



'FLUSHED AWAY'

Family gathering

If the little ones start begging for a pet rat this Christmas, blame Sam Fell. The British animation filmmaker came up with the idea for — and co-directed, with David Bowers — the Aardman Animation company's **"Flushed Away"** (Nov. 3), which this fall is part of a kid-movie crowd that includes **"Everyone's Hero"** (Sept. 15), **"Open Season"** (Sept. 29), the 3-D reissue of **"Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas"** (Oct. 20) and the holiday season's **"Charlotte's Web."**

Aardman, the studio behind Wallace & Gromit, recruited an all-star cast of voices (including Hugh Jackman, Kate Winslet and Ian McKellen) for its tale of a well-heeled English rat who sinks low, only to find high adventure. But to hear Fell tell it, the whole thing may have been just an excuse to get subterranean and see the real London underground.

"We got to go down into the sewers," Fell says happily, the way one might discuss a trip to Fiji. "We all had oxygen and special suits and big gloves. It was all very dangerous!"

For Charles Sturridge, the director of **"Lassie"** (Sept. 1), the danger was in working with real animals. The gentle, England-set



TOP DOG Jonathan Mason and collie in **"Lassie."** Is it us, or do they have the same smile?

remake of the classic tale faces off against other live-action family fare like the junior secret agent flick **"Alex Rider: Operation Stormbreaker"** (Oct. 6), **"Flicka"** (Oct. 20), Tim Allen's **"The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause"** (Nov. 3) and the holiday fantasy tale **"Eragon."**

"It's hard to describe what working with animals is like," muses Sturridge, who has helmed critically acclaimed TV epics like **"Brideshead Revisited"** and **"Gulliver's Travels."** "It's not like you think, 'I've done five days and the next five will be okay.' It's, 'My God, I've survived five days of this. How will I do six?'"

Michael Glitz