



## My Dog Tulip

By [JUSTIN CHANG](#)

The intensely personal, mutually possessive devotion between man and man's best friend gets a thorough probing -- often in the most literal sense -- in the **lovingly hand-crafted** animated feature "My Dog Tulip." From J.R. Ackerley's droll and tender memoir, husband-and-wife helmers Paul and Sandra Fierlinger have spun an equally droll and tender film, albeit one that can feel a tad strained in its intense focus on the mating habits and waste products of its canine heroine. **A considerable treat for dog lovers**, this **charming if not especially kid-friendly toon** should find a home in theatrical kennels internationally; ancillary prospects look fetching.

First published in England in 1956, "My Dog Tulip" recounts how Ackerley, a middle-aged bachelor with no particular feeling for dogs, became the owner of an Alsatian bitch; for the next 14 years, she would serve as child, lover and constant companion. The filmmakers have taken pains to preserve the source material's dryly affectionate tone throughout, not only in their voice casting of Christopher Plummer (who delivers the author's every witticism to perfection), but also in their deliberately rudimentary 2D animation style, which, in its simple yet rapidly shifting hand-drawn images, provides an almost musical accompaniment to Ackerley's words.

Unflappably English to the core, the 81-minute picture comprises a series of wryly humorous episodes, mostly concerning Ackerley's trial-and-error attempts to provide for Tulip's needs. When she falls ill, dog and master pay troublesome visits to multiple veterinarians, only one of whom (a perhaps too recognizable Isabella Rossellini) turns out to be sensitive and sensible enough for Tulip. Later, Ackerley invites his sister (Lynn Redgrave) to move into his flat, initiating a sibling tug of war for the dog's loyalty.

But most of the film is given over to a painstaking tour of canine bodily functions, including numerous anecdotes about Tulip's ill-timed potty breaks and, in the most overextended chapter, Ackerley's vain attempts to find Tulip a husband. Sketches of Tulip relieving herself on the sidewalk ("businesslike, as though she were signing a check"), or Ackerley clumsily trying to, er, position Tulip and a potential suitor, are admirably unflinching, even rhapsodic; this, the filmmakers seem to be saying, is what it *really* means to be a dog lover, and it ain't pretty.

But a certain monotony creeps into these passages as well, especially in comical interludes in which Ackerley envisions Tulip as a biped in a dress. It's an amusing but needless attempt to anthropomorphize a character whose thoughts, habits and emotions are quite easy to read and identify with in this often uncomfortably moving love story, which fully understands the unique intimacy, jealousy and commitment that characterize the bonds between dogs and their owners.

Per press notes, "My Dog Tulip" is the first feature-length toon entirely drawn and painted by hand via paperless technology, as artists Paul Fierlinger (credited as sole animator) and Sandra Fierlinger (background and image painter) made use of a digital tablet and animation software. The result won't win any awards for pictorial splendor but is marvelously deft and expressive in its blend of color and monochrome, movement and stasis; a light snowfall sequence proves unexpectedly breathtaking. John Avarese's music and sound design provide a match for the images that's never less than ideal.



## **My Dog Tulip**

**3.5 stars**



### **Discovery**

Interestingly anachronistic in its pencil-drawn animated style, this unsqueamish film — adapted from the '50s novel by J.R. Ackerley about his loving 14-year relationship with an incorrigible German shepherd — is a tonic for (a) real-life dog owners, and (b) anyone who felt the need for a

sickness bag while watching Hollywood junk such as Hotel For Dogs or Marley And Me.

This is a film where dogs sniff butts, where they go into heat, where they bite out of territorial behavior and where they create unpleasant messes of various sorts.

In his narrative, Christopher Plummer beautifully captures the British pragmatism and reserved affection that informs this love story.

Isabella Rossellini has a fun cameo as a behaviorist vet who tells our protagonist that Tulip's behavior is all his fault.

- Jim Slotek

# NATIONAL POST

## **My Dog Tulip**

September 03, 2009

by Brad Frenette

### **TIFF '09 MINI-REVIEW: MY DOG TULIP**

#### **3 Stars**

U.S.A., directed by Paul and Sandra Fierlinger

Starring Christopher Plummer, Lynn Redgrave, Isabella Rossellini

Based on the 1956 novel by J.R. Ackerley, this animated tale of a man's failed search for human companionship — "unable to love each other," we're told, "the English naturally turn to dogs" — is a sweet and honest meditation on what it means to look after an animal for years on end. The narrator remarks upon his dog's relentless enthusiasm and wonder at the world, and it's clear that this inspires him to achieve the same. There is perhaps too much focus on Tulip's bowel movements throughout the film, but the beautifully scratchy and vivacious illustrations make up for this.

– Vanessa Farquharson



## **My Dog Tulip**

### **3 Stars**

Reviewed by Andrew Dowler

The dark and disturbing part of *My Dog Tulip* doesn't surface until the very end, when J.R. Ackerley, our hero, narrator and author of the source novel, reveals his beliefs about the desires behind human friendship. They're quite strange, and at odds with his behaviour toward Tulip, an Alsatian bitch he acquires in his 50s.

Ackerley, a London bachelor, brings dry British humour and understated warmth to his and Tulip's ordinary adventures: inappropriate dog poop, visits to the vet, relations with Ackerley's sister and attempts to get Tulip to mate. Plummer's even-toned narration lets the emotion emerge from the words. Except for a few flights of fancy, so does the Fierlingers' ink-and-watercolour animation, which is graceful and lightly comic.



## **Today's TIFF mini reviews**

### **My Dog Tulip** (Recommended)

This offbeat animated feature about an older man who finds the one true emotional relationship of his life with a dog has nothing conventional about it. From being the first animated feature hand-drawn using paperless computer technology, through the deft adaptation of A. R. Ackerley's novel, right to the A-level cast of voices led by Christopher Plummer, Lynn Redgrave and Isabella Rossellini, it's definitely an entry for the connoisseur of the truly different.

Tonight 9 p.m. Varsity, 55 Bloor St. W. RO



## TIFF 09: MY DOG TULIP Review

by Kurt Halfyard,

*Animation, Comedy, Drama, Toronto Film Festival 2009, USA & Canada*

Poetry comes from strange places. After all, who would have guessed that a diary of a lonely gay man about the trials and tribulations of his dogs bodily excretions would be as **charming, warming and yes emotional** as achieved here. I have not read J.R. Ackerley's novel (diary?) on which My Dog Tulip was based, but part of me wants to after seeing this wonderful adaptation. The film version, I am told, was animated 'without substrate.' That is to say that the process was digital, using a light stylus direct to screen by Paul and Sandra Fierlinger who are veterans of doing documentary animations and short films (one nominated for an academy award in 1980, suggesting that yea, Fierlinger has been doing this sort of thing for some time). My first experience with their work (he draws, she shades) was reminiscent of the cinema of Bill Plympton, only a tad more pastel-shaded and aristocratic, but still 'handmade'. I mean that both visual and narratively.

