

AW

ANIMATION WORLD MAGAZINE

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MIYAZAKI'S
SPIRITED away

***Innovative Animation
Through the Ages***

**BIG IDEA PRODUCTIONS, WINKY DINK,
WINSOR MCCAY, DAVID ERHLICH AND MORE...**



Innovative Animation Through the Ages

Hayao Miyazaki's Spirited Trip to the US

Fred Patten outlines Hayao Miyazaki's career and rise to fame, culminating in his trip to launch the English-dubbed version of *Spirited Away*.

BY FRED PATTEN

Carrying Forward: Online Animation

Has the boom gone completely to bust? Lee Danacher visits some of the dotcom survivors and learns how their business approach saved them from the crash.

BY LEE DANACHER

Winky Dink Returns!

America's first interactive TV show is now available again on DVD and VHS. Paul Feldman reports on *Winky Dink* and why it still appeals today.

BY PAUL FELDMAN

Big Idea Productions: A Success Story Anyone Can Believe In

Paul Vischer, founder of Big Idea Productions, explains how he turned a bunch of God loving vegetables into the hottest commodities around. Let's face it... these legumes are cute!

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Karl Cohen has found a copy of Winsor McCay's long lost lesson on animation. Read about what it contains and what these tidbits mean to animation's history.

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David Ehrlich: Excavation of a Flawed Soul

Since entering animation in the Seventies, David Ehrlich has created not only a prolific number of films but also a greater sense of the animation community. Chris Robinson explains. [QuickTime movie clips available online!](#)

BY CHRIS J. ROBINSON

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The Animation Pimp: "...And Never Die...and Never Die."

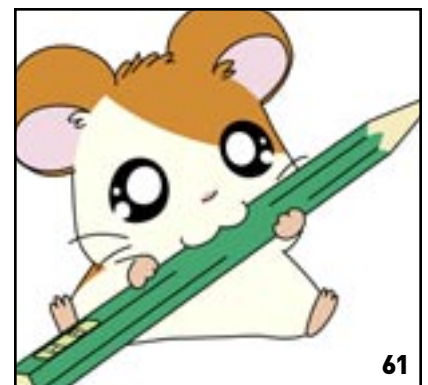
How responsible is the treatment of violence in cartoons? And what is the bigger cultural impact of this? The Animation Pimp takes a swing.

BY CHRIS J. ROBINSON

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BY MAUREEN FURNISS



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AWN, Inc.

6525 Sunset Blvd.
Garden Suite 10
Los Angeles, CA 90028
United States
[T] 323 606-4200
[F] 323 466-6619
info@awn.com
www.awn.com

PUBLISHING

PRESIDENT

Ron Diamond

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Dan Sarto

OPERATIONS

GENERAL MANAGER

Joan Kim

EDITORIAL

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Heather Kenyon

MANAGING EDITOR

Darlene Chan

CONTENT MANAGER

Leigh Godfrey

CONTRIBUTION

AUTHORS

Darlene Chan
Karl F. Cohen
Lee Danacher
Gene Deitch
Rick DeMott
Paul Feldman
Maureen Furniss
Martin "Dr. Toon" Goodman
Christopher Hart
Chris Lanier
Fred Patten
Chris J. Robinson
Gregory Singer
Pamela Kleibrink Thompson
Jean Ann Wright

WEB DEV/ART

WEB MASTER/DEVELOPER

Mike Dunlop

ART DIRECTION

Deron Yamada

ADVERTISING

SALES

Dan Sarto - dan@awn.com
Jason Hudson - jay@awn.com



A meeting between John Lasseter (left) and Hayao Miyazaki (seen here at the recent Toronto Film Festival) 20 years ago led to the U.S. release of *Spirited Away* this year. Photo credit: Eric Charbonneau, Berliner Studios.

COVER STORY

HAYAO MIYAZAKI'S *Spirited* Trip to the US

THEIR PERSONAL FRIENDSHIP BROADENED TO LASSETER'S ADOPTING MIYAZAKI AS A *SENSEI*, HIS TUTOR...

