

This article was printed from Animation World Magazine.

Visit this article online at (http://mag.awn.com/?article_no=3857)

[Show Images](#) | [Print](#) | [Close Window](#)

\$9.99: 'Magic Realism' in Stop-Motion

Tatia Rosenthal tells Joe Strike about her journey to make Etgar Keret's \$9.99 into a stop-motion feature, which links Israel, the U.S. and Australia.

Etgar Keret may be the hardest-working man in the literary biz. When he's not writing short stories or plays, he's whipping up TV comedy sketches, children's books and directing the occasional award-winning movie. His short story *Kneller's Happy Campers* was adapted into the graphic novel *Pizzeria Kamikaze* and from there into the live-action feature *Wristcutters: A Love Story*, starring Tom Waits and Will Arnett.

It's unlikely you've heard of him unless you're a literature buff and a fan of up-and-coming writers; Keret hails from Israel and writes in Hebrew. He's earned himself a stack of honors over there, including the Prime Minister's award for literature. Here in the U.S. his reputation is on the upswing thanks to recent translations of his work and the *Wristcutters* movie, but it's about to get another boost now that \$9.99, a stop-motion animated feature based on his work is in theaters.

\$9.99 weaves an assortment of Keret's stories together by making their protagonists neighbors in a big-city apartment building, some of whom discover the meaning of life via a mail-order book selling for the titular price. The stop-motion animation creates a tactile, lived-in ambience that would be very difficult for CG or 2D to duplicate. The technique establishes a world with its own peculiar rules, a perfect setting for the "magic realism" of Keret's stories: tales in which a stoner shares his apartment with three very tiny and equally stoned roommates, people turn themselves into furniture and a homeless, panhandling and suicidal bum just might be an angel in disguise -- or maybe not...

\$9.99 took a circuitous route to the screen, an itinerary linking Israel, the U.S. and Australia together in the film's creation. It began in the early 1990s with Tatia Rosenthal, a young Israeli artist on her way to New York to begin her freshman year as an NYU film student, opening a book of Keret's stories given her by a friend to read on the flight. She read the book cover to cover before the jet was even halfway across the Atlantic. "I was already a fan of his work," she recalls. "I'd read an article he wrote about his sister becoming ultra-religious that was moving and original, but understated at the same time. When I finished the book I knew I had to work with him."

Rosenthal was taken by the "sparse and exacting tone" of Keret's work. "[His stories] keep a certain distance from their subjects. Almost underhandedly they bring up such emotion and identification with his characters. I like stories that are smart and surprise you about how much you know by the end."

Once at NYU, Rosenthal focused on the animation program within the university's famed [Tisch School of the Arts](#). While she watched TV broadcasts of the Disney features in her younger days, it was a very different piece of animation that helped her decide to pursue a career in the medium. "I was 11, at home by myself watching *The World According to Garp*. I don't know how that happened: *Garp* really isn't a kid's film. When the kid was on the carpet drawing pictures of himself and his dad and his pictures began moving I realized you could do special things with animation. That was the moment I wanted to do it myself."

Rosenthal first made contact with Keret when she wrote asking permission to film his story *Breaking the Pig* as an NYU project. He gave his okay and the two began a correspondence. Then just after graduating she filmed *Crazy Glue*, another Keret story; the effort impressed the author so much he approached her about working on a longer project together, discussions that resulted in their collaboration on \$9.99's screenplay.

Rosenthal spent five years laboring as an animator on Nick Jr.'s [Blue's Clues](#) before moving on to the channel's [Wonder Pets](#) series. In between she created [A Buck's Worth](#), a stop-motion short based on a Keret story that would ultimately be re-voiced and re-animated as \$9.99's opening vignette. The short was a calling card and a demo for the longer film she and Keret hoped to make. (Rosenthal credits successful stop-motion films from the [Aardman](#) studio, [Tim Burton](#) and [Henry Selick](#) for "opening the door for anyone trying to finance films like this.") As it turned out, \$9.99 would be the first film to take advantage of an untapped, 15-year old co-production agreement between Israel and Australia.

An Aussie film producer by the name of Emile Sherman entered the picture. "Emile is very interested in Israel," Rosenthal explains. "He's Jewish and knows a lot of exciting new cultural voices in the country -- and he was looking for the right material."

