant part of filmmaking: it’s difficult to do everything yourself as there are so many skill sets involved.

I had always enjoyed reading and writing poetry, which seemed about the furthest thing from advertising I could imagine. While advertising requires a story that is clear, concise, and

excruciatingly precise in its messaging, poetry seemed just the opposite. Poems require the reader to think creatively and provide their own context, to join things together which might not readily or even logically connect. In poetry there is a looseness to the interpretation, a co-creation between the poet and reader. I was curious how this would translate to short film, which is also a freeing medium. Unlike feature films, which often follow certain narrative rules, a short film can do anything. If the audience doesn't get it, or doesn't like it, then it will not take up too much of their time. There is room for much experimentation, room to drop the standard narratives and create space in the imagination, to allow the viewer to participate in the creation actively, like the reader of a poem.

I went through my bookshelves in search of ideas. I had been a fan of Erin Moure's work since a friend gave me a copy of her book, *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person*, upon learning that I liked Fernando Pessoa. That particular book of Erin's had lit up all sorts of sleepy and quiet areas of my mind. It was so fun to read, so imaginative, so new and playful. The specific areas of Toronto she mentions in this book were very familiar to me. My mom grew up on Atlas Avenue, one street over from the place Erin was staying in the book, and I'd walked along the paths outlining the buried Garrison Creek countless times. Yet here they were in this very new light, remixed with Fernando Pessoa and his imagined selves.

Many people have asked me why I chose Erin's poem *Homage to the Mineral of Cabbage* as the basis for a film. I don't have a very satisfying answer to this question. My process for choosing the poem went roughly as follows: I read through my small collection of books by Canadian poets, and chose a poem that brought up the most interesting and evocative images in my mind. I tried to picture the film as I was reading. And though I may have liked a particular poem, in reading it my mind might not have conjured up the type of images that I was

interested in making into a film. But the Homage poems definitely did. As much as I loved Sheep's Vigil, the book seemed to me to work best as a whole. I couldn't extract one poem out from this context and make it work as a short film.

There were also practical considerations. I didn't want to start out basing my first film on a poem that was too long. I was hoping to make a film that was less than four minutes in length, so I had to be able to read the poem aloud within this amount of time, leaving enough space for the visuals to unfold between lines of poetry.

So at this point, I had decided upon the book. The poems here centred around this idea of Little Theatres, a Little Theatre that I wanted to create. The fact that this film was going to be a stop motion film fit my interpretation of what Little Theatres were: a place to appreciate small, everyday things that are often overlooked. It is a place in which to enact the details and the beauty of rootedness, of ordinariness. I thought that the Homage poems would be a good place to start. I love food, and am interested in issues surrounding food: farming practices, the ethics of new technologies, etc. These food poems in particular reminded me of a [Micheal Pollan article](#) I had read at the time, about the loudness of foods that are marketed towards certain goals, vs. regular foods that are actually healthy, yet sit quietly, going unnoticed:

Of course it's also a lot easier to slap a health claim on a box of sugary cereal than on a potato or carrot, with the perverse result that the most healthful foods in the supermarket sit there quietly in the produce section, silent as stroke victims, while a few aisles over, the Cocoa Puffs and Lucky Charms are screaming about their newfound whole-grain goodness.

I loved how Erin's poems brought the "regular" things to life, and how much she appreciated their importance. The particular vegetables she had chosen were dear to me as well, as my partner is Ukrainian, and certain foods have now been embedded with ritual. We have a Ukrainian Christmas dinner every year, which seems like a reason to gather friends in

celebration of the most basic, hearty vegetables: beets, cabbages, potatoes. These are things that could not be commercialised because they are too dull to marketers, they live below their radar. They have a shelf life, they are alive, they exist on their own terms. But this means that if you look beyond the Big Theatres of commerce, you will be able to see and appreciate a quiet type of beauty.

