

The Salmon Dance - CG Video for the Chemical Brothers

Six Weeks to Complete Work in Maya On Some 320 Hand-Animated Fish

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Framestore CFC has recently completed work on a trippy, fishy little promotional video for The Salmon Dance, a new single by The Chemical Brothers, featuring vocals by ex-Pharcyde rapper, Fatlip. With a cast of over 300 piscine performers, the video is the latest collaboration between directing team Dom & Nic and Framestore CFC. Drawn from the Brothers' latest album, We Are the Night, the video was produced by John Madsen for Factory Films.

The last time that Tom & Ed and Dom & Nic and Framestore CFC got together, the result was Believe, a brilliant and unnerving video featuring a menacing CG robot which won wide acclaim, including 'Best Special Effects' at the 2006 CADS Music Vision Awards. So there was plenty to live up to this time around. Fortunately, this particular combination of audio and visual talent is one of the most inventive going, and The Salmon Dance, in addition to being infernally catchy, is one of the wittiest, prettiest videos around.

A young guy is woken from his bed by a faint noise from next door. Walking through, he slowly approaches a large fish tank. As he nears the glass, a large piranha looks out at him and says (lip-synching to the start of the song), "Hello boys and girls, my name is Fatlip, and this is my friend, Sammy the Salmon," at which point a Squirrel Fish (!) introduces himself with a casual, "What do?. Today we're going to teach you some fun facts about salmon," Fatlip continues, "And a brand new dance." The beat then kicks in, with a puffer fish inflating and deflating in time to the pulse.

What follows is a sort of hip-hop Billy the Bass meets Busby Berkeley meets Finding Nemo number, as assorted seahorses, lion fish, yellow tangs, neon tetras and butterfly fish disport themselves around the tank, both individually and in aquatic chorus lines. As the dance comes to an end we cut to a pair of model divers in the corner of the tank, who bear a more than passing resemblance to a certain pair of Brothers ...

VFX Supervisor and Lead Inferno Artist for the project was Ben Cronin, veteran of many a Dom & Nic project, including Believe. "After some initial discussions," he recalls, "Florent de La Taille, one of our Animators came up with some preliminary fish sketches, from which Dom & Nic could select the direction they wanted to go. The pre-viz gave us a chance to block out some of the big chorus sequences, though not as many as we'd hoped, time being against us." A two-day shoot off Brick Lane saw the necessary plates captured, with challenges successfully overcome including cloudy tank water and a malfunctioning periscope camera.

After a little over two weeks for rigging and so forth, the Commercials 3D team were able to complete work in Maya on some 320 hand-animated fish in just six further weeks. "One thing that really helped along the way," enthuses Lighting TD Simon French, "Was a brilliant dynamic script developed by Junior TD Henry van der Beek for animating the fins and other features. It was a massive time-saver in the animation and

brought an extra level of realism to the renders."

"We were using real fish as models," says Animator Michael Mellor, "But they were obviously going to be doing unrealistic things (talking and dancing), to name but two. So the trick was to walk a line between necessary stylization, and an overly 'cartoony' look." Fellow Animator, Nicklas Andersson, agrees. "You can use the natural features of the fish in your favour," he points out, "The piranha, for example, has a certain set to his lips that lends itself to certain expressions (they just look right on his face ...)"

Telecine for the spot was provided by Framestore CFC Colourist Dave Ludlam. "We arrived at a look early on," he says, "And did a final mastergrade at the end of the job to bring it all together. Obviously, the focus of the spot is the tank, so we tried to keep the room quite dark, bringing out the fluorescent, luminous qualities of the water."

Cronin is clearly very proud of the work the Framestore CFC team have done on The Salmon Dance. He sums up his feelings by pointing out that many people (including the directors) have said that once you've seen the video it becomes impossible to picture the vocalist as anyone other than a piranha. Which is probably as good a definition as any of an animation job well done.

More Information at: www.framestore-cfc.com - Image and Video Courtesy of Framestore CFC.