I do not like dogs. In fact, I am like some of the troublemakers in the movie insofar as my attitude towards the beasts. After sitting with this film, I had a warm and fuzzy feeling, and fully understand why so many people go through all the troubles and challenges of dog ownership. Good movies should offer experiences and points of view that are not a part of your own everyday existence, and they should not all have to be gangsters action heroes and space explorers. The down-to-details rewards are many, and the film offers profundities on a life well lived (with a dry British wit) in the process.

Our dog owner acquires an 'Alsatian bitch' mainly because he is over 50, alone and lacking the energy or the desire to cultivate friendships of the human kind.

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He is a vigorous and loquacious speaker, voiced by none other than Canadian National Treasure, Christopher Plummer. And doggie scatology and every last detail about canine sex are visualized with rhythm beauty and comedy. When festival programmer Colin Geddes casually mentioned over beers one evening that the film delved into the sex life of a dog, I was unprepared to have this be two thirds of the running time! Yet is never offered for cheap laughs (even as Tulip is anthropomorphized into a bipedal creature with a dress!), offering a dignity to the whole proceedings along with a healthy dollop of warmth. Urination carried out with joy and grace? Check. Discussion (with hand gestures) of tight foreskins and 'mounting bitches?' Check. Friendship is perhaps holding your partners head hair out of the way as they vomit. You have to go so much further than this with a dog in heat. Yet the loyalty and unequivocal friendship (and need) seems worth it after viewing this one.

Dog lovers will shit themselves.

*[On an amusing side note, Isabella Rossellini can add 'dog porn' to her bug and crustacian porn playing at this years TIFF, as she (and the lovely Ms. Lynn Redgrave) provided supporting voices, making this perhaps the most distinguished celebrity voice cast in an animated film ever. Suck it Dreamworks.]*



## My Dog Tulip -- Film Review

By Kirk Honeycutt



**Bottom Line:** An adult cartoon about a middle-aged man and his dog aims for, for the most part achieves, wit and whimsy.

TORONTO -- This is not the Year of the Dog in the Chinese calendar, but it certainly is in the cinematic one. "Marley & Me" and "Hotel for Dogs" celebrated canine follies, then talking dogs enlivened Pixar's cartoon "Up," and now comes "My

Dog Tulip," a whimsical animated tale about a middle-aged man and his very unruly, undisciplined Alsatian bitch. This is an adult cartoon where the attractions are a droll and very British commentary by Tulip's owner (voiced by Christopher Plummer) and stylish animation from the husband-and-wife team of Paul and Sandra Fierlinger.

While a natural for festival exposure, the film is not really family friendly -- too much examination of Tulip's adventures in defecation and sex. Theatrical opportunities appear limited.

The film is based on J.R. Ackerley's memoir, published in 1956, about his 14-year relationship with Tulip, which proved to be the happiest years of his life. In a way, that's a sad commentary on the English writer's inability to sustain human relationships although the film never makes that point.

He certainly takes his dog's side in all issues involving other humans and seems more at ease with Tulip than even with his own sister (voiced by Lynn Redgrave). Indeed Tulip and his sister wage a war one year over who will win his affection. It's not a fair fight.

Of course, human/canine interaction presents limited dramatic opportunities except in exaggerated kiddie cartoons where dogs may assume anthropomorphic characteristics. Since "My Dog Tulip" is an adult cartoon, comic incidents focus on problems incurred by Tulip's defecation, her need to define her territory with urinary markers, her "marriage" to a male dog and then her first litter. It is, at times, a case of too much information.

The narration, presumable lifted liberally from Ackerley's tome, is witty and unsentimental. And Plummer's clipped, measured tone is always reassuring.

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The Fierlingers claim this to be the first animated feature ever drawn and painted utilizing paperless computer technology. They say 60,000 drawings went into the final picture. Little wonder it took three years to complete.

Much of the film is drawn in a colorful sketch style, more realistic than exaggerated, where our human protagonist addresses us directly as he relives his life with Tulip. Other times simpler drawings, as in a magazine cartoon, evokes the writer's dreams or visions; black-and-white lines speak of more distant memories; and yellow-pad scribbles take us into a world of fantasy thoughts.

The animators are clearly fond of both main characters. Others, human and canine, don't fare so well. Then again, this is the point of view of a slightly misanthropic author who prefers his typewriter and dog to human company.

While a few get bitten, the film itself lacks real bite. This is a placid memoir, describing fond memories with little dramatic urgency.

Tulip's temperamental nature with others is the chief dramatic issue. When a smart veterinarian (Isabella Rossellini) takes her in hand, even that issue seems to subside. A sexual fantasy about a couple, fellow Alsatian dog owners, represents the film's one venture into animation's wilder possibilities. Would there were more.

## **TIFF movie reviews**

### **My Dog Tulip**

#### **2 Stars**

Paul and Sandra Fierlinger (USA)

You don't have to be a canine connoisseur to appreciate animators Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's latest feature-length film, but it might help. An adaptation of J.R. Ackerley's novel, it's the story of a solitary writer who, rather late in life, adopts a German shepherd named Tulip and, much to his delighted surprise, finds a kind of love hitherto unknown. Alas, as artistically skillful and diligent as the Fierlingers are - more than two years and 60,000 drawings went into the making of the picture - the lack of a genuine narrative pulse weighs heavily. The first half concerns itself largely with Tulip's less than fastidious bowel and bladder habits; the second, with the writer's attempt to find her a suitable stud. The voice-over acting of Christopher Plummer, Lynn Redgrave, Isabella Rossellini and others is flawless, but I was more bored than charmed.

- Michael Posner

## **My Dog Tulip**

BY Chris Bilton   September 09, 2009

### **2 Stars**

What amounts to story time with Christopher Plummer — who essentially reads the JR Ackerley novel of the same name to accompany what looks like a free-association animated Herman comic — is actually a twistedly enjoyable watch, but only if you're a dog owner.

## "My Dog Tulip", un film qui ne manque pas de chien

LE FIL CINÉMA - C'est un long métrage au trait minimaliste et aux couleurs pastels réalisé par les Fierlinger, un couple d'animateurs américains plus tout jeunes, d'après un roman anglais. Et ça conte la "passion" entre un vieil homme et son berger allemand (une femelle). C'est tendre, malicieux, drôle... Et assez scato, quand même. Oui, il a du flair, notre envoyé spécial.