I therefore envisioned the film to have three separate layers, three different, yet connected, worlds. The first depicts the grounding of the cabbage: it is a dark, airy world where the cabbage is alone in a theatre, bound by metal cords. This world was meant to be abstract. The cabbage is alive (its leaves flutter) and yet it is tied down. This scene establishes the theatre, as well as the subject it holds. We then transition to a central, in-between world. This world was intended to be a flat, watery space, where the real cabbage is created: what was first an idea is now a real object (as air transforms to water). From here we emerge into a new, yet familiar world, we return to the theatre, to behold the earthy setup of the family at a dining table, where the cabbage is served as a soup. Here the three worlds are drawn together: from the idea, to the creation, to the enjoyment and sharing.

I wrote these intentions out, including storyboards and technical treatments, in the application for my first grant. Erín was involved early on as, of course, I needed her permission to use her poem. She helped firm up a couple of ideas, and convinced me that the voiceover must be in Galician, as that was how the poem was written. The English version doesn't sound as good, she said, and sent me two mp3s, recordings of her own voice, reading the poem in the two languages. Yes, it's true! The word *repolo* sounded much better than cabbage. I decided to include subtitles in the film, building them in like fortune cookie fortunes, unfolding from inside the film's imagery. These titles could potentially be changed, if I needed versions in other

languages. Eventually the film was rendered into French, Ukrainian, and English subtitled versions.

I applied for a grant through a private granting body in Canada called BravoFACT. This is the foundation arm of Bravo, a Canadian specialty channel that is now owned by Bell Media. The “FACT” stands for Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent. BravoFACT began in 2003 as a showcase for artistic films that were far outside the norm of mainstream TV. They aired a half-hour program on their network once a week called BravoFACT Presents, which consisted of mostly experimental short (under-6 minute) films -- dance films, animation, live action, and mixed media of all sorts. The foundation accepted proposals four times per year, and their requirements seemed to be based on professionalism, originality, and artistic quality. First-time filmmakers were supported here, whereas the Arts Councils in Canada did not offer grants to fund first films. For me it was an ideal fit, as I had what I felt was a unique proposal. Though it was my first independent film, I had a lot of experience working professionally in TV, and knew that I could do the work at a level of visual quality that was expected for that medium. BravoFACT was also very accepting of the creative process. They agreed to fund the project based on the proposal alone, and as long as certain key creative people did not change by the time the film was handed in, and the proposed length of the film remained the same, they would have no input at all in the process, and the director would have full creative control. The funding arrangement with BravoFACT was such that the filmmaker must fund the film herself until the final film is delivered. This could be challenging, but also provided incentive to complete the project as soon as possible.

Three months after submitting the proposal, Bravo announced the award recipients, and I was thrilled to find my name and project there on the list. Here, the work begins.

I am fortunate to have a space in which to work, in our garage. We have no car, so the two-car, leaning and crumbling garage was easily converted into a workspace. One part of the garage was made into a small workshop, with a mitre saw and other woodworking tools, while the other side became a film studio. The sets were small: the final theatre was about 4 feet wide, 3 feet deep, and sat on a kitchen table that had its legs extended to be at a more workable height. Since animating requires many hours at a time of leaning over a table, the working height was a very important consideration from the start.

The basic materials used for the project were building materials: plaster, two-by-fours, nails, and metal brackets. I used some art materials as well: balsa and bass wood in strips, sheets, or fancy cornice-type mouldings. Most of the paints used were acrylics and oils left over from my art school days. The floor of the theatre was made of individual basswood strips, about 1cm wide and 1mm thick, that I had hit with a hammer or run a rasp along the surface and edges, to make the strips look like well-worn floorboards. These were then glued down, painted with acrylics, and shellacked with furniture lacquer for a solid, glossy surface.

The first two months working on the project were spent building the foundational items: the basic theatre set, as well as all the set elements that would be necessary to create the different scenes. I wanted to build kitchen elements that could slide in and out, or could be lowered down on pulleys, within the theatre, to transition between scenes as a real theatre production would, as well as a dining room that did the same. The content and style of these scenes were designed very carefully, based on a combination of memories of the kitchens and dining rooms I spent time in growing up, theatrical sets used in plays that I have seen, and Galician details which Erín would tell me about. As a child of the 70s, I remembered the avocado-green fridges and stoves, and the orange / brown / green colour combinations that were fashionable at the time. In my set