NORTH AMERICAN ANIME FANS GOT A RARE TREAT in September. Not only was Hayao Miyazaki's long-awaited *Spirited Away* finally released, but the man revered as Japan's greatest animation creator made an unprecedented public appearance. Miyazaki, along with Studio Ghibli president Toshio Suzuki, held press conferences and answered audience questions at *Spirited Away*'s premiere screenings at the 27th Toronto International Film Festival on September 7th; at Disney's U.S. premiere at its showpiece El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood on the 10th; and at a special benefit screening for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation at Pixar Animation Studios in Emeryville, California on the 15th.

Miyazaki's name has been synonymous with anime's highest quality since the early 1980s, when it first came to the public's attention with his *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds*. Miyazaki originally began this as a comic book (manga) serial in *Animage* magazine and then developed it as a 1984 animated theatrical feature. Even before that, his work stood out to anime fans who did not know his name. His first theatrical feature as director, *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* (released December 1979) was not only a hit in Japan (voted the top animation of all time by the readers of *Animage*), but studio Tokyo Movie Shinsha used it for test-marketing in the U.S. It was shown at the 1980 World Science Fiction Convention in Boston, FILMEX 82 in Los Angeles, and other film festivals during the 1980s. It was widely gossiped by anime fans that *Cagliostro's* climactic battle in the clock tower inspired the very similar scene in Disney's 1986 *The Great Mouse Detective*.



Toshio Suzuki is a co-founder of Studio Ghibli and frequent Miyazaki collaborator, as well as the godfather of anime fandom. © 2002 Nibariki. TGNDTDM. All rights reserved.

Toshio Suzuki's name is not as well known, but he is much more than the business manager of Studio Ghibli. He was arguably largely responsible for the development of anime fandom. He was the founding editor of Tokuma Publishing Company's pioneering anime publications; *Animage* magazine (monthly since July 1978), and the series of *Roman Album* reference guides devoted to individual theatrical and TV anime titles. Although adolescent fan-oriented, their in-depth coverage of production data have made them continuously the leading sources for reference information about any anime theatrical or TV releases since 1978. They were the foundations of the popular attitude that animation was not just for kids but was worthy of as much serious consideration as any other genre of cinema studied in high school and college.

It was *Animage's* coverage of *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro* that introduced Suzuki and Miyazaki to each other. Suzuki proposed that he write/draw a manga for serialization in *Animage*. Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Winds* began in the February 1982 issue and was an instant hit. Miyazaki had not originally intended it for animation, but readers assumed a movie would follow and began asking when it would be released. The response was so great that Tokuma Publishing decided to fund it as an independent feature, directed by Miyazaki. The success of *Nausicaä* led to Tokuma financing a new permanent animation studio in 1985 to be run by Miyazaki and his longtime friend and fellow animator, Isao Takahata. Suzuki's promotion of Miyazaki's films in *Animage*, as well as his close friendship with Miyazaki, eventually led to his transfer to Studio Ghibli as that company's president.

MIYAZAKI AND SUZUKI HAD ALMOST A COMEDY ROUTINE, WITH SUZUKI MUGGING AS AN EXASPERATED BUSINESSMAN TRYING TO KEEP AN IDEALISTIC ARTIST UNDER CONTROL.

THE RISE OF A MASTER

Miyazaki was already a twenty-year veteran animator by this time. He was born in Tokyo on January 5, 1941. He joined the Toei Animation Company staff in 1963, rising from in-betweeners to key animator on both theatrical and TV series projects. Among Toei's other young animators was Isao Takahata, with whom he formed a permanent friendship and working relationship. By 1971 both Miyazaki and Takahata were feeling creatively stifled working within Toei's animation assembly-line production. Miyazaki began producing comic-book stories (manga) on the side, where he had total creative control. Both quit Toei and went to work for other studios during the 1970s. Among their major projects during that decade were several year-long (52 episodes) TV animated serializations of classic children's literature for *World Masterpiece Theater*. Some of these, including *Heidi*, *Girl of the Alps* and *Three Thousand Miles in Search of Mother* (about a young Italian boy's search for his mother in Argentina), gave Miyazaki the opportunity to visit Europe and South America to sketch art references. A trip to Stockholm for a proposed *Pippi Longstocking* TV series that was never made gave Miyazaki lots of location and background art that appeared almost twenty years later in his *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