En raison de l'extrême minutie et de la considérable quantité de travail qu'ils requièrent, les longs métrages d'animation sont très souvent des œuvres collectives conçues dans des studios où chaque étape (scénario, graphisme, storyboard, layout, décors, animation, compositing, montage...) est confiée à des petites mains expertes, parfois même délocalisées en Inde, Chine ou Europe de l'Est par souci d'économie. My Dog Tulip (Mon chien Tulip) n'appartient pas à cette catégorie. Adapté du roman éponyme de J.R. Ackerley, ce dessin animé pour adultes présenté en compétition à Annecy a été conçu de A à Z par les époux Fierlinger. Sans la moindre feuille de papier. Paul a dessiné directement

sur une tablette graphique avant de laisser Sandra peindre par dessus (la technique est décrite là). Né en 1936 au Japon, de parents diplomates, l'Américain Paul Fierlinger est un vieux singe de l'animation. Il réalise son premier film à Prague en 1958 et a signé des centaines de courts, séries, publicités en plus de cinquante ans de carrière. My Dog Tulip est son premier long métrage (1h23).

Publié en 1956 en Grande-Bretagne, le court roman autobiographique de J.R. Ackerley raconte la relation quasi amoureuse entre un vieil homme désabusé et sa chienne, de race berger allemand. Quatorze années de bonheur décrites avec une sensibilité très british. Et un goût poussé pour les fluides canins divers et variés. Pour rester aussi fidèles que possible au texte littéraire écrit à la première personne, les Fierlinger ont confié à Christopher Plummer (La Forêt interdite, L'homme qui voulut être roi, La Mélodie du bonheur, Le Nouveau Monde...) le soin de lire l'histoire. Sa voix douce et malicieuse accompagne à merveille, du début à la fin, les dessins aux couleurs pastels (ou parfois simplement les croquis au trait léger) du couple d'animateurs américains.

Recommandé aux plus de 15 ans, sensibles aux histoires simples et au rythme indolent, ce dessin animé, nous a emballé par son humour scatologique et ses réflexions d'une grande justesse sur l'égoïsme des propriétaires d'animaux de compagnie. Le grand-père, un vétéran de la guerre de 14 passablement misanthrope, promène sa chienne en fredonnant des airs tels que « Tu sens mon cul et je sens le tien » ou encore « Les êtres humains sont prudes et ennuyeux ». Le nirvana, pour l'heureux propriétaire de Tulipe, est atteint quand sa chienne lui fait l'honneur, au gré de leurs promenades digestives dans des cimetières, de lever la patte sur l'arbre contre lequel il vient juste de se soulager. Une certaine vision du couple et du bonheur.

- Jérémie Couston

## ENGLISH TRANSLATION

### "My Dog Tulip," a film that has no shortage of dog

This is a feature-length work in a minimalist and pastel-colored style by Paul and Sandra Fierlinger, a couple of not-so-young American animators. Based on a British novel, it expresses the deep love between an old man and his female German Shepherd. It is **tender, mischievous, funny** ... and very scatological. It definitely has a certain flair.



Because of the extremely detailed and demanding work they require, animated feature films are often collective works conceived and planned in studios where each task (script, graphics, storyboards, layout, backgrounds, animation, compositing, editing ...) passes through many hands, and is sometimes even outsourced to India, China or Eastern Europe for budgetary reasons. *My Dog Tulip* does not belong to this category. Adapted from the eponymous novel by JR Ackerley, this cartoon for adults presented in competition at Annecy was literally hand-crafted from start to finish by the Fierlingers, yet benefited from the latest technology. Eschewing the use of paper, Paul hand-drew each frame on a graphics tablet, and then Sandra digitally painted over the sketches ([the technique is described here](#)). Paul Fierlinger's parents were American diplomats stationed in Japan, where he was born in 1936. An animation old-timer, he directed his first film in Prague in 1958 and has contributed his skills to hundreds of shorts, series, commercials in his more than fifty-year career. *My Dog Tulip* is his first feature film (1:23).

Published in 1956 in Great Britain, the autobiographical novella by JR Ackerley details the quasi-romantic relationship between a disillusioned old man and his German Shepherd from beginning to end. The intervening fourteen years of happiness are described with a very British sensibility and a fixation on various bodily fluids of the canine variety that stretches the boundaries of good taste. Searching for the perfect actor to bring Ackerley to life, Fierlinger landed Christopher Plummer (*Wind across the Everglades*, *The Man who would be King*, *The Sound of Music*, *New World*, *Up* ...) by sending him a copy of the book. Plummer's amazing voice is a marvelous complement to the pastel-colored drawings (or sometimes simple sketches) of this American couple.

This animated film, with its reliance on a simple story and deliberate pacing, packed with scatological humor and pointed observations on the foibles of pet owners, is recommended for audiences over 15 years of age. The old man, a fairly misanthropic war veteran, walks his dog humming tunes like "You smell my ass and I smell yours" or "Human beings are prudish and boring." True happiness, for the lucky owner of Tulip, is achieved when his dog does him the honor, during their walks in cemeteries, of lifting her leg against the tree on which he has just relieved himself. This is a quirky vision of relationships and happiness. - Jérémie Couston

## Plummer's pipes keep working



Sep 12, 2009  
Richard Ouzounian

For Christopher Plummer, 80 is the new 40.

The veteran actor will indeed become an octogenarian on Dec. 13, but the rate of activity he's generating these days would do credit to a man half his age.

Not only does he have two movies at this year's Toronto International Film Festival (My Dog Tulip and The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus), but he's got three other pictures

in release this year (Up!, Caesar and Cleopatra and 9), is preparing to return to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival next summer as Prospero in The Tempest, and is being inducted into The Canadian Film and Television Hall of Fame.

"Well, it does sound like a lot if you put it that way," concurs Plummer over the phone from his Connecticut home, "but I love every second of what I do, so it never really seems like work at all."

Even when a project is as troubled as Parnassus was, due to the unfortunate death of Heath Ledger during its filming, Plummer finds no fault, but chooses instead to hail "the amazing spirit of professionalism and teamwork of the artists who pitched in selflessly to make it work."

In particular, he's referring to the triumvirate of Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Colin Farrell, who all came to the rescue of director Terry Gilliam and helped to reimagine Ledger's role.

"It's a very different movie," he says of the final product. "I think you'll be intrigued by it."

Things were much more tranquil during the preparation of his other TIFF entry, My Dog Tulip.

Based on J.R. Ackerley's warm-hearted novel about a middle-aged man who finds the first real emotional connection of his life with a dog, this project certainly attracted an A-level team, with celebrated writer/director/animator Paul Fierlinger at the helm and the likes of Lynn Redgrave and Isabella Rossellini joining Plummer in providing the voice work.