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there were macramé plant holders, and fake-wood covered tins to hold flour and sugar on the countertops. There were tiny jars of food: pickled eggs, pickled cucumbers, and some spices. Erín suggested a couple of items that might typically be found in a Galician kitchen, mentioning that there should be a little can of pimentón by the stove, so I designed and printed off a tiny label, and wrapped it around a silver-painted little section of dowelling for this can. [Two Eatons catalogues from 1968 and 1970](#) were useful for creating many details in the set: the style of the cabinets, window coverings, toaster, and wall clock. I had a formula to convert measurements, which the catalogue also helped with. It supplied the measurements for a 1970 stove, for example, which I could convert down to miniature size by multiplying it by my special conversion number.

What I enjoyed most about the tiny-set building is the sort of creativity required for more pragmatic solutions to building problems. I tried to create most of the miniature objects with things that already existed, and just altered them enough to look like something else in its smaller scale. The



plates were made of buttons, painted, with their holes filled. The cups on the table were made of clear plastic thimbles, and the table itself was a painted small bamboo cutting board. The [kitchen sink](#) was made of an empty plastic yoghurt container, cut down to size and spray-painted silver. The drain of the sink was also a found object. Pots were made of copper piping; the lids, of copper pipe caps.

Many of these items are not even in camera, and if they are, they are barely noticeable, because they are onscreen for such a short time. But I feel they all add something to the look and feel of the film. All the little details create a mood, whether they are consciously, individually seen or not. It was important to me that a specific mood be set with a well-worn, well-loved and -used, basic kitchen.

The dining room scene was, overall, also based on memories from my youth, modeled after my grandparents' dining room. The room I remember from childhood was quite formal, small, with a plate rail running along the walls. My grandfather collected plates -- mostly mail-order plates, with Norman Rockwell illustrations printed on them. These plates were for decoration only, I was told as a child, not for eating off of. I used to wonder why they would be plates, then? But my grandfather enjoyed collecting them. For the dining room set, I thought of creating a similar room in miniature, lined with [decorative button-plates](#). However, these plates had a different sort of decoration. Erín had sent me the website for Sargadelos ceramic designs, so I looked into these. Also, a Galician-Canadian friend living in Toronto invited me over for dinner to show me her collection of Sargadelos figurines, explaining the meaning behind some of the hands, eyes, and symbols that were painted on the figurines in dark blue. She made us an empanada for dinner, which I also photographed, to later make into a miniature for the dining table, as an accompaniment to the cabbage soup. Again, the empanada and plates were very small touches to add to the scene, and I was not trying to make them precisely, authentically Galician, but rather, to add small touches to modify the memory of the room, to bridge between cultures in my own, subtle way.

The living room also contained a screen, onto which I [painted a landscape](#). The image was based on a photo that I found online. I wanted there to be a pastoral element, a backdrop to

bring farmland, the source of the meal, into the dining room. The landscape was painted on a translucent, rice-paper frame, and positioned in the scene as though it could be home decor, or a theatrical backdrop. In the opposite corner of the living room sat a tiny *didukh*, the bouquet of wheat that is traditional to Ukrainian dining rooms, as a symbol of prosperity in connection to the earth. The family enters on a stage platform, lit from below. The gridded floor of the platform is meant to suggest the grid lines of seeded land, glowing with warmth and energy.

After the sets were designed and built, I moved on to creating the puppets. This was very challenging for me, as I had never built stop motion puppets before, aside from very simple, two-dimensional ones. Stop motion puppets are unique in that they have to have an armature “skeleton” that is supple enough to move, yet stiff enough that the puppet can hold its place. The puppet must be lightweight, and not too top-heavy, so that ideally it can stand on its own (though none of mine did -- they were either fastened to their seats if they were sitting, or rigged to a support, if standing.) This often translates to puppets having large feet, which I really didn’t want, as this would give the puppet too light-hearted and cartoony a feel. I needed delicate feet, lightweight bodies, and relatively realistic bodily proportions.