1979 through 1982 were significant years for Miyazaki at the Tokyo Movie Shinsha (TMS) studio. He created their major theatrical feature *Lupin III: The Castle of Cagliostro*, not just directing it but writing its script, designing the characters and drawing the storyboards. In 1981 TMS asked him to produce a children's TV funny-animal series based on the Sherlock Holmes stories, with the characters as dogs (*Holmes, the Great Detective*, released in America as *Sherlock Hound*), commissioned by Italy's RAI TV. By this time Miyazaki's connection with Suzuki had been established, and *Animage* heavily promoted *Sherlock Hound* as the latest masterwork by Miyazaki. *Sherlock Hound* was Miyazaki's final TV anime work. The project introduced him to RAI's representative, Marco Pagott, who became a close



Miyazaki made *Spirited Away* so that his 10 year-old granddaughter and her friends would have a sense of Japanese heritage and culture. © 2002 Nibariki. TGNDTDM. All rights reserved.

friend. Both the Italian connection and Pagott (as protagonist Marco Pagotti) appeared in Miyazaki's 1992 *Porco Rosso*.

Another 1981 TMS project which Miyazaki was asked to join was the theatrical feature *Little Nemo*. Miyazaki left it very early (TMS did not complete it until 1989), and began his work on *Nausicaä for Animage*. But his brief involvement with *Little Nemo* included a business trip to the Disney studio in Hollywood, where he met the young animator John Lasseter — a meeting that would have great significance for *Spirited Away* twenty years later.

A significant indication of Miyazaki's tunnel vision on the creative aspects of his work is that Studio Ghibli's films for the first five years were critical successes but were only moderately successful at the box office, barely enough to keep the studio open. It was not until 1990 that a literal public demand for Totoro plushies and similar merchandise convinced him that maybe Ghibli should lower itself to (ugh!) merchandising. Not only did the studio almost immediately earn enough from licensing that it could begin plans for expansion, but the flood of Totoro and Kiki toys made the general public more Ghibli-aware than its movie's promotions ever had. Studio Ghibli's 1992's *Porco Rosso*, 1994's *Pom Poko* (directed by Isao Takahata), 1997's *Princess Mononoke*, and 2001's *Spirited Away* were all Japan's top box-office draws for those years.

Time to Talk

At the *Spirited Away* press conferences, Miyazaki made it clear that the intellectual and artistic aspects of his projects are still the only ones that really concern him. He and Suzuki had almost a comedy routine, with Suzuki mugging as an exasperated businessman trying to keep an idealistic artist under control.

Questions at the Hollywood premiere comparing *Spirited Away* with *Princess Mononoke* (did he think the English dub of *Spirited* was better than that of *Mononoke*; did he think that *Spirited* had a better chance of box office success in America) seemed to highly annoy him. He made it clear that each of his films has been made because of a particular creative inspiration. With *Spirited Away*, he had noticed that some of his granddaughter's friends, girls about 10 years old, seemed very apathetic, only interested in passively watching modern popular culture, unaware of Japan's rich cultural past. He felt that he should make a film for 10-year-old girls that would both introduce them to their heritage and encourage them to develop a sense of self-reliance and responsibility. How he feels about the success of his films depends upon how closely he thinks each comes to achieving his particular goal for it. He does not compare his films with each other or with any other movies. "I frankly am not a big fan of valuing, evaluating a film's worth based on box office receipts," he said through

MIYAZAKI'S NAME HAS BEEN SYNONYMOUS WITH ANIME'S HIGHEST QUALITY SINCE THE EARLY 1980S...

