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‘Nine Nation’ an animated tour of the world

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The universal power of imagery is on full display in "Nine Nation Animation," the series of animated shorts playing the Detroit Film Theatre this weekend.

As is always expected, much of the imagery follows a humorous trail, but there are also moments of sheer terror offset by gusts of florid imagination and sweet nostalgia. These films — gathered from around the world — are both entertaining and breathtaking.

They also show the breadth of animation these days. From the line-driven future-world angular tale of a cat and mouse in a dysfunctional romantic relationship ("Please Say Something," from Ireland and Germany) to the painterly fable of a holy man on a journey ("Bamiyan," from France and Belgium), the range of styles is astounding.

Some of it's just plain fun, especially "Flatlife," an 11-minute film from Belgium that offers an outsider's perspective on four apartments, simultaneously following the action and inter-action going on as laundry is done, pictures are hung and televisions are watched (and destroyed). The laughs are gentle and consistent.

Far more harrowing is the surreal — or too real — "She Who Measures," a Croatian film that has creatures pushing shopping carts through the desert, wearing happy face masks that feed them video images, picking up and discarding commercial junk along the way. A floating, evil-looking clown presides over it all; the one creature who manages to lose his mask commits suicide.

This is hardly the stuff of cartoons. You watch this thing and worry for Croatian psyches everywhere.

Luckily, the heaviness comes in doses. Balancing things out is the British "Home Road Movies," in which a grown man looks back on the way his father — played by a live actor super-imposed on the animation — took his family on outings across Europe when he was a child. It's nostalgic, sweet and a bit sad.

Nostalgia, or something like it, also figures into the Swedish "Never like the First Time!" which consists of a series of (apparent) real-life stories about how people lost their virginity. Each segment has its own style, with the drawings matching the tone of the narrative. Leave it to the Swedes.

The entire program starts off with Norway's "Deconstruction Workers," in which two construction workers — again real people inserted into the animation — discuss the meaning of life while weathering both doldrums and calamities.

It's the perfect setup for a program that's dazzling, challenging and heartening all at once.