"This had wit to it, was quite well written and I loved the illustrations, the vague suggestive style of them," explains Plummer. "It's not on-the-nose or cute. I jumped at it."

The actors laid down all their vocal tracks before any of the animation was done, and Plummer was fulsome in his enjoyment of the process.

"I had a marvellous time with (Fierlinger). He was very quick as a writer to see what worked and what didn't. It kept changing all the time."

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In thinking about it, Plummer realizes that "I've done a lot of voice work recently, but I've had the fortune to work with amazing people, which makes it so rewarding.

"I get very opinionated and I often want to change things, but when you're working with real pros, they understand that's part of the process."

One of the other reasons Plummer has developed such a fondness for this kind of employment is that it takes him back to the beginning of his career.

"My first professional work, you know, was in radio back in Montreal. I loved everything about it, in particular the ability to change your voice in a dozen different ways and become an equal number of characters."

He sighs deeply. "I miss radio. It was a great medium. A medium of the imagination. You could suggest so much by just knowing when to pause. It was so intimate, so intense."

Plummer has made over a hundred feature films in his lifetime and discussing them with him is like flipping through an impossibly glamorous photo album at high speed. The great and near great are all put under his unsparing gaze.

"Such a bad actor," he says almost admiringly about a colleague who shall remain nameless, exulting in the level of the man's awfulness.

But he's equally generous with praise for the performers he venerates (see sidebar below), and can be just as hard on himself.

"Take Lock Up Your Daughters," he says, referring to a now-forgotten "naughty" 1969 romp through Restoration England. "The only good thing to come out of that film was that I met my wife, Elaine, while shooting it, and we're still together 40 years later.

"I always knew she must have really been in love, because she watched me playing Lord Foppington and still married me."

But on the semi-plus side were flamboyant failures like *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), which gave Plummer "my biggest screen role to date" as the villainous Commodus.

"The biggest star on that picture was the producer, Samuel Bronston," recalls Plummer fondly. "He was the Robin Hood of the film industry. He robbed the rich and gave it to us poor actors. He brought back the 1930s. We all had our own Rolls Royces. We lived with such style! He spent a lot of money and it all showed on the screen, but none of it, alas, wound up in the investors' pockets."

In 1970, Plummer played Wellington opposite Rod Steiger's Napoleon in another epic flop called *Waterloo*, but he has no memories of working with the American method actor. "The way the shooting schedule was arranged, I arrived the day that Rod departed. He left me the suite he had occupied, including a collection of the most outrageously lethal pornography you've ever seen!

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"Had I been caught, I would have been arrested," Plummer shivers. "So I read them very fast and then threw them into the fireplace."

He admits that the quality of the movies he was being offered started to decline over the years, but then, "after I had a big hit with Barrymore on the stage, people started sending me quality scripts again."

His favourite from that period was the exposé of the tobacco industry called *The Insider*, with Plummer scoring a huge hit as the abrasive investigative TV reporter, Mike Wallace.

"I loved doing that movie. Real quality all the way down the line and I didn't have to do any research, because I knew Mike. I was thrilled to portray him, but I didn't do an imitation of him, but offered instead a kind of portrait of what he was like."

Plummer is also very fond of the recent screen version of *Caesar and Cleopatra* adapted from the stage version he did for Des McAnuff at Stratford. "I had always refused to do stage plays on screen before that," he admits. "It just looks like you're shouting at the top of your lungs. We insisted on using the audience. That was the secret. Once you use them as part of the play, people will accept it as a filmed theatre piece, because you see them laughing and enjoying it with you in the same shot."

"I got quite excited about the possibilities of that. I'd love to do it again."

Does this mean next year's production of *The Tempest* at Stratford may wind up on screen as well?

"If we all do our jobs well," hedges Plummer, "I certainly hope it does."

Which only goes to prove that even at the age of 79, Plummer is ready to face a "brave new world."





## Hard working Plummer

By JIM SLOTEK, SUN MEDIA

It takes a big year to drag Christopher Plummer to a film festival. Luckily, he's had a few of those lately.

Indeed, with his two 2009 entries -- the legendary Canadian actor is the lead voice in the animated film *My Dog Tulip*, and he plays the title role in the star-crossed Terry Gilliam film *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* (Heath Ledger's last film) -- he'll have had six movies in the Toronto International Film Festival this decade. (The others: *Emotional Arithmetic*, *Closing the Ring*, *Syrianna* and *Ararat*).

Plummer admits, however, "I haven't been to the (Toronto) festival very much. I don't usually like festivals because you meet people that you never see again -- a great deal of hangers-on, almost professional hangers-on. They almost never have anything to do with the business.

"So I've avoided these things unless it really is necessary to be there," he adds with a laugh over the phone from his Connecticut home.

"It was two movies the last time (2007), when I had Dicky Attenborough's film (*Closing the Ring*) and also *Emotional Arithmetic*. This time I'm here for both (*Dr. Parnassus* and *My Dog Tulip*), and also they're giving me an award (The Canadian Film and Television Hall of Fame) ... which is very nice, but I don't know much about it.

"So, in any case, I'm there with full medals."

Have we mentioned that Plummer turns 80 in December? And he admits he's never been busier. Fresh off his Stratford turn in *Julius Caesar* (a production that may be headed to Broadway), he's agreed to play Prospero at Stratford next season.

Meanwhile, he has just finished yet another starring role, as Leo Tolstoy, opposite Helen Mirren and James McAvoy in Michael Hoffman's *The Last Station*.

Why the Plummer renaissance?

"I think people say, 'He's not going to be here very long. We might as well hire him quickly before he cops it,'" Plummer quips. "There's that aspect, and of course you never really retire in this profession. It's a wonderful business in that respect, because it's a hobby as well as a profession. I adore it. I will drop dead doing it."

His favourite choices are the most personally resonant. Hence *My Dog Tulip*, Paul and Sandy Fierlinger's minimally-drawn animated film based on J.R. Ackerley's '50s memoir of a loving 14-year relationship with an incorrigible German shepherd.

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Though American, it's reminiscent of classic National Film Board work, an observation Plummer shares. "It reminded me of Frederic Back's work, the French illustrator the NFB hired. He did the Academy Award-winning thing which I did with him, *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Wonderful illustrations, and very similar to Fierlinger's illustrations for *My Dog Tulip*."

But it's the unsqueamish portrayal of what dogs are really like -- from droppings to humpings to destruction to being in heat -- that sold Plummer on *My Dog Tulip*.