There are two basic approaches to puppet-making. The less expensive, most basic approach is to build the puppet armature out of armature wire -- a soft aluminum wire that is designed to provide a solid base when sculpting larger objects. It comes in varying thicknesses, is cheap, and easy to work with. The wire can be bound together using plumbers’ epoxy, which

is also cheap and easy to use. The alternative is to have an armature that is made professionally by an armature maker. The machining involved must be quite precise, as the joints are very small, and need to be adjusted to the point that they are easy enough to move, yet stiff enough to hold the puppet in place. The advantage to the professionally machined armature is that it will last forever. The joints can be tightened if they get loose, and all parts are made of steel. The aluminum wire armatures, however, will eventually break. The puppet is bending at its joints over and over again, and the aluminum will only withstand this repeated bending for so long before it breaks.

Expecting the armature to eventually break meant that I had to be clever about how the puppets were built. The main character, a young girl named Sabela, had a head and legs that were made using a mold, with the armature wire skeleton being cast into foam. This way, if the armature of her neck or legs were to break, the head and legs could be easily replaced by casting new identical ones from the mold. The rest of the body was covered in clothing. For these areas, then, I created the wire armature, joined it to the cast head and legs, and built up her torso and arms using upholstery stuffing and nylon stockings. The hands were made using finer jewelry wire lined with plastic tubing, then dipped in liquid latex and painted.

The faces of all four characters were first modeled in a firm, Plastescine-like clay. These were then cast in plaster, creating a two-part mold that could be split apart once the plaster hardened, then re-aligned to form the final mold.



The most challenging part of mold-making was figuring out what the final cast material should be. I experimented with various silicone and polyurethane foams, with little success. I spent weeks trying different things, finding that the material would either shrivel once cast, or would be too heavy, or it would be too foamy with bubbles and would lose the details of the original sculpted figure. Eventually I settled on a two-part technique, where I painted the inside of the molds with liquid latex, which captured all the nuances of the modeled texture, and then filled that with a polyurethane foam, so that it would hold its shape. The [final cast](#) worked perfectly -- it was lightweight, full of detail, and could then be painted and finished.

I wanted the faces to be somewhat doll-like. The eyes were made of glass, and though they don't move much in the film (I tried, but the effect looked too spooky), they do have this ability. They are tucked into eye sockets, surrounded by a skin of latex. The hair was made from hair extensions, nylon partial wigs that people wear, sold at the drug store. These worked well because they are formed into a weave, which I then broke apart into segments and [stitched or glued into the scalps of the puppets](#). The visible edges of the hairline were stitched, one segment at a time, while the remaining hair was glued in, strip by strip.

The costumes were designed and created by a friend, Allison Easson, who is a sewer, and usually designs and sews beautiful cloth bags. This was her first time creating miniature costumes, but we both enjoyed the process immensely. The first step was going through the old Eaton's catalogues together, looking through the clothing section. We decided on a short A-line dress for Sabela, a pantsuit and rollerskates for her little sister Abigail (mostly because I

remember having a lot of fun rollerskating as a child, and thought it would be cute to have a little girl sitting at the dinner table in her rollerskates -- something a rebellious 5 year old might do, refusing to take them off for a Sunday night dinner after a playful day outside), velvet pants and a dress shirt for Xosé Luís (the father), and a turtleneck and pants for Liberdade (the mother). The parents' clothing choices were inspired by the outfits my parents might have worn in the 70s, dressing up for a special dinner at home.



The materials for the costumes were confined to a basic colour palette, which was associated with the surrounding scene, and inspired by both the 70s palette, and the outdoors. The colours are earthy and muted, with soft fabrics like velvet and jersey. Sabela's costume was given the most attention, because we wanted it to be slightly suggestive of a cabbage. The dress is made of a satiny pale green fabric, which resembled the waxy texture and soft colour of a cabbage leaf. Her sleeves and neckline were hemmed with a curly, pale purple ribbon, which was chosen for its likeness to the edging of a decorative purple cabbage leaf.

Aside from making stop motion puppets, the most difficult part of the filmmaking process was lighting the sets. Though I had taken photography courses in school, I hadn't taken any courses involving studio lighting. My interest at the time was in learning how to use a camera, and in those days the only choice of camera was a film camera. At the time, the most creative stuff seemed to happen in the darkroom, in processing the film. I didn't worry too much about learning how to light a studio scene, which I now regret.

