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Buzz Lightyear, Nemo, Mr Incredible – we've loved them all. Now Wall-E, a robot rubbish-collector, is set to win over audiences' hearts. On a tour of Pixar's California HQ, **Sam Leith** seeks out the company's shiny metal soul.

WHEN you clear security and step on to the Pixar campus, three-quarters of an hour out of San Francisco, the wattage of the sunshine seems to go up.

There is an overwhelming and delicious smell of freshly mown grass. Among trim shrubs is a wide black tarmac path unblemished by chewing gum and, along it, bronzed paragons of healthy Californian youth, wearing T-shirts and cargo pants, fly past on little silver scooters.

Purpose-built at the behest of Pixar's former chairman, Steve Jobs, the main offices of the world's foremost animation company are housed in a two-storey, red-brick warehouse-style building, set around an enormous atrium. Light streams in through glass louvres in the roof and the plate-glass front wall, and spills across a vast blond-wood floor. And in the middle, sitting on a wooden bench looking comfortable in a shaft of sunlight, are the two most important people in the building: Wall-E and Eve.

I say "people"; they're robots. And I say "robots"; they're actually cardboard simulacra of imaginary cartoon robots.


But it is on the personal charms of these two — the stars of Pixar's

ninth animated feature — that everything depends. Down both sides of the room run slick, mock-art-deco advertising banners. One of them shows Wall-E's plaintive binocular eyes gazing out at you. "Wall-E," proclaims the legend: "A Brighter Future." When the film *Wall-E* opens, the smart money says the future will indeed become even brighter for Pixar.

Being given a tour by Randy Nelson — the dean of Pixar university — feels like being inducted into a cult.

He makes theatrical gestures with his hands and articulates slowly and clearly like an inexperienced carer attempting to convey solicitousness to those with learning difficulties.

His smile is unwavering, and he utters gloopy catchphrases in a



swooping, sing-song voice: "Thank you for helping us to tell our stories"; "Membership is one of the first things you have to feel"; "One of the jobs we have as managers is to make sure that people go home at the end of the day." At one end of the building, there is that glass front wall; at the other, the screening room: Nelson explains that the purpose of the building's design — which forces employees to visit the communal area every time they want to get something to eat, take a break or even go to the loo — is to make sure that everyone bumps into everyone else as often as possible. The reason?

"We're doing art as a team sport," is a catchphrase Nelson pronounces more than once. The roll-call of Pixar's successes in the 13 years that it has been making animated features has been extraordinary: *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Finding Nemo*, *The Incredibles*, *Cars*, *Ratatouille*. And the roll-call of its flops? None. *Cars* — deemed by some as something of a disappointment — grossed almost half-a-billion dollars.

Wall-E tells the story of the last creature left on Earth: an indefatigable solar-powered rubbish-compactor. Humans, having made a complete mess of Earth, have flown off into space and left this "Waste Allocation Load or Earth-Class" to clear it up.

For 700 years of solitude, trundling about crushing into cubes and piling them on top of each-other, *Wall-E* must be a little eccentric. He has a pet cockroach and collects with which he feasts on the battered old trailer he calls his cubicles, cutlery, fairy lights and such like. Not long after, Eve shows up — a sleek and fast-moving space probe like a bee, stings like a surface-to-air missile and looks like a sexpot. He's in love at first sight for our clunky hero.

Stanton, the writer-director of *Wall-E*, has wind-burned sandy beard and a loud, quick-fire laugh. He's in his early 30s, closer to his mid-30s. As a young animator, he applied to Disney — and they turned me down. I was just a pimple-faced kid. If I were to see my portfolio work, I wouldn't hire me, certainly not me bitter."

Stanton needed to spell out what it would have meant when, in 2003, he was hired by Pixar, which he wrote and directed, won Pixar its first Best Animated Feature Oscar. Disney's *The Lion King* had at that point held the highest-grossing animated feature for 10 years. *Nemo* was second place.

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The Southland Times

Unwind

THE RETURN

... to memory lane **D4**



Festival finish in Speedos

MATE
MARK WILSON



THE dog derby came and went and was just as chaotic as I'd expected. A record field participated but, unfortunately for me, my dog Jose wasn't completely cured of his sexual confusion issues and behaved a little inappropriately. We did, however, manage to win a prize (for the worst start to the barking competition ever) so all in all a great day out.

The remainder of the Queenstown Winter Festival was an extremely festive affair with many a snowflake, cold beer and concert going teeny bopper in abundant supply.

Despite several issues with actually forecasting when the snow would arrive it quietly slipped in some time in the wee small hours of Saturday.

As I slept curled up in bed visualising my lines for the suitcase race scheduled for Saturday arvo the space outside my frozen window was tuning whiter than a 1970s Springboks rugby team and as many a glassy-eyed festival reveller awoke, the Wakatipu basin was a picturesque winter wonderland littered with car crashes, kids on sleds and the odd erotically shaped snow creation.

Despite Queenstown being a winter resort which relies on snow, when snow actually falls pandemonium ensues. Shops are closed, schools close and cars crash. Even the ski fields can't seem to cope with more than 25cm in one hit. So it came as little surprise that most of Saturday's events for the winter festival were cancelled.

Town ground to a halt for a few hours while the snow plough team swung into action and got things moving again in time for the evening concert, which was very creatively named *The Big Night Out*.

A crew evenly divided between the sexes arrived at my house in the afternoon to begin preparations for the concert — a leg of venison in the oven and cold Speight's in the fridge set the scene well. Controversy arose, however, when the male contingent decided it was unmanly to leave for the concert until the rugby had concluded so the genders parted company and were not reunited until the men arrived fleetingly at the concert just before the curtain came down. One thing that stood out is that teeny boppers had dangerously excessive energy levels (possibly from sugar-filled lolly water RTD drinks) and will all be deaf if they continue to stand that close to speakers and jump around like spider monkeys in a mating ritual.

Sunday saw the final day of winter festival action on Coronet Peak. I dragged my now extremely weary liver with body in tow up the hill and took part in the suitcase race, which has become an iconic event of the festival.

While not troubling the finishers with blinding speed I managed to pick up the best costume prize — complete with accompanying cuts, grazes and snow burn — for my effort in racing down the mountain at mach 2 in my Speight's Speedos. Let's just say the safety features of such clothing when hitting the snow at speed are limited.

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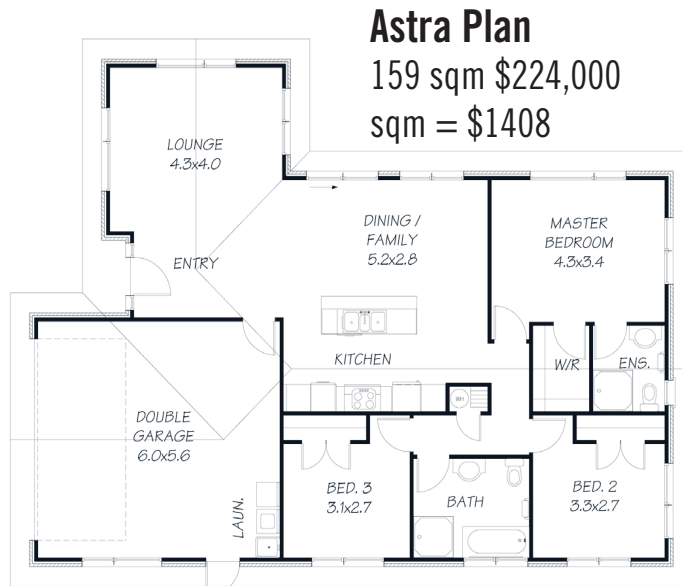


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