"My whole life has been spent with dogs. And all my dogs were rather like that, every one of them as undisciplined as possible. My fault probably, because we spoiled them. I had a whole family of dogs most recently, which was extraordinary of course, because we were the lowest members of the pack.

"We had to obey the Mistress, a shepherd-collie mix not unsimilar to Mr. Fierlinger's shepherd. We had to await her orders every day, which was exhausting. But they all lived to a grand old age. The oldest living to 18, the kids lived to 16. So they had a good life. They ate our caviar and steak tartar. We did spoil them. But they hated dog food, wouldn't touch it. It was about five, six years ago the last one left us."

They haven't adopted another dog since, "because we sorely needed a break from them. I would get another dog, but it's impossible to travel, and my wife had to stay home an awful lot and look after us. We had people working for us, but they're not dog people."

As for *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, he declares it an ironic case of a tragedy with a silver lining. The movie, about a travelling theatre impresario (Plummer) who offers patrons entrance to another world, was already at a creative crossroads at the time of Ledger's drug-related death in New York in January 2008.

"Fortunately, the film is about magic. So we were able to transform Heath into three other characters. As tragic as it was, for the film it turned out for the better, actually. because we needed a profound change by that time in the story.

"it turned out smashingly, and Johnny Depp and Jude Law and Colin Farrell were terrific in those three roles. They stepped in very nobly and came to the rescue. And they gave all their money to Heath's family and the daughter he adored. And that was a very nice gesture."

These days, Plummer lives quite quietly with wife Elaine "on a large tract of land we got almost 30 years ago in Connecticut. It's perfectly beautiful and quiet. I don't hear any traffic, mercifully.

"It's a perfect place to be, close to New York where I do Broadway plays, and close to the airport for London and Europe. I couldn't possibly live in Los Angeles."

## Plummer's not going quietly

- Michael Posner



He may be 79 years old but, fit and feisty as ever, Christopher Plummer says he has no intention of retiring. Plummer is at TIFF for a few days to promote two films, Terry Gilliam's *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*, in which he plays Dr. Parnassus himself, and *My Dog Tulip*, Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's animated adaptation of the J.R. Ackerley novel. Here,

Plummer is the voice of the lead character, a bachelor writer who becomes a dog owner and dog lover late in life.

"Everyone asks me if I'm going to retire," says Plummer. "No! No! We don't retire in this business. We just die and if we can, we die doing it. I wouldn't mind going out that way." Plummer has just finished playing Count Leo Tolstoi in *The Last Station*, opposite Helen Mirren as Sonya Tolstyoi. "We go at it hammer and tong." The film was well received at the Telluride Festival and is expected to receive a commercial release.

Plummer says he's quite happy with *Parnassus*, although he thinks the cold winter nights shooting in London might have contributed to the untimely death of Heath Ledger. "He came down with walking pneumonia and came back from Australia after Christmas with terrible insomnia, and then came the terrible news from New York that he had taken one too many. He was just adorable, a wonderful actor who chose gutsy parts. He wanted to direct and he adored his daughter and any suggestion by the press that it was a case of suicide is disgraceful. He had everything to live for and wanted to, but made a terrible mistake."

As for himself, Plummer is weighing a number of screen roles, but starting next spring, he's signed on for another season at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, playing Prospero in *The Tempest*, directed by Des McAnuff.

"I was avoiding it like the plague because it's a very difficult part and I always associate it with the last big role an actor plays and then he retires. So I intend to do something very quickly right afterward. Just to prove I haven't."

JENNIE PUNTER

While the Toronto International Film Festival hasn't historically been a hub for animation fans, industry or gossip (the annual Annecy, France, and Ottawa fests, and San Diego's Comic-Con are the top destinations), this year, three features and shorts offer a cross-section of styles and stories, and a well rounded perspective of the genre's roots, art and audience.

*A Town Called Panic* (part of the Midnight Madness program) is a raw, surreal Belgian stop-motion tale featuring characters that look like cheap toy figures. It follows Horse, Cowboy and Indian's quest to nab pointy-headed sea creatures who stole their house. *My Dog Tulip* (Discovery) is veteran animation artist Paul **Fierlinger's funny and touching** hand-drawn (with the latest paperless computer software) adaptation of J.R. Ackerley's beloved book about his 14-year relationship with an adopted Alsatian. Then there's *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Real to Reel), a juicy insider look at the dramatic, game-changing renaissance and executive tussles of Disney's floundering animation studio in the 1980s - not strictly a cartoon but a key work in understanding the current boom.

Fierlinger, who has won a Peabody and every award the Ottawa International Animation Festival bestows, may not be a household name, but his work in the seventies and eighties for *Sesame Street*, including the stop-motion series *Teeny Little Super Guy*, helped shape the cartoon sensibilities of teeny viewers in households around the world. The son of Czech diplomats, Fierlinger began his career in late 1950s Prague and produced 200 films (ads, shorts, kids' TV) before escaping communism in 1967. "My most profound influence from Czechoslovakia was the importance of being original, and the whole purpose of creating art was to stand out in your own way," he says. "When I came to America I was shocked to find just the opposite.

"People imitate others and take pride in it," he continues. "My first encounters with advertising agencies, they asked, well, can you do Disney or Terry Gilliam? And that notion exists to this day." (Interestingly, Gilliam uses CGI to "imitate" the look of his famous seventies cut out-and-collage work for Monty Python in *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*.)

*My Dog Tulip*, which features the voices of Christopher Plummer and Isabella Rossellini, is set in postwar Britain and delivers the animated antithesis of the Disney canine hero. "I wanted to show not just how dogs can be endearing but what people have to put up with, all the bodily fluids and humping," says Fierlinger, a Jack Russell owner. "I wanted to create the opposite effect of *101 Dalmatians*."

But the pervasive cultural impact of Disney animation was not always so. The "euphoria and horrible fear" of rescuing the department from oblivion and launching it into the blockbuster stratosphere is charted in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, directed by Don Hahn, who produced many of the studio's groundbreaking successes (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*),

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# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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and produced by Peter Schneider, a former Disney animation exec whose theatre background was key in introducing the Broadway musical vibe to Disney toons.

"In the 10-year period covered in the film we had a monopoly at Disney," recalls Schneider. "Once it was established there was an audience and that you could spend millions and get your money back, every other studio went into the business, and now the animated movie is a staple of the product line. It changed from a kids' to a movie business."

Indeed, recent releases *Coraline*, *Monsters Vs. Aliens* and *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* have all seen brisk business. Last week saw the release of CGI sci-fi action feature *9*, and *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* opens this Friday. Also coming soon are: Wes Anderson's stop-motion *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, Disney's 2D musical *The Princess and the Frog* and *Polar Express* director Robert Zemeckis's 3-D performance-capture film *A Christmas Carol*. Perhaps the biggest sign that animated films are now counted among the big leagues, celebrities traded their designer shades for 3-D glasses at the Cannes Film Festival this year, which chose the Disney-Pixar film *Up* as the opening-night film.

