

OUTLOOK

Rector who swapped pulpit for puppet

Picture: MIKE ARRON

Tanya Reed talks to a former clergyman who is now pursuing a childhood love of animation – in a converted Gothic chapel

TAFFY DAVIES is a most unlikely animator. A former rector of Templecombe and Horsington — “no man’s land west of Salisbury Plain” — he moved north to Macclesfield to fulfil a childhood ambition.

His entire operation suggests divine intervention. The animation and production studio is nothing less than an 1870s Gothic chapel set among the tombstones of Macclesfield cemetery, while his latest assignment puts a cathedral against a backdrop of classical organ music for Channel 4’s Animators in Concert.

Few in the Cheshire market town realise he is there. “Some think I’ve made a peculiar choice of environment, but I’m very comfortable among gravestones and funerals,” says Davies. “I find them soothing and restful. In summer, punks congregate, completely unaware of my presence.”

Mesmerised by Walt Disney cartoons from an early age, Davies, 41, moved to Cheshire in 1989 after seeing a fly-poster advertising a redundant church building. “The chapel was a millstone around the neck of the town council and had been empty for 20 years. We spent £30,000 renovating and four months weeding out broken pews and old fertiliser bags

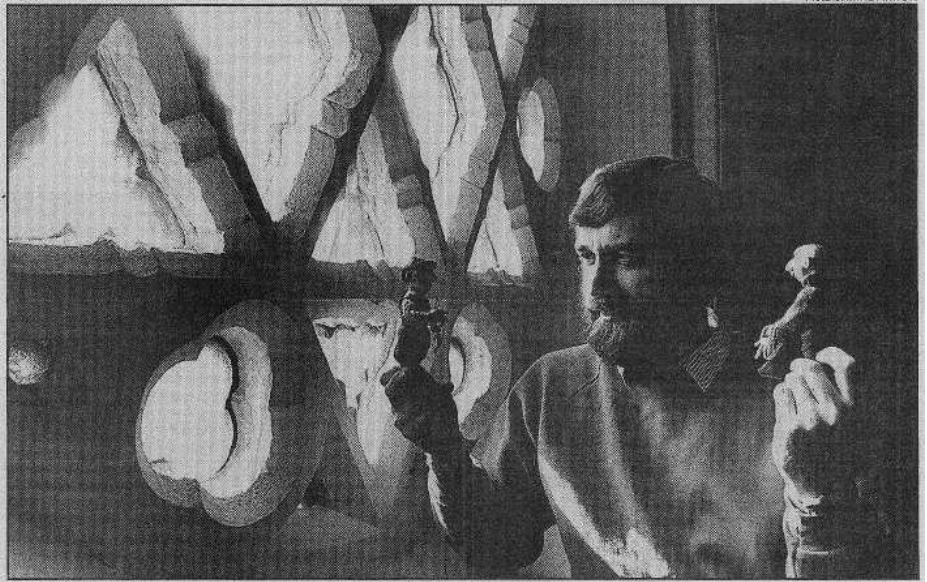
while adding an extra floor from which to work.”

Davies works from hand-drawn storyboard frames depicting individual scenes of a film used as references by the cameraman. On a good day, 18 seconds of film are produced. Each second comprises 12 different moves.

The Lighthouse, his first television production for Channel 4 (also sold to Iceland and Portugal), features puppets with resin heads and clothes of natural materials. The animation, which showed a Scottish community struggling to maintain its lighthouse in a Whisky Galore era of no cars or telephones, was filmed in three months on a £20,000 set and was broadcast last Christmas. It may be developed as a teaching resource for schools — it was also short-listed for The Broadcaster’s First Time Award.

“The figures were built on wire skeletons with ball and socket joints,” says Davies. “We took a liking to some, while others were notorious for falling over or almost walking off in fits of pique. My family was a great help, pointing out when the colour of the lighthouse beam was inconsistent or which bits were twitching.”

Davies’s new life would not surprise his former congregation. Well-known as



Taffy Davies in his new chapel: “To be able to breathe life into animated figures gives you a great feeling of power”

the rector responsible for a series of children’s books in which a boy named Miles goes on surreal adventures, he dabbled first in computer animation. Creating educational school videos with characters like Duke Starduster, he told Jesus parables with a twist, replacing

lost sheep with lost flying saucers.

The BBC’s Big Time programme further whetted his appetite for animation by asking him to be a Fleet Street cartoonist for a day. Then a Channel 4 commission to produce a series exploring a range of human

experiences finally tipped the balance.

“It was quite a wrench,” admits Davies, who set up Really Animated Productions with writer and director Terry Gibson, whom he met while working on projects for the Church Pastoral Aid Society.