For this film I knew that lighting would be key to establishing a mood within the film. I wanted the sets to look like a theatrical set as much as possible, lit the way a play might be lit. I wanted spotlights, and a lot of darkness lit by small pools of light, with peripheral items falling away in a vignette of shadow. To do this takes a great deal of skill, so I knew that I needed help with this, as well. While at YTV I had done some stop motion, and the network had hired a Director of Photography, Marcus Elliott, to shoot it. He had a great deal of patience for details, which I liked, and really enjoyed lighting small sets, as opposed to the life-sized sets he was used to lighting. So I asked him if he'd be interested in lighting the set, or at least teaching me how to light it, for Little Theatres. He agreed, though couldn't commit to any sort of schedule. I was willing to wait for the help whenever he had time, and I'm very grateful for that, because I would not have been able to light or shoot these scenes on my own.

We started with the most [complex set-up in the entire film](#). In this scene Sabela is looking out through a window into an imagined theatre audience. We see her from behind, as well as her reflection in the window. We also see a starry field beyond the window, and the theatre set reflected behind her.

This scene took close to two weeks to light and rig. There was a hand-made dolly track for the camera to run along, as we needed a slow pull out, from a closeup to a medium shot. Her face was lit with a tiny spotlight, angling down from above, so that it could appear in the reflection. The back of her body also needed to be lit, as did the window itself. The stage behind her was lit, so that the red curtain especially could be seen in the reflection. The stars beyond the window, which were created by backlighting a piece of black foil wrap, were also very carefully lit. Those stars were rigged with a gradated plastic panel that slid from left to right behind the foil, so that the lighting in behind it would be animated to twinkle ever so slightly. The lighting

for this set-up, along with the spacing of all these elements within the set, took up most of the room in the garage.

Though it took about two weeks to set up this scene, it was shot in a day. I tried to keep to this schedule throughout the shooting process, putting the focus and deliberation on getting the lighting just right, and less focus on getting the animation perfect. This is because stop motion



animation has a certain mystery factor to it that, in my experience, when duplicated, it loses something. I can't really put my finger on what it is exactly, but whenever I was unhappy with a scene and tried to shoot it a second time, working through what I didn't like about the animation previously and trying to correct it, in the second take the animation became too mechanical. The flawed animation, though not always realistic, had more character and life to it than the too-well-thought-out animation. Perhaps as I become more skilled as an animator, this imbalance will even out to allow me to create natural-looking yet spontaneous movements. But for now, at the time of this project, I found it best to think a scene through, then shoot it once, but to not redo or over-think the movements.

Animation is a slow process. For this film, I shot 24 frames per second, which means that a 7 second shot like the one described above would contain 168 frames. For each frame, the puppet needs to be moved very slightly, and all the other things animating in the scene will need to be nudged into position as well. Each frame might take 2-5 minutes to set up before the shutter is clicked.



I used a software called Stop Motion Pro to capture the frames, with a Digital SLR camera, a Canon EOS 1D. The camera allowed for a high resolution image (larger than film resolution -- it needed to be downsized significantly for HD output, which is how it screened at most festivals), and interchangeable lenses, so that I could choose the look of each shot. I own two lenses, and borrowed another. For some shots I used a macro lens, which brought the scene quite close to the viewer even though the camera was a metre or so away from the subject onscreen. For others I used one of two tilt-shift lenses, which allowed for some interesting depth of field situations. With regular lenses the focal point is in a parallel plane to the viewer, i.e. either things in the foreground, midground, or background might be in focus. However with a tilt-shift lens, the focal plane can be tilted, or shifted, to be at a diagonal to the viewer. At its most extreme setting, an object in the foreground can be in focus, as well as an object in the background, while everything else outside this non-parallel plane will be blurry.

In the world of landscape photography, tilt-shift lenses are used to give the illusion of smallness. An overhead view of a crowded train station, for example, could look like a miniature train set, with tiny people and trains, because the depth of field seems illogical for a large setting. When the foreground and background are both blurred, the world closes in on itself, making it seem tiny. I was hoping for this illusion to create a further sense of smallness for these miniature theatre sets, though the effect is far more subtle when applied to a set that is small to begin with.