Like Rosenthal, Sherman was a fan of Keret's work and tracked him down during a Tel Aviv vacation. The author showed the producer \$9.99's screenplay and Sherman was immediately interested. Amir Harel, an Israeli producer working on *Jellyfish*, a film written and co-directed by Keret (and ultimately a winner of two Cannes Film Festival awards in 2007) signed on as well.

Five months of pre-production (building the film's numerous sets and creating its plasticine cast) commenced in Sydney, Australia, followed by 40 weeks of painstaking stop-motion animation and then by Israel-based post-production. When asked if animating the film *Down Under* changed the tone, Rosenthal replies "no, just the accents." The project quickly exhausted the pool of stop-motion animators in both Israel and Australia. The producers sought and received permission to import a handful of overseas talent (one of whom, recalls Rosenthal, "would work crazy hours then every weekend he would go climbing in the Blue Mountains" outside of Sydney). Rosenthal never strayed far from the set during production, but only animated "in case of emergencies" and estimates the film contains perhaps a minute of her own work.

Viewed side by side the similarities and differences between [A Buck's Worth](#) and \$9.99 are striking. Although the staging and dialogue are close to identical, "everything you see in \$9.99 that's different from *A Buck's Worth* was a product of having a crew" working on the feature as opposed to the short's do-it-yourself production. "And because our budget [on the feature] was very low, we always had to think carefully about what were best ways to do it. I think giving the characters sculpted eyebrows and mouths like they had in *A Buck's Worth*, where we sculpted them every two frames would've been a beautiful aesthetic thing, but it would've taken so much time we decided not to even try it and did plug-ins instead." A voice cast led by Geoffrey Rush (*Shine*) and Anthony LaPaglia (*Frasier*, *Lantana*) was recorded in the space of three days. Instead of recording her performers individually and then assembling their conversations from separate takes, she brought the cast from each scene together so their performances would play off one another naturally in the audio booth. (When they could not be physically in the same place at the same time, simultaneous, Internet-connected recording sessions took place in Los Angeles and Sydney in order to achieve the same naturalism.) Did their characters sound as she imagined them while preparing the film? "You can never

anticipate what a great actor will bring to it on top of what you want."

The film's on-camera performers were sculpted by Phillip Beadsmore, the production's puppet master. Beadsmore, whose credits include [Superman Returns](#), [Ghost Rider](#) and [Star Wars Episode III](#) worked with Rosenthal, production designer Melinda Doring and several other folks to create the cast. Their likenesses were an amalgam of various friends, relatives and total strangers -- with one exception: Marcus Pocus, the apartment building's resident magician was based on animation historian and filmmaker [John Canemaker](#). Canemaker, the head of and Rosenthal's mentor in the NYU animation program also happened to be the creator of the *Garp* animation that so inspired her as a child. "I didn't realize that until my first day at NYU. At student orientation the professors showed their reels and that scene was on Canemaker's. When I saw it I jumped out of my skin." (A further bit of synchronicity Rosenthal was unaware of when she cast Canemaker as a magician was that his film [The Wizard's Son](#) is the story of a boy who'd rather not follow in his father's magical footsteps.)

Even though Keret was familiar with the ways of the filmmaking world (in addition to *Jellyfish*, some 50 of his stories have been translated to film), he maintained an arms-length relationship with the production. "We wrote the screenplay together," Rosenthal notes. "We had a few preliminary conversations before we began shooting and then we touched base every week or so. I think Etgar's very proud of the film and happy with the way it turned out. I think one big difference between us is that if he had directed the film it would've been funnier. I had a more melancholy vision than his."

\$9.99 and Rosenthal are Annie nominees for best animated feature and director, competing against this year's Pixar, DreamWorks and Disney behemoths as well as a second Israeli-produced effort, Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir*, which has already snagged some critics awards. Rosenthal finds herself "flabbergasted and honored by the company" she's in and hoping to snag an Oscar nomination as well. However, this may prove to be a difficult task, with only three slots available in the category.

No matter: Rosenthal is already looking ahead to her next animated effort. "I'm in the process of optioning a children's book to do as a stop motion film in Israel; the deal isn't final yet. Very few people have read it; it's an anonymous book from Israel, but it's a masterpiece -- a young adult novel with a few illustrations. It's a good story, a travel -- what do they call it? A road movie -- a fantasy road movie."

Joe Strike is a regular contributor to AWN. His animation articles also appear in the NY Daily News and the New York Press.

© 1996 - 2008 AWN, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this article may be reproduced without the written consent of AWN, Inc.