

On March 12, the day that Leo Varadkar announced school closures and the cancellation of mass gatherings, Animation Dingle pulled the plug on its 2020 festival. Jam Media, which organises the annual event, began to send its animators home to see how they would cope with remote working. The studio provided equipment and resolved broadband issues. Six weeks later, mid-lockdown, they delivered to Amazon Prime a full series: *Jessy and Nussy*, a preschool story about a girl with magic spectacles.

"It was completed at the same schedule that it would have been if everyone was in the studio," notes John Rice, co-founder of Jam Media, which has bases in Dublin and Belfast. "It worked out so well, you would wonder about the necessity to have studios."

While live-action film and television production has stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic, animation has continued. The nature of the artform, whether hand-drawn or computer-generated, lends itself to remote working simply because it is so desk-based.

Jam Media's experience is being repeated across Irish animation. Boulder Media, a Dublin studio that was acquired by the American toymaker Hasbro for €11.85m in 2016, has kitted out its 390 staff for remote working. Boulder is working on shows for Warner Bros, and the lockdown "hasn't affected schedules, which has been a relief", according to Robert Cullen, its creative director.

Wolfwalkers, a new animated film from Cartoon Saloon, is due to be completed and delivered to Apple TV+ for streaming this year. The team is working in isolation, having recorded a soundtrack with the Irish folk band Kila in February. Since then, Maria Doyle Kennedy has recorded another song for the movie from her home.

The domestic animation industry is served by a 2,000-strong workforce, double the size of five years ago. These workers are spread across a multitude of studios, including Brown Bag, Monster Entertainment and Telegael. Animation accounts for half of all production spending in Ireland, according to new figures from Screen Ireland, which based its calculation on projects that qualified for section 481 tax relief. Last year, this relief was granted to 39 animated projects with a total production value of €372m. In 2014, tax relief went to 15 projects with a value of €85m.

Ronan McCabe, who produced *Zig and Zag* and *The Podge and Rodge Show*, and is now chief executive of trade body Animation Ireland, agrees that the industry is booming here. "People are drawn to our creativity and storytelling," he says. "It's a golden age for animation. Amazon, Netflix, Apple: the money they are spending is in the billions. There's a massive demand for content."

Becca's Bunch, another Jam Media preschool series, is showing in 80 territories



FROM THE TOP DRAW

The Irish animation industry is booming as studios fill the gap left by live-action films and television production in the lockdown, discovers *Pavel Barter*

and there are spin-off publishing and merchandising deals. Boulder Media, which has created content for the BBC and Disney, tells stories in genres based on Hasbro properties such as *Transformers* and *My Little Pony*. *Sherwood*, a 10-episode animated series by Irish studio Giant Animation, has amassed more than 25 million views on YouTube.

Wolfwalkers is the final part in Cartoon Saloon co-founder Tomm Moore's Celtic trilogy, following his films *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*, which were Oscar-nominated. *The Breadwinner*, another Cartoon Saloon film, directed by Nora Twomey and co-produced by Angelina Jolie, was also nominated for an Academy Award.

Wolfwalkers is based on an Irish folk

tale that originates in the Kilkenny region, where Cartoon Saloon is based. "There were stories about St Patrick putting a curse on people who wouldn't convert and turning them into werewolves," says Moore, who is co-directing.

The film is about two young girls who want to save Kilkenny's wolf population, and takes place in the mid-1600s. "We set it in Cromwellian times, when there was an aim to wipe out the wolves," adds the director. "The English, who considered Ireland as being wild and unattainable, called it 'wolf land'."

Cartoon Saloon's animators are drawing backgrounds for *Wolfwalkers* by hand, using a style seen in 17th-century pamphlets to build cities. Watercolours and pencils are deployed to create forest scenes; and the team uses charcoal

animation to create the world as it might be seen through the eyes of wolves.

The story might be prescient, Moore contends. "We have plague doctors walking around in the background in some scenes," he says. "But more so than the pandemic, a story about cutting down forests, which we are now seeing across the world, is timely. We have a basic problem with how we relate to the wilderness and wild animals."

Pink Kong Studios, an animation company in Dublin, also inserts deeper messages into its stories. *Urban Tails*, its recent production for RTE, teaches children about urban animals through hip-hop. *Planet Park*, in development, "teaches kids about climate change, but in a fun and engaging way," according to producer Niamh Herrity.



Maria, a virtual-reality animation on which Herrity is working, tackles consumerism and body image.

While Irish animation studios have traditionally catered for primary and preschool audiences, there is a rising demand for more grown-up content. Pink Kong is working on a "feminist-oriented" adult comedy for an audience aged 18 to 30. "A lot of the older adult animation is heavily targeted towards a male audience, but there's a massive appetite among females as well," says Herrity. Netflix has its own adult animation department, with series such as the 18-rated *BoJack Horseman* pulling in big audiences. Cartoon Saloon tries to cater for all ages with each production. "We want to make films intelligent enough for children to be interested in

Good hair day *Wolfwalkers*, above, *Sherwood*, top left, and *Urban Tails*, below

and simple enough for adults to enjoy," says Moore.

In the 1980s, Sullivan Bluth Studios, in partnership with Steven Spielberg, moved to Dublin from California, creating successful feature films such as *An American Tail* and *The Land Before Time*. Production of animated features in Ireland faltered after Bluth's departure in 1995, but several are in production at the moment. Last year Netflix commissioned Cartoon Saloon to produce a feature

entitled *My Father's Dragon*. Moetion Films in Galway is working on *Ooops! Back in the Deep End*; and Boulder has what Cullen describes as "Ireland's first fully produced computer-generated feature film", which he expects to be in cinemas in September 2021.

The pandemic is changing the nature of storytelling within the Irish film and TV industry. It will be followed by a dearth of content, because of the months of inactivity. With live-action furloughed, there is a gap that animation can fill.

Rice of Jam Media is finding that broadcasters and streamers are not so much asking for pitches for new ideas as asking: "When can we have

them?" This has prompted the studio to explore content ideas that can be produced in a short timeframe.

As with many other sectors, Irish animators are likely to rethink their entire way of working when the country fully emerges from lockdown. "Some people in the industry have said they don't want to ever go back to the office if they can help it," says McCabe. "You sort of think, why did we not do this before?"

Yet, with their industry built on creativity and collaboration, festivals and community events, animators are looking forward to the end of social distancing. "During the early stages of a production, when we're coming up with ideas, we need to be in a room together," Rice insists. "I don't think you can do that on a Zoom call."