I began the shooting stage with the most difficult scenes, namely those with character animation and complex lighting setups. Once I felt like I understood lighting techniques better, I was able to proceed on my own. The first third of the film was shot and lit by me, without the help of a professional DOP. This involved lighting and animating the cabbage on an empty stage. Since the stage had been lit in previous scenes, not much needed to change there when it

was empty -- lighting could be removed, or repositioned to light the cabbage, which was a fairly simple task.

The final element to shoot was the [middle third of the film](#), the inner world, which consisted of blue paint animating on glossy paper. For this segment of the film, I set the camera up high, looking down onto the substrate, which was parallel to, and quite near, the floor. Beside the camera I positioned a digital projector, which was also looking down onto the substrate. I achieved the animation here by painting over a projection, frame by frame, and then turning the projector off to capture the image for the film. In effect this piece was planned beforehand and traced out by diluting regular oil paint with salad oil rather than the usual medium for oil paint, linseed oil. The reason for this substitution is that linseed oil dries to a firm, skin-like surface, while salad oil stays malleable. This scene was approximately one minute long, and was the fastest part of the film to shoot, taking about a month from beginning to end to animate and capture.

With all the previous slow-to-establish theatre lighting setups, and time needed to plan each shot, the entire film took about two years to shoot. The film is about three minutes long, excluding the end title sequence. Therefore it consists of about 4300 frames of stop motion photographs.

After the photos were taken, there was still much more work to be done. Though it was a relief to be finished with the filming, now I had to go back to the computer to do the final steps of compositing, colour-correction, and rig removal. As mentioned previously, the puppets could not stand on their own, so when Sabela walks across the stage, she needed to be supported by an obtrusive metal contraption. The rigging was screwed into a bolt that was built into her armature, and suspended by arms and clamps attached to a ceiling grid. The rig was bulky because it was

handmade, using brackets and other metal elements from a hardware store and, like the puppet armatures, it needed to be stable enough to hold her upright, yet flexible enough to be animateable as she moved in space. Again, since I had never built such a rig before, it wasn't perfect, and if you look closely, Sabela starts to lean forwards as she walks across the stage after first picking up the cabbage. This leaning walk was caused by the inflexibility of my rigging set-up. The next time I make puppets, they will be bolted down to the floor by their feet, to avoid this problem.

At this stage of post production, all of the rigging needed to be painted out, frame by frame. Fortunately I had the help of a compositor for this task, as another coworker from a prior job, Brad Husband, offered to do this.

In the meantime my own compositing project involved adding in all the text elements. These were shot in camera, with text that had been printed out onto rice paper, and cut into strips. I shot each line of paper on greenscreen, and later removed the background. There were a few lines of poetry that needed to be animated, for the middle part of the film. These lines were written on scrolls of paper that rolled out as the lines were spoken in the voiceover. I composited these elements in using the graphic animation software After Effects. The colour correction was very minor, as most of the elements looked fine as shot on camera, but I did add a few tweaks here and there. The final credits were then animated, and the video of the film was complete.

From here, I worked with musicians and sound designers to finish the audio for the film. This part was very exciting for me, partly because I'd never been involved with this aspect of filmmaking, and also because in a very short period of time, a wonderful new dimension is added to the film.

We recorded the music and voiceover (offered by Erín) in Montreal, because Erín and the musicians were all located there. A musician friend had suggested a recording studio, a well-respected studio in the Montreal indie music scene called Hotel 2 Tango.

The band performing the music for the film was Ensemble QAT, a group of four classically trained musicians who perform classical contemporary compositions, as well as improvised performances. This was their first time improvising a soundtrack for a film, so none of us was entirely sure how best to organize the recording. We were in contact as soon as the visuals of the film were finished, and had discussed whether the band members should see the film fresh on the day of the recording, or whether they should see the film in advance, so that there could be some planning to what they would do. I sent them the film along with a written outline, suggesting mood and specific moments of the film that could be emphasized musically.