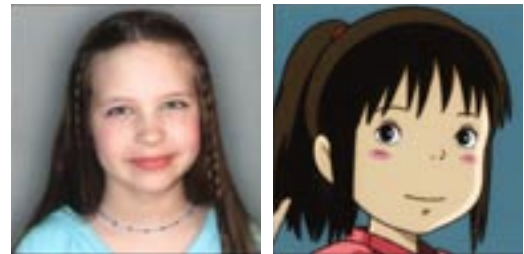
interpreter Linda Hoagland. "I believe that a film should represent a very intimate personal encounter between what's on the screen and an individual's heart. To try to reduce the value of that to numbers on a page is not something that I can be a fan of." A query as to whether he was excited about the possibility of *Spirited Away* or a future film of his winning an Academy Award brought a dismissive, "Doesn't interest me." (Suzuki immediately added that it certainly interested him!) Another question as to whether Studio Ghibli would ever make any sequels to its popular movies, as Disney is doing today, drew an even brusker, "Never!"

Miyazaki strongly affirmed his commitment to traditional cel animation. One questioner commented on, "...an incredibly detailed Chinese-style vase. It's shockingly realistic looking, really beautiful; but it looks real and I'm guessing that it was done digitally. And indeed, in this film you seem to have used more digital effects than you have in any of your previous films. Maybe you could talk about the digital effects." Miyazaki replied, "You're wrong. That's hand drawn, that Chinese vase. It's also not Chinese; it's a Japanese vase from the Imari area. All of the drawings are hand-drawn. All of the artwork that's featured as design in the bathhouse in the film is all hand drawn. We've, you know, given it a little sort of elegance boost with digital technology."

He elaborated in reply to a second question about what percentage of *Spirited Away* was digital. "Fundamentally, the animation is all pencil drawn. In a few scenes we turned to digital, for instance to create patterns on the waves or to show bubbling water, water bubbling up. As we headed into production on this film I gathered my staff and I said to them, 'This is a two dimensional film. This is our strength.' And there is a fundamental difference in thinking and approach between 3D movies and 2D, and I'll give you an example. For instance, I don't know if you noticed, but Yubaba's head, large as it is, is not identically the same in every scene. Depending on my mood and her mood, the size of her head changes. This is an emotional relationship that we developed to scale with the audience that we'd have to abandon if we wholeheartedly embraced 3D. I'm holding on to my pencil."

AT THE MIC

My initial question for *Animation World Magazine* was unexpectedly stonewalled. Q: "It's been announced off and on that Studio Ghibli and you will be making a film from the British juvenile novel *Howl's Moving Castle* by Diana Wynne Jones. I understand that this is your next project. I was wondering how you discovered this novel. Did you read the novel on your own and decide this would be a good picture, or did someone suggest it to you?" Suzuki answered, "Actually, the next project has not yet been formally announced in Japan so unfortunately



The cast, such as Daveigh Chase who performed the voice of Chihiro, took the time to listen to the original Japanese-language version of *Spirited Away* for inspiration and authenticity. © 2002 Nibariki. TGNDDTM. All rights reserved.

I can't answer any questions about the next project." (Considering that Japanese bookshops are advertising the Japanese edition of *Howl's Moving Castle* as, "Read the novel that will be Studio Ghibli's next feature," I am not sure of the distinction between a formal and an informal announcement.) Miyazaki added as an exaggerated aside which drew laughs, "You know, I'm going to be doing it as usual. The real reason he doesn't want to talk about it is because he's not sure I can handle it." (Ghibli's formal announcements only say that the studio has been temporarily closed following the release of its Summer 2002 feature, *The Cat Returns*. It will reopen in February 2003 to begin production of its next

feature, planned for a Summer 2004 release.)