“However, to be able to

breathe life into animated figures gives you a great feeling of power. They’re not like marionettes or Spitting Image puppets, because they move under their own steam. It is very satisfying work, but agonisingly slow. People can’t believe I commit my life to doing this.”

Exhibition organiser Thomson (below) has scoured the world in order to cover the full range of Lautrec’s genius: (bottom left) commercial poster; (top left) *L’abandon* (*Les deux amies*); (above) *La clownesse* Cha-U-Kao

RICHARD THOMSON has spent the past four years trying to minimise the more sensational stories that surround the colourful figure of the French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

A massive project saw Thomson engaged in different parts of the world, tracking down a portrait here, a sketch or lithograph there, and arranging for them all to be brought to a Europe which hasn’t seen some of the artist’s works for more than 60 years.

One hundred drawings, prints and posters, 70 paintings and a stained glass window now hang in London’s Hayward Gallery at what will be Britain’s most comprehensive exhibition yet of Lautrec’s work.

Thomson travelled to the United States, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria for exhibits to help put the record straight. The outcast aristocrat whose image is that of a burned-out, deformed drunk who preferred the seedier side of life originally deterred some from taking his work seriously.

Thomson says: “When Lautrec painted posters they weren’t done because he felt like it — they were commissioned. The idea of a bohemian genius seizing images from *La Belle Epoque* at random is a tremendous exaggeration.

“He was a very professional and serious painter, but films made about him — frothy rubbish such as *Moulin Rouge* — haven’t helped his image, while memoirs, often written 50 years after his death, were biased and contradictory, coloured by time.

“As it was illegal to pass a night in a brothel in the 1890s, the idea of Lautrec living and working in one is unlikely to be accurate. And the image of the prostitutes as his surrogate family is sentimental.

“He probably sketched snatches of scenes before completing them in his studio. If we knew more about his life, we could help get away from the exaggerated

“I wanted to prove Lautrec was a serious, professional painter — not a deformed, aristocratic drunkard”

Richard Thomson



mythology surrounding him.” Widely accepted as the most gifted and innovative print-maker of the 19th century, Lautrec created posters which have become a common commonplace, adorning tea caddies and tin trays everywhere, while his achievements in other areas have remained unknown.

Until now, that is. After proposing the exhibition to London’s South Bank Centre in 1987 and securing further collaboration from the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Musée d’Orsay, Thomson, an English university lecturer in the history of art, has taken works “out of retirement” in other countries and into the public eye.

A selection of 250 works was reduced to fewer than 200 for fear of drowning the public in a sea of pictures.

Then Thomson set off to track down the works in their homes around the world. During a visit to the Institute of Chicago in 1987 he paved the way for borrowing

works that included a picture of the Moulin Rouge and several drawings. In the following years he beat regular paths to museums and the homes of private collectors in America. He explains: “By seeing the original in detail you can read it more accurately. Works which look wonderful in books don’t always look so good, or so big, ‘in the flesh’.

“Also, museum curators and collectors don’t like letters out of the blue requesting a loan of their valuable paintings. Negotiating face to face can make a big difference.” A visit to Genoa secured an oil sketch, together with a lithograph of a café singer, a portrait of Viaud, who was Lautrec’s guardian, and a work in black chalk lent by the Sao Paulo Museum in Brazil. A trip to Copenhagen last summer produced a portrait of Monsieur Delaporte, rarely seen in exhibitions. Working via a dealer in Zurich, Thomson negotiated for the portrait of a prostitute from a collec-

tion in Switzerland, while a rare colour lithograph of two women in a theatre box was lent from Austria.

Thomson is particularly proud of *Training the New Girls* at the Moulin Rouge — the painter’s most ambitious work to date, from 1890, which was left to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “It had been bought by a private collector in 1930 and not been seen in Europe since,” he says.

The exhibition reunites a Tiffany stained glass window from the Musée d’Orsay with Lautrec’s original cartoon, usually hanging in the Philadelphia Museum. The two had not been in the same room together for 100 years.

Further finds were discovered after the paintings arrived at the Hayward and lay stacked against a wall, ready to be unpacked. On the back of three — one from a private collection in New York, two others from French museums — a sharp conservator spotted rapid oil sketches of two women and a still life, all so far uncatalogued.

Thomson had earlier decided that a “plod-through” exhibition was a bad idea, and opted instead for displaying Lautrec’s work in nine sections. “I tried to emphasise other aspects, such as his portrait painting, which is frequently overlooked. He was clever and witty with a shrewd sense of personality.”

Posters which shout the vivacity of life in late 90s Montmartre vie with stark, colourless sketches of horses and clowns. The bawdy cancan girls for which Lautrec is best known wrestle with equally bawdy girls at their toilette.

France’s love for its own aristocracy in the years since the French Revolution will be expressed in the spring when the exhibition spends 100 days at the Grand Palais in Paris.

Tanya Reed