When we met on the day of our recording session, the band was prepared with my notes. As they warmed up, I sat and listened. They had such a strong rapport throughout the warmup, responding to each other's alternate leads, and creating some very interesting, spontaneous sounds.

When we started the recording, with the film visuals rolling, projected onto the wall in front of us, we went through one or two takes before it became apparent that my notes were hindering the creative process. The beautiful sounds that they had made in their warmup were missing, and the music wasn't flowing as well with the approach to what my notes were asking them to do -- respond mechanically rather than intuitively. I asked them to scrap my notes, and react to the visuals as they appeared. When musicians have such skill and rapport with one another, this seems to be the best approach to improvisation. There should not be too much planning or thinking ahead, but rather doing what comes intuitively, with playfulness and ease.

We began by establishing the general, overall mood to each of the three segments of the film, and then the beauty of the music shone beyond anything that could have been described in words (at least, with my lack of musical vocabulary). The important aspect was the mood of the film, and the music captured and reflected this perfectly, differentiating the three worlds. For the first, dark and airy world, the emphasis was on the heavy tones of a bass clarinet. The pianist plucking and scratching at the piano strings brought lightness and fluidity to the second world. Finally a delightful harmonious melody accompanies the visuals of the family gathering around the dining room table, in the final world. The three segments were recorded in separate takes, and then seamed together later by the sound designer.

Erín came to the recording studio in the evening, toward the end of the musical recording. She also read the poem along to the visuals, and we were finished in a couple of takes. The recording engineer sampled some sounds of the room without Erín's voice, to fill in the gaps between lines of poetry.

Once I returned to Toronto, I took these sound files to a sound mixing studio, VO2 Mix. Here, Terry Wedel and Euan Hunter created sounds to accompany the visuals. For this they used primarily foley techniques, recording enactments into a microphone, rather than using pre-recorded stock sounds. Foley is an interesting process because sometimes the methods are direct and obvious, like using a cabbage dropping to the floor to create the sound of a cabbage dropping to the floor. However sometimes other objects create a better sound than the real thing, or the sound can be made more efficiently using another object. A skilled foley artist can create the likeness of a sound with whatever objects suit the sound best, and the choice is not always the obvious one. With the sound design complete, Terry created a final mix, adjusting levels of music, voiceover and sound effects to create the right balance.

With the final film in hand, I was ready to apply to film festivals. Though the film was eventually supposed to air on Bravo, at the time the network encouraged directors to take the film worldwide, to expose both Bravo and the filmmakers to the festival scene.

I am very happy with how the film has been received at festivals, especially being a film with such a humble centrepiece as a cabbage. It premiered at one of the largest animation festivals in the world, the Annecy Animation Festival in the South of France. I attended this festival, and when I returned to Toronto there was a message on my phone from one of the programmers at the Toronto International Film Festival, asking what the premier status of the film was, and letting me know that it had been accepted into the festival's Short Cuts Canada Programme. The exposure from both of these festivals led to many more screenings, and as Erin once put it, I have travelled far on the wings of this cabbage.

I can't say why the film has been successful in the festivals, but I do know why it was successful to my own eyes. The process of making the film involved such focus and attention to detail that I feel it suited the poem quite perfectly. This idea that one must pay attention to ordinary objects, to the life in inanimate things, provides the perfect momentum for a stop motion project. I have spoken with a couple of stop motion animators who agree that their puppets become alive to them: the animators speak to their puppets, wonder if they're having a good day on the set, and treat them with the respect of a live person, asking them in advance of the animation day that they perform well, like a director speaking with theatre actors. The appreciation of life where it is not immediately apparent, and the imagination required to feel things until they become alive, is the most exciting part of the stop motion filmmaking process.

When I was in art college, I had many inspiring teachers, one of whom came to mind as I was writing this article. Her name is Colette Whiten, and at the time (in the mid 90s) she was

creating large-scale bead works based on various emotionally weighty photos she had found in newspapers. The process was chosen for its ties to the techniques traditionally used by women for craft, to pass time, or for self expression: embroidery, cross-stitching, and beading. If she found a news article particularly disturbing, to the point where she was unable to process it logically, she would render the image into large-scale beadwork, using the repetitive, time-consuming task as a way to ponder the most incomprehensible of human behaviour. It must have taken her weeks, if not months, to complete a single image. I have always been drawn to this idea of stretching time, by using intense focus to see something that lies beneath the obvious. Like Francis Bacon's pope paintings, where the veneer of the status quo is peeled away, there can be the most terrifying or beautiful truth living between the gridlines of what we normally see. Rather than giving way to boredom and tuning out the repetition, there is the potential to wake up, and see through what we usually see out of habit.