My second question was, "There has been one new Studio Ghibli film released in Japan since *Spirited Away*, just a couple of months ago [July 19th]: *The Cat Returns*, I believe is the official English translation of the title, *Neko no Ongaeshi*; directed by Hiroyuki Morita. This is the first film from Studio Ghibli directed by someone besides yourself and Isao Takahata, and unfortunately the only one film by Yoshifumi Kondo. [Kondo died shortly after directing *Whisper of the Heart*.] Are you grooming more directors, and are there any plans to release *The Cat Returns* in the U.S.?" Suzuki replied, "For starters, yes, if there's young talent we're more than happy —

MIYAZAKI STRONGLY AFFIRMED HIS COMMITMENT TO TRADITIONAL CEL ANIMATION.

we're delighted, in fact, to embrace it and nurture it. And thankfully, *The Cat Returns* did quite well at the Japanese box office. We're in discussions about — we're considering a possible U.S. release."

ON JOHN LASSETER AND PIXAR

All questions about how Miyazaki had prepared *Spirited Away* for its American release were waved away with a repeated variation of the comment that he didn't have anything to do with it; he didn't care whether it was released in the U.S. or not; the American release was entirely due to his good friend John Lasseter. "You know, our presence here today, your being able to see the film today, all of this and the North American release, I owe to the unflagging dedication and determination of my dear friend John Lasseter who bulldozed his way through every obstacle to make this release happen." On what he thought of the Lasseter-directed English dub, "I haven't seen it. This is not just about this film, this is not limited to *Spirited Away*. I never watch my movies after I watch it with my staff after it's done, at the end. So I'm not discriminating against *Spirited Away*. The fact of the matter is that I so deeply trust John Lasseter that I don't need to watch the film."

Miyazaki's and Lasseter's joking comments about each other have made it clear that Lasseter's relationship to *Spirited Away* is much closer than that of a prestigious American animation creator brought in as executive producer on a straight work-for-hire basis. In fact, Lasseter's reputation as the major creative developer of the Pixar CGI studio, and director of the CGI hits *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life* and *Toy Story 2*, seems to be partially responsible for the mistaken assumption that *Spirited Away* contains lots of CGI. Lasseter met Miyazaki in 1981 (Miyazaki: "I actually met John Lasseter twenty years ago when I came to Los Angeles

to work on a job. I didn't encounter him through my work. He was off in a small studio, I think he had been dispatched by Disney to go, and he was working alone trying to develop 3D animation. Unlike the John Lasseter of today he was a very slender young man ..."), and their personal friendship broadened to Lasseter's adopting Miyazaki as a *sensei*, his tutor, as Miyazaki's features appeared in Japan while Lasseter was building Pixar. Lasseter became involved with *Spirited Away* right from its start.

In a telephone interview from his Pixar office in July, Lasseter told me, "We have a really close creative connection at Pixar with Studio Ghibli. We often look at the Japanese laser disks of Miyazaki's movies to be inspired.

"I visited Studio Ghibli in March of 2000 when I was in Japan for the release of *Toy Story 2*. I had my two sons with me. They were just beginning production on *Spirited Away*. It looked fantastically exciting. Ghibli is a fairly small studio, and Miyazaki does not have a separate office. He works in the same studio with the other artists, at a desk in a corner. [...]

"There was a camera crew on hand to film the director of *Toy Story 2* visiting the director of *Princess Mononoke*. Miyazaki sent them away. He drove me and my sons, and Suzuki to a nearby re-created traditional village in a large park. When old buildings have to be removed for new construction, they try to preserve them by moving them here instead of just tearing them down. Miyazaki led us down this street to a bathhouse, and he described to us the tradition of the village bathhouse as a communal center in old Japan. This was to be one of the main points in *Spirited Away*."

Miyazaki revealed at the press conference in Toronto that a living lantern which appears briefly late in the movie, hopping along a dark road to light Chihiro's way, is an ingroup joke for Lasseter; a reference to his Luxo, Jr. Miyazaki may not have cared whether *Spirited Away* was released in America, but Suzuki certainly did. As Lasseter explained: "Suzuki came to Pixar with a subtitled film print of *Spirited Away* when it had just been released in Japan. We showed it in the 235-seat screening room at Pixar. This was its first screening anywhere outside of Japan. Everyone was blown away. We were familiar with Miyazaki's previous films, and we felt that he had topped himself.

"I reported to Disney the reaction at Pixar. Disney was considering whether to release *Spirited Away* in America. They were concerned about American audiences not understanding some of the Japanese traditional cultural elements in the story. I felt that it would be particularly accessible to Western audiences because it is seen from the point of view of a modern, materialistic young girl who is unfamiliar with her

own cultural past. The way the story is told, it works as an introduction to a fascinating, rich culture whether it is the viewer's own ethnic heritage or not." Lasseter's job as executive director included supervising Disney's English dub directed by Kirk Wise. The supercritical anime fan reaction to the *Spirited Away* dub is that it is Disney's best yet; considerably better than those for *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *Princess Mononoke*. Those were professionally excellent, but some of the voices seemed to give the characters different personalities. For example, comedian Phil Hartman's reading for Jiji, Kiki's black cat, gave Jiji a brash, sardonic personality very different from the shy, meek voice of the Japanese dub. Disney's *Spirited Away* press kit quotes the opinion of Daveigh Chase, the voice of ten-year-old Chihiro (also of Lilo in Disney's *Lilo & Stitch*), "On doing a movie that she heard originally in Japanese..." This indicates that the American voice cast listened to the original Japanese voices and studied their intonations. Fan interviews with the voice actors of many American anime dubs have revealed that they are often not given time to listen to the original Japanese dubs. The American voice director simply leads them to do readings of their lines that he likes. "[T]hat she heard originally in Japanese" shows Lasseter's and Wise's determination to make the English-language dub as close to the Japanese dub as they could.

Miyazaki's and Suzuki's publicity tour ended with a small fundraising screening at Pixar Animation Studios' screening room for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. A report on the Website of No-

Name Anime, the nearby San Jose anime club, explained that this charity has a personal significance for John Lasseter and voice actor John Ratzenberger (the froglike Bathhouse Assistant Manager in *Spirited Away*), both of whom have children with diabetes. Lasseter told the audience that, since Miyazaki's love of old-fashioned airplanes is well known, they had arranged for him while at Pixar to take a biplane tour over Northern California's wine vineyards. (<http://www.nnanime.com/events/0209pixar1.html>)

So now America's anime fans are crossing their fingers and hoping that *Spirited Away* will do better at the box office than *Princess Mononoke* did. The initial results of its September 20 release are encouraging. The September 20 - 22 weekend box office report on the *Box Office Guru* website (boxofficeguru.com) is: "The Japanese animated blockbuster *Spirited Away* sparkled in its North American debut grossing \$449,839 from only 26 theaters for a vibrant \$17,302 average. Buena Vista released Japan's highest-grossing film in ten major markets this weekend and looks to add another ten next weekend as it continues its steady rollout." ■

FRED PATTEN has written on anime for fan and professional magazines since the late 1970s. He wrote the liner notes for Rhino Entertainment's *The Best of Anime* music CD (1998), and was a contributor to *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons*, 2nd Edition, ed. by Maurice Horn (1999) and *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. by John A. Lent (2001).

Online Highlights

Every online (HTML) issue of *Animation World Magazine* contains additional features not found in the download or print Acrobat version, such as QuickTime movies, links to Animation World Network sites, extended articles and special sections. Don't miss the following highlights that are showcased exclusively in this month's *Animation World Magazine* HTML version:

FRESH FROM THE FESTIVALS: OCTOBER 2002'S FILM REVIEWS

Maureen Furniss reviews five short films fresh from the festival circuit: [The Mosquito and the Horse](#) by Mikk Rand, Michael Overbeck's [Tongues and Taxis](#), [It's Alive!](#) by Terry Ziegelman and Paul George, [Caged](#) by Ashley Hoffman and Dan Blank's [Shadowplay](#). Go online and view the QuickTime clips.