"The bittersweet ending of *Waking Sleeping Beauty* is that we started repeating ourselves and audiences will tire of that," says Hahn, currently developing Tim Burton's stop-motion feature *Frankenweenie*. "If you look at the boom now, there's not a lot of new styles. I'm hungry to reach out to new visual ideas. There was a time when Disney was the avant-garde, then Pixar, so I'm looking for that next direction."

Copperheart Entertainment's Steven Hoban, co-producer of Oscar-winning animator Chris Landreth's acclaimed CGI short *The Spine* (part of TIFF's Short Cuts program), sees 3-D as the next frontier - pushing its creative boundaries far beyond today's fare. Since producing *Cyberworld* in 2000 with Imax, the format's first fully 3-D animated movie, Hoban has set his sights on working with filmmakers that will take it there.

"Commercial 3-D films haven't used the technology in a new way, it's still a gimmick," says Hoban, who's new film with Landreth, *Lovecraft*, took part in the TIFF-related International Financing Forum. "Where 3-D is really going to take off is a new kind of storytelling."

"When [Russian film director Sergei] Eisenstein cut up films and edited in a new way people had never seen before, some thought it would confuse audiences, but it created a whole new film language," he continues. "Animation offers more opportunity than live action for that. And now is the time to do that with films that are commercial but push the medium forward and Chris, who was initially not interested in 3-D, is exactly the kind of director to do that."

## **TIFF '09 | Paul Fierlinger: "No independent animator has been doing this longer than I have"**



Paul and Sandra Fierlinger's "My Dog Tulip" is a vivid, whimsical animated feature about the relationship between a man and his dog. We gave Fierlinger and others a free-form style interview to gather their thoughts on their careers individual projects.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of a series of interviews indieWIRE will be running with the filmmakers screening in the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival's Discovery program.

You...

1. I have been a chronic insomniac for the past 30 years. For all those years I have been drawing animation images between 12 and 16 hours a day, almost every day of the year, including weekends and holidays.
2. For most of my life I have owned some sort of boat, starting with a simple wooden kayak. When I finally got a sailboat that could cross oceans, I spent a lot of time on it – mostly below decks, drawing animation images.
3. As a child I was never allowed to have a dog. On the other hand, from the age of 15 I was allowed to live on my own, in a rented room, and the first thing I acquired was a dog. Since then, rarely has a day passed in which I have not been in the presence of a dog that belonged to me.

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### Your Filmmaking Career and Process...

1. The first animated films were made about a hundred years ago and I have spent half of those years making a living as a freelance animator; I have never held a job. As far as I know, no other independent animator has been doing this longer than I have.

2. I was born in Japan, spent the WWII years in the U.S., lived for 20 years behind the Iron Curtain before I managed to escape in 1967 and return to the U.S. I was the first animator of all the Communist countries to get away with privately producing animated films, which I sold to the Government run television and film studios.

3. My first professional camera, which was made exclusively for shooting frame by frame film, was a WWI 16 mm Siemens designed for aerial intelligence photography. My last film, "My Dog Tulip," was made with no camera at all, no pencils, no pens or paper or paint, yet drawn and painted the old way – by hand. It's been just the two of us, my wife Sandra and me, using a Wacom stylus & tablet and a computer, sitting apart in the corners of our living room and a spare bedroom. [Click here to find out more!](#)

### "My Dog Tulip"...

1. I've made about 900 films but this is my first 35 mm feature film and the first one made for theatrical release.

2. The assignment came to me over the phone when Norman Twain and Howard Kaminsky, two producers I had never heard of before and who had never heard of me either, called me one day out of the blue (on the recommendations of a mutual friend Howard ran into on the street) to ask me if I would like to make a feature film about anything I want, as long as it will be based on a well known book.

3. It took Sandra and me two-and-a-half years to draw and paint My Dog Tulip and we never experienced a stressful moment to retell, something I can't say about many 10 second films I have made.

### Your Influences...

1. I stopped going to the movies about 30 years ago and I will see a movie at home or at a film festival about once or twice a year. All my influences come from reading. I love books and I now love the Kindle because we have no more room for books in our house. Two of my many favorite authors are James Thurber, and Oliver Sacks. My favorite book of the past 10 years is "Stoner," by John Williams.

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2. But clearly the greatest influence on my work has been the invention of the computer with its software TVPaint, developed by Hervé Adams in Metz, France.

3. We live and work in a small ranch house on a quite street in the very quite suburbs of Philadelphia. We are surrounded by gardens and beautiful tall trees and trimmed lawns. We have few close friends and the phone rarely ever rings. All our important business communications are conducted over the Internet. In this fashion we present dailies to our producers and we deliver the entire film on a small external hard drive. I correspond over e-mail with about two dozen close associates from all over the world. I receive and immediately answer about 50 e-mails every day. This mundane lifestyle has a grand influence on our work.

The Future...

1. Currently, Sandra and I are developing with Norman Twain Productions our second feature film which retells the story of Joshua Slocum, the first man ever to circumnavigate the world alone in a sailboat, at the end of the 19th century. We use this true event of adventure as a parable to the state of affairs we moderns have to face in our own insecure and tenuous lives. This project will be our security blanket into the immediate future, say the next three years and far beyond.

2. I have an eye on the fast developing and marvelous venue of the digital print media, specifically the New York Times online. Both Sandra and I are news junkies. I foresee glimpses of ourselves producing animated image bites as observations on everyday lives of people everywhere, who like us cannot (and do not want to) escape the cascade of news events streaming by the minute into their lives, over the ever improving paraphernalia of mass digital media.

3. I wish that I may still be able to outlive every dog we own and that I will never be without a dog.



## **Almodovar joins TIFF line-up**

- Gayle MacDonald

The latest additions to the Toronto International Film Festival's 2009 lineup were unveiled Thursday, with Pedro Almodovar's thriller *Broken Embraces* and Todd Solondz's dark comedy *Life During Wartime* both getting North American premieres.

Almodovar's film, starring Penélope Cruz (her fifth film with the director), was nominated for the Palme d'Or award earlier this year at Cannes. *Broken Embraces* is the story of a blind writer (Lluís Homar) haunted by a past of jealousy and treachery.

Solondz, whose 1998 *Happiness* was nominated for a Golden Globe, also wrote the screenplay for *Life During Wartime*, a story of sexual obsession, starring Allison Janney ( *Juno*, *American Beauty* ) and Irish actor Ciarán Hinds ( *There Will Be Blood* ).

TIFF, which runs Sept. 10 to 19, also announced six other special presentations, including British director Lone Scherfig's *An Education*; Italian Renato De Maria's *The Front Line*; British Stephen Poliakoff's *Glorious 39*; French director Jacques Audiard's *A Prophet*; and Juan Jose Campanella's *The Secret of Their Eyes* from Argentina/Spain.

Another special presentation will be Japanese director Yoichi Sai's *Kamui*. A world premiere, the film tells the story of a fugitive ninja played by Kenichi Matsuyama, who also stars in the black comedy *Bare Essence of Life* by newcomer Satoko Yokohama.

*Bare Essence of Life* is one of 21 feature films TIFF has added to its Discovery program, a showcase for new and emerging directors. Other films include *The Angel*, from Norway's Margreth Olin, and Australian actress-turned-director Rachel Ward's *Beautiful Kate*.

Also part of the program are the animated film *My Dog Tulip* (voiced by Christopher Plummer and Isabella Rossellini) and *The Unloved*, directed by the Oscar-nominated British actress Samantha Morton.



## **Rossellini in Green Porno art installation**

By Ciara Byrne, THE CANADIAN PRESS

Isabella Rossellini is starring in a porno, but it's not as scandalous as it sounds.

The actress was in Toronto Wednesday on behalf of "Green Porno: Scandalous Sea," an art installation that will be on display at the Royal Ontario Museum throughout the Toronto International Film Festival, which kicks off Thursday.

"I've always been interested in animals, but most people seem to be interested in sex, so we decided to do a series of films about how animals reproduce," Rossellini said with a laugh as she stood in the foyer of the museum on Wednesday.

Originally, the cartoonish-like green porno films (the museum will be showing nine instalments) were an experiment by the Sundance Channel, which wanted two-minute films about the sex life of marine animals.

In one short, Rossellini is clad in a red starfish costume and set behind a sea made of blue paper.

"If I were a starfish, I can reproduce sexually or asexually," she intones as her limbs float away, illustrating how a starfish fragments its body.

"To mate, you don't have to have a penis," she adds, smirking at the camera.

In another film, Rossellini is dressed as an "ugly" angler fish, hiding in the abyss waiting for its mate — also played by Rossellini — which will pierce its belly to impregnate it.

The most outrageous of Rossellini's films shows the stunning former model wearing a giant, blue whale suit, which is equipped with an six-foot-long erection.

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"They do it in very funny, scandalous ways," said Rossellini as she described the mini-movies.

"The films are meant to be comical but also for people to laugh and say 'I didn't know that.'"

Since the films can be accessed online, they are ideal for cellphone users, she said.

"The experiment was to try to find a visual language for the new canvas," added Rossellini, who said the videos have already garnered more than five million hits and resulted in a book deal and DVD.

Francisco Alvaraez, the managing director for the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the ROM said the films are a wondrous glimpse into a very active underwater world.

"You learn about the incredibly fascinating weird habits of whales versus crustaceans," said Alvarez, adding that despite all the laughter the films have a larger message.

"The deeper message is one about preservation," he said, as he commented on the films' ability to raise awareness about environmental concerns such as overfishing.

**Rossellini also has another project that will be showcased in Toronto. Her voice is featured in the animated film "My Dog Tulip," which will screen at the festival.**

# A DIFFERENT STRIPE

The animated My Dog Tulip to screen at the Toronto Film Festival

We've been talking about the animated film adaptation of My Dog Tulip for a while now, but it's finally close to having a US distributor—that is, if it gets picked up after the Toronto Film Festival (where it will be showing on September 13, 14, and 18).

The cast of the could not be more illustrious. Christopher Plummer, Lynne Redgrave, and Isabella Rossellini are among those who lend voices to this most adult (and often scatological) story of a middle-aged gay man's discovery of the love he spent his life searching for—in the form of an ill-behaved German Shepherd (or Alsation, as they're also known).

The filmmakers, the husband-and-wife team of Paul and Sandra Fierlinger, have a no less impressive pedigree, including a Peabody award for their Still Life with Animated Dogs. Paul began his career as an independent producer of television and theatrical shorts in his native Czechoslovakia. After emigrating to the US in the late '60s, he established a studio and created films for Sesame Street (such as the famous "Little Teeny Superhero") and Nickelodeon, in addition to longer works, including an animated autobiography, that have appeared in such venues as PBS's Independent Lens series. Sandra has been Paul's close collaborator on many of these projects. She is responsible for the resplendent coloration of the film.

Go to [www.tulipthedog.com](http://www.tulipthedog.com) to see clips of the film and to find out more.

Posted by Sara | Permalink September 02, 2009

The animated My Dog Tulip to screen at the Toronto Film Festival

# THE DEWEY DIVAS AND THE DUDES

THE ADVENTURES (READING AND OTHERWISE) OF BOOK REPS ON THE ROAD

NYRB Challenge: In which I go to the dogs (and the movies too!). . .

Let me start by saying that I've never been a dog owner. I classify dogs in the same category as cars and kids; I can understand the appeal, but for me - too much work and worry. This hasn't stopped me though from thoroughly enjoying these two short canine tales, both of which were published in 1956 but couldn't be more different in style and content.

My NYRB Challenge Book #2 is the very funny memoir *My Dog Tulip* by British writer J.R. Ackerley, which I picked up both because I had a ticket to the new animated film screening at TIFF, and I couldn't help laughing at the E.M. Forster quote on the back: "It is the biography of the New Dog - a creature comparable to the New Woman that disturbed our grandparents."

*Tulip* is a young Alsatian that Ackerley acquires when he is in his fifties and she completely changes his life, despite the fact that she is badly behaved, barks at everyone, and has very unpredictable bowel movements (the chapter simply titled "Liquids and Solids" is Ackerley's comic account of dealing with the latter in this era before "poop and scoop" laws). However the two absolutely adore each other and the reader can't help but smile at Ackerley's determination to make Tulip happy by ensuring that she experiences all that a female dog should - namely sex and pregnancy. Two thirds of the book follows his many frustrating attempts to find Tulip a proper mate; who knew how complicated canine sex was? But the deed is finally done and there is a very touching scene when Ackerley watches throughout the night as Tulip gives birth to her puppies (though you'll be shocked by what happens next). Even if you are completely indifferent to dogs, the strength of this memoir is definitely the writing which will charm and surprise with its candor whether Ackerley is describing the inexhaustible and unsuccessful wooing on the part of Tulip's suitors - many of them too small to do anything about it - to the heartfelt gratitude he feels when they both relieve themselves in the park and Tulip makes a point of sprinkling her own urine on his: "I feel that if ever there were differences between us, they are washed out now," he writes. "I feel a proper dog." (Must be a guy thing). He is also very good at describing dog owners to comic effect. My favourite quote shows the strong and beautiful bond between the two: "Tulip never let me down. She is nothing if not consistent. She knows where to draw the line, and it is always in the same place, a circle around us both."

I saw the animated film of *My Dog Tulip* last night. It's directed by Paul Fierlinger who is also the main animator along with his wife Sandra Fierlinger. He draws the images and she paints them. He was at the screening and in the Q & A that followed he explained how the images were created. The entire movie was hand-drawn but using a computer software program that allows the process to be paperless. He draws the frames on a computer slate and later the colours are painted in. It still took two and a half years to complete. I enjoyed the film; the style of animation (which is far more sophisticated

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# THE DEWEY DIVAS AND THE DUDES

THE ADVENTURES (READING AND OTHERWISE) OF BOOK REPS ON THE ROAD

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than it initially looks - lots of interesting things happening the in the background) works well with the basic simplicity of the story, and Fierlinger has stayed very close to the book (95% of the narration is taken directly from it). Christopher Plummer is a marvellous choice for the voice of the crusty and cynical Ackerley. There are many sexual references and jokes, but these are rendered in an non-explicit, almost cartoonish style - while not a children's film specifically, I don't think it will unduly disturb any kid 12 and up. You can see clips and the trailer at the movie's website located here.

Niki: The Story of a Dog by Tibor Déry, translated by George Szirtes, is a very different breed of dog story and #3 in my NYRB Challenge, picked up because I was fascinated that it was published in the same year as the Ackerley and seemed an ideal pairing. This is a novel set in Hungary after the Second World War, amidst the fears and violence of ongoing political unrest. Niki is a scrappy little terrier who is adopted by the Ancsas, a couple who have lost their son in the war. When the husband gets a new job in Budapest, they move from the country to a tiny flat and things start to fall apart. Niki is not an urban dog and has a hard time adjusting. Mr. Anscas gets shifted to a number of jobs for which he is highly overqualified and then one day he doesn't come home and no one knows why. His wife is left to fend for herself and with little money, she has to question whether or not to keep the dog which is now viewed by a suspicious and hungry society as a luxury item. But Niki is the only thing she has left, and so she strives to provide as much love and happiness as she can for the inconsolable dog who is missing her master. This sad novel explores the difficulties of true communication between dogs and humans. This incomprehensibility is played for laughs in My Dog Tulip, but here, Niki stands in for the Hungarian citizens - they too can't understand why people suddenly disappear with no explanation given or how long this state of suspension will last. It takes a physical and mental toll:

The bitch neither cried, nor argued, nor protested, nor demanded explanations; and it was impossible to convince her. She simply resigned herself to her fate in silence. This silence, which resembled the ultimate silence of a prisoner broken in body and soul, was, for Mrs. Ancsa, like a violent protest at the nature of existence itself.

I was oddly touched by both books which of course were as much about the owners of Tulip and Niki, and their own quests to fight loneliness and connect emotionally with the world. Dog lovers will find their own personal touchstones within these pages, but any rendition of a relationship has a universal appeal and relevance to all humans - even those not attached to a leash.

- Posted by Maylin at 11:40 AM



[Marshall Fine](#)

## [Live from the Toronto Film Festival: Day 3](#)

It's always nice to see old pros given the opportunity to ply their trade in new and revealing ways. Consider a pair of Christophers in films at the Toronto Film Festival.

Christopher Plummer is sublime as the title character in *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, the star-crossed film by Terry Gilliam that is most notable for the death of Heath Ledger during shooting and the scramble by Gilliam to figure out a way to finish the movie without him. As the good doctor, Plummer is limber and versatile, playing drama and physical comedy, bringing to bear the best that his mellifluous voice has to offer.

That voice seems to be ever present this year, at least in the animated realm. He was the villain in *Up*, the domineering No. 1 in *9* and he'll also be heard here in Toronto in *My Dog Tulip*.

Plummer most often plays silky villains these days, so getting the chance to play a hero gives him a role that makes much broader demands on his talents -- and he delivers. His performance almost makes the Gilliam film worth seeing -- that and the clever manner in which Gilliam created his own rules of fantasy to explain why Ledger transforms at various points into Johnny Depp, Jude Law and Colin Farrell. Unfortunately, Gilliam's astonishing visual sense can't compensate for a movie that's too short on script and story to pull itself together in the end.

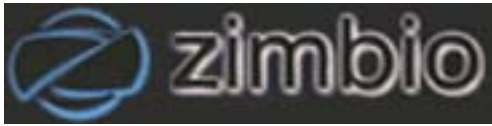
Just as Plummer is the best thing about Gilliam's film, Christopher Lee salvages Danis Tanovic's *Triage*, a film that proves once more that Colin Farrell is an underrated actor with hit-and-miss taste in scripts. For every *In Bruges* and *The New World*, he seems to make a half-dozen duds like *Cassandra's Crossing* and *Miami Vice*.

Farrell is outstanding in *Triage*, a film about the traumatic effects of war on a veteran news photographer. But while he makes us feel this guy's pain, the story itself is clichéd stuff -- right down to the iconoclastic shrink who helps him face his problem.

But the shrink is played by Christopher Lee, with a playful Spanish accent (his character is the grandfather of Farrell's character's wife, who is played by Paz Vega). The grandfather is an 84-year-old psychiatrist who treated the problems of fascists after Franco fell and who treats Farrell when he develops a psychosomatic inability to walk. Lee's eyes twinkle with mischief, even as he calls Farrell on the phony defenses he hides behind to keep from confronting his real secret (which you'll figure out long before Tanovic reveals it). It's great to see Lee play someone without supernatural powers for a change; he makes this guy the most interesting character in an otherwise predictable film.

Speaking of performances that bowl you over -- I wasn't, but let's -- there are a pair of them in Lee Daniel's shattering *Precious* (which actually is burdened with the unwieldy title *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire*).





**"My Dog Tulip" After Party - 2009 Toronto International Film Festival**



Actress Lynn Redgrave (L) and director/ writer Paul Fierlinger arrive at the "My Dog Tulip" screening after party during the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival on September 13, 2009 in Toronto, Canada.





**"My Dog Tulip" After Party - 2009 Toronto International Film Festival**

TORONTO, ON - SEPTEMBER 13: Director/ writer Paul Fierlinger arrives at the 'My Dog Tulip' screening after party during the 2009 Toronto International Film Festival on September 13, 2009 in Toronto, Canada.

In this photo: Paul Fierlinger

Photo: Teresa Barbieri/Getty Images  
Sep 13, 2009