The film has been traveling to festivals for the past year, with the interest mostly concentrated in Europe, though it has also appeared in South Korea, the US, and at three festivals in Montreal, Canada. I have attended film festivals, animation festivals, stop motion animation festivals, and, this week, will be presenting the film at the Zebra Poetry Film Festival in Berlin. Little Theatres has traveled on an animation festival on a boat, sailing the Black Sea through Ukraine.

At this festival in Ukraine, attended mostly by Europeans, Western and Eastern, I was asked why I chose to make a film in a language that I do not speak. I didn't have a good answer to this question at the time, other than the fact that I liked the poem and that it was originally written in Galician. But I have since realized the answer. Living in Toronto, one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, and using public transportation to get around the city for my

entire life, I hear many different languages nearly every day when I am out and about, languages that I do not understand. Though I don't understand the languages, I sometimes still try to listen to the conversations, to the intonations and expressions and sounds being spoken. It seems quite ordinary to me, to listen to words that do not make sense. I know that they make sense to someone, and that they sound interesting. It is an everyday lesson in humility, to remind myself that my slice of awareness and knowledge of the world is quite narrow, and while I can try to know more, to communicate more, there will always be something that I do not understand, and things that I don't know. To hear dialogue as pure sound is an advantage available to someone who doesn't understand its content, because the meaning of the words is no longer a distraction. It is like seeing an abstract painting, observing the colours and textures, with no relation to the real world. The colours and textures and mood become more prominent than the ideas or things that they could represent.

Therefore, I feel the texture and sound of Erin's reading, along with the little fortune-cookie-like tabs of translated text, together create the mood and atmosphere of the film. Since poetry is an aural experience, even when read quietly in one's own head, the sounds of the words convey a message beyond their content.

I have begun planning my next film, and have found the funding climate has changed in Canada since 2007, as it probably has around the world. I have been working on proposals and a script for another film based on a poem, by Canadian / American poet Paulette Jiles. When I first applied to Bravo for Little Theatres, the woman running the foundation, Judy Gladstone, was known for her interest in supporting creative and unique voices, with the intention of sharing the works not only with the TV audience but also with the worldwide Film Festival audience. I visited her office once, and she had dozens of Festival ID tags hanging from her doorknob,



proudly showcasing the multitude of festivals she had attended over the years (and I'm sure she had many more stashed elsewhere).

The foundation is now run by a different crew, apparently with a new mandate. When I had applied earlier this year, out of the 10 successful applicants, not one animation project was on the list. When I wrote to ask why my proposal was rejected, the response was that BravoFACT was now looking to fund dramatic or comedic narrative short films. My interpretation was that they were looking for shorts that could eventually be made into TV series. They are essentially looking to fund the usual TV content, rather than showcasing the riskier, more artistic projects that would not otherwise be on air. Poetic, non-narrative filmmakers need not apply.

The effect of these cultural changes and cutbacks is heartbreaking. Even the National Film Board of Canada, the longstanding institution for supporting unique artistic voices, has had its funding cut. Though I would still love to work with the NFB eventually, my proposal for this next film was rejected.

I was hoping to have the support and budget to hire people to help create the next film, and therefore finish it much faster, but it looks like I will be working on it on my own, in my spare time, between other jobs. Fortunately stop motion projects can be done this way, and I have learned enough in the process of making my first film to be a woman-of-all-trades in my next film -- lighting, directing, compositing, animating, designing, building everything (or most things) myself. However due to the time-consuming nature of stop motion, it means that my 7 minute project could potentially take 5-10 years to complete. This is not unusual for an auteurist animation project, so I should not feel discouraged, but rather continue the process, step by step, and enjoy it as it all (slowly) unfolds.