DAVID EHRLICH: EXCAVATION OF A FLAWED SOUL

Since entering animation in the Seventies, David Ehrlich has created not only a prolific number of films but also a greater sense of the animation community. Chris Robinson profiles Ehrlich's illustrious career. Please visit us online to see QuickTime clips from several of [David Ehrlich's films](#).



ONE MAY BE THE LAVISH DAYS OF INTERNET expansion but animation on the Web soldiers on. Three years ago, the dreams dreamed were of a perfect round-the-clock audience in a perfectly new market. Creatively, this came true in an explosion of Flash produced fare. But the business of Net entertainment proved mercurial — crashing downward as fast as it had scaled up just moments before.

It's hard not to feel like we've been depressingly blown backwards — until we remember that this has all been *just* a beginning. The animation going up on the Web today is as exciting and viable now as it was at the outset... and many of the companies profiled on these pages two years ago have been steadily advancing — albeit at a much slower and quieter pace — in their continuing efforts to blend animation, emerging technology and new media ideas in fresh and interesting fashion.

Those who have weathered the melee of Net mania have done so by staying adaptable, adjusting the scope of their businesses and realistically looking for cash-flow opportunities in the off-line worlds. Their roads to staying above the fracas have been individual and imaginative, as evidenced by the companies we followed up with below...

WEB ANIMATION

Carrying Forward: **ONLINE** Animation

Internet Companies – Where Are They Now?



Like, News (left) and *Thugs on Film* were two of the first Web series on The Mondo Network. © 2000 Mondo Media.

“THE INTERNET WILL BE THE ‘SEED MEDIUM’
OF CHOICE FOR THE COMING DECADE.”

— JOHN EVERSHED

"WHEN HAS IT NOT BEEN DIFFICULT TO TRY AND FOLLOW YOUR VISION AND CREATE NEW THINGS IN THE WORLD?"
— JOHN CARLIN

Barbra Streisand is lampooned in Mondo Media's *The God and Devil Show*. Mondo Media has managed to establish and maintain a strong presence as a major producer and syndicator of Web entertainment. © 2000 Mondo Media.



Mondo Media's *Happy Tree Friends* found a home this year on MTV's *Downloaded*. The production also served as a basis for Mondo Media's first foray into DVDs and merchandising. © 2000 Mondo Media.

MONDO MEDIA

From the start, San Francisco-based Mondo Media's Internet plan was to become a dominant producer and syndicator of entertainment on the Web, eschewing the costly lure of becoming a destination site itself. That successful, multi-tiered business model has kept them up and running. With an established 14 year track record in award-winning design, entertainment and digital production services, Mondo Media, led by CEO and co-founder John Evershed, has been able to maintain focus on leveraging their character-based animation across multiple media fields.

In their heavy production days, the company churned out hit after hit with Web series such as *The God and Devil Show*, *Thugs on Film* and *Like, News* — using these 'Mondo Mini Shows' to create and feed an online distribution set-up they dubbed The Mondo Network, which remains strong and active today. Although production has diminished considerably, some new episodes are still going live and most importantly, the company now has an established library of over 3,000 minutes of broadcast quality animation with which to pursue licensing and merchandising possibilities worldwide.

In fact, several of their properties have already enjoyed off-line success: episodes of *Thugs on Film* have aired on BBC America, and their wacky *Happy Tree Friends* debuted on MTV's *Downloaded* special just last year. Based on audience feedback from their Website, Mondo chose *Happy Tree Friends* as their first foray into DVDs and merchandising, introducing those materials for sale this summer. That series will also be featured prominently in this fall's *Spike and Mike's Sick and Twisted Festival*, while in yet another ancillary deal, a bit from one of the Webisodes can be seen in Jennifer Aniston's *The Good Girl* feature now in theatrical release.

While episodic production, advertising and marketing will remain essential to what Mondo's brand is all about, Evershed says they are simultaneously focusing on their "digital entertainment services business — with particular emphasis on the games industry." At the same time, the studio is rapidly growing their 'viral' marketing network, creating a full spectrum of guerilla tactics to provide new kinds of on-the-edge exposure for their content overall.

