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IMAGES FROM MOZINET

From left, the Garden of Eden, ancient Egypt and ancient Greece in “The Tragedy of Man,” an animated film from Hungary.

# Living Through Animated Millenniums

By **ROBERT ITO**

IN 1996 the Hungarian Film Festival of Los Angeles screened 18 minutes of early footage from “The Tragedy of Man,” an animated work in progress by the director Marcell Jankovics. In the segment Luci-

fer and Adam visit a socialist community sometime in Earth’s grim future, a time when poetry and rose cultivation are banned, babies are issued numbers rather than given names, and the desiccated corpses of citizens are recycled to make household goods.

Michelangelo — or at least his reincarnated form — is a frustrated factory worker; Plato spends his time herding oxen.

“The people loved it,” Bela Bunyik, the festival’s founder, recalled of that sneak peek.

“When’s it coming? When’s it

coming?’ they asked. Everybody was waiting.”

As it turns out, that footage was just a small excerpt from a film that wouldn’t be completed until 2011, fitting for an epic that begins at the dawn of creation, ends with man’s last gasp and in-

cludes stopovers in ancient Greece, 17th-century Prague, Dickensian London and outer space, among others. At 160 minutes — about three hours, including the intermission — the film includes one visual spectacle after the next. Each of the 15 sections is animated in a different style, and cameos abound, from Lenin, Stalin and Hitler to Mickey Mouse, Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles of the “Yellow Submarine” era. There are also death and carnage on a grand scale: beheadings, stabbings, suicides, crucifixions, mass shootings, deaths brought on by sheer exhaustion and so on. “It won’t be a film everybody will see,” Mr. Jankovics admitted.

The full version of “The Tragedy of Man” will have its American premiere next Sunday, returning to the same festival 16 years after that initial screening and nearly three decades since Mr. Jankovics first began working on the film. At the world premiere in Budapest last December Mr. Jankovics said he told the audience that he was happy that he had lived to see this moment. “I couldn’t say anything more,” he said in a recent phone interview from Budapest “or I would have started to cry.”

The film is an adaptation of the poet Imre Madach’s play of the same title, which has been translated into 90 languages and is considered one of the great works of Hungarian literature. The action takes place over the course of one very long dream, as Adam, Eve and a chatty Lucifer visit the world’s great civilizations at the height of their power, only to watch as humanity’s noblest hopes and dreams come to naught. At 15 scenes long, set in 10 different historical periods, the play can be a beast to stage, let alone sit through. “Reading the play is exhausting,” Mr. Jankovics said, “so I think a film is a good solution.”

If anyone had dibs on adapting Hungary’s best-known drama into a feature-length animated film, it’s Mr. Jankovics, Hungary’s best-known living animator. In 1976 his film “Sisyphus,” a short-form masterpiece about the doomed, boulder-pushing king, was among the nominees for an Academy Award; the next year his “Kuzdok” (“The Struggle”) won the Palme d’Or for short film at Cannes.

“In Hungary people know him in the way they know Walt Disney,” said Paul Morton, who studied Hungarian animation in Budapest while on a Fulbright fellowship in 2008. “When I was on the street, and I told people what I was doing, they would immediately go, ‘Oh, have you talked to the great Marcell Jankovics?’”

By the time Mr. Jankovics first started working on “Tragedy,” in 1983, he had already directed two full-length films: “Janos Vitez,” Hungary’s first animated feature, and “Fehertolfa,” which stars a horse-suckled hero, his two brothers and a combative hobgoblin who loves to eat piping-hot porridge atop the bellies of his defeated enemies. “I knew pretty well that I needed three years to make one movie,” Mr. Jankovics said. “Since this is an extralong movie, it counts as two, so that’s six years. So I basically spent six years making the movie.”

And the other two decades or so? “The rest of the time,” he said, “was spent raising funds.”

Production began in 1988, at the tail end of what is now considered the golden age of Hungarian

animation. Filmmaking in that country was a state-run affair, and the Pannonia Film Studio financed by the Communist government, had become a mecca for many of the top animators, including Mr. Jankovics. A year later the government fell, forcing artists and directors to find other means of financing.

Mr. Jankovics worked a section at a time, starting with the shortest scene, in which Adam transforms into a giant robotic spaceship as he and Lucifer hurtle through the cosmos. As soon as one section was finished, he’d go about raising money for the next, applying for small grants from organizations like the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation. In the meantime he wrote several books on art and mythology, directed films and television series, and served as president of the Hungarian Cultural Society.

The film crews he led as the “Tragedy of Man” director and writer changed substantially over the years, with animators retiring or dying. “The voice of God and Lucifer remained throughout the whole production,” Mr. Jankovics said. “But Adam and Eve grew old, so younger actors were brought in.”

The last bit of money to complete the film came in 2008, when Mr. Jankovics allowed General Motors to use “Sisyphus” in an ad for the GMC Yukon Hybrid. The commercial — which compared Sisyphus’ legendary stick-to-itiveness to that of the vehicle — was broadcast during that year’s Super Bowl.

“Tragedy” has now played throughout Hungary, where it has been praised by critics, as

**A film’s cameos include Stalin, Hitler, Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles.**

well as at festivals in Russia, Serbia and the Czech Republic. This month the film will screen at festivals in Poland, Portugal, Armenia and Canada, in addition to its American premiere. There are no plans at the moment for a commercial release.

“It’s a monumental, gigantic opus that Marcell Jankovics created,” said Marton Orosz, curator of photography and media arts at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. “It’s the film he was preparing for his entire life.”

Near the end of the film, under Earth’s dying sun, one down-on-his-luck Eskimo asks Adam, whom he mistakes for a god, for more seals to eat, please, and fewer humans to share them with. After viewing eons of human misery in a single night, Adam wonders what the point of all this is, and viewers have to wonder along with him. The film ends with the timely return of Eve and God and this heavenly directive: Keep struggling, keep striving, no matter how lousy life gets.

It’s hardly a feel-good ending, but for Hungarians, at least, it’s a satisfying one. While in Budapest, Mr. Morton said, he heard a local woman explain one fundamental difference between Hungarian stories and American ones: “She told me, ‘You always end the story with “and they lived happily ever after.” We end our stories, “and they lived happily ever after ... until they died.””



Marcell Jankovics spent nearly three decades on his epic that begins at creation and ends with man’s last gasp.

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