One fall-out of the dot-com bust is that a great many artists' interest in the Net has seemingly tapered off. Evershed is frustrated that Mondo Media is "not getting third party submissions as often as I would like." He believes there are still lots of independent geniuses around who are capable of coming in with the next hit and he doesn't want them

to be discouraged. "This whole 'adjustment' we're going through has not lessened the number of people using the Internet and there's still an appetite out there for compelling content." In light of that, he urges the creative community to think of Mondo like a comic syndicator and to stay in touch. The Internet is still a powerful way to gain exposure, he reminds us, and Mondo Media is well situated. "With our syndication infrastructure, we can still get material out in front of millions of viewers."

The toughest part in riding out the Net's volatile times, Evershed says, has been "trying to maintain a focus on the here and now of growing revenues day to day while not losing sight of our long term future. We had to be realistic about the external market conditions, and at the same time find the seams of opportunity that the downturn created. One thing that happens when you trim your company to 10% of its size is that you distill your team down to the essence of what it's really good at. We have an excellent team of people now that are mining these seams and the results have been pretty exciting. We're making our targets and cultivating some new opportunities in a considerably less cluttered environment."

URBAN ENTERTAINMENT

From the inception of their Internet play, Michael Jenkinson, CEO and co-founder of the highly successful Urban Entertainment, has kept one eye solidly on the bottom line in a media plan that has mixed rock-solid business acumen with high-octane creative elements. Sticking to their initial mantra of "Let's be scalable," the Los Angeles company has kept themselves small in number, bringing in-house only the essential team of high-level management, acquisitions and a core producers group while outsourcing everything else — thereby keeping their infrastructure lean and flexible.

With cash flow from the sale and distribution of independent films (on top of venture capital monies along the way), Urban Entertainment has built a rich Website of original animated shows and live-action shorts. Today, with a recent infusion of more investment capital (as well as ongoing deals with New Line Features and AOL/Time Warner), their site continues to expand. In an earlier response to the dot-com aftermath, Jenkinson expressed his thoughts in a letter to *Variety*, writing, "We've seen that the survivors are the hybrid businesses, the ones that took advantage of using technology as a tool to facilitate more efficient operations within current business structures." It's undisputed that Urban Entertainment has mined these 'tools of the Internet' well — creating an environment that utilizes the Net for attracting top creative talents, for development

and exposure of new programming, and for collecting a wealth of beneficial audience feedback. After bundling all of the above for any given show, the company then has a wealth of ammunition on hand to court interest in the offline worlds.

UrbanEnt.com currently showcases over 18 animated series and Nichelle Prothro, VP of production and programming, reports that episodic production continues on their more popular shows. Periodically, new original series are going live, as well, such as the recent one from John Ridley entitled *The Shonuffs*, which premiered on the site just last month. Attracting high-profile creative talent (such as director John Singleton, writers Tina Andrews, Mike Elliot and George Tillman, and the music world's Lil' Bow Wow, to name but a few), Prothro says their goal is "to continue to work with those artists inside and outside of the animation world." Referring to possible hook-ups with traditional animation studios, she said Urban Entertainment would definitely be interested, noting,



Undercover Brother from Urban Entertainment is the paradigm of how an Internet series evolved into a major motion picture. © Urban Entertainment (left) and © Universal Pictures 2002 (left).

“THE CONTENT IS STILL KING.” — NICHELLE PROTHO



Urban Entertainment hopes that its Web series *Pookie Poo* (left) will follow in the footsteps of *Undercover Brother*, while *Cisco and Ripple* has already crossed over from the Net to the Starz! cable channel. © Urban Entertainment.

“We think there is real synergy to be had between us.”

Protho explains her company’s attention has always been “on acquiring or producing content that we could exploit,” and their discerning eye paid off handsomely this May when Urban Entertainment’s *Undercover Brother* (created by the prolific John Ridley) jumped from the Internet to the big screen. Marking an industry milestone, the Web series morphed into a well-reviewed live-action comedy directed by Malcom Lee, which Urban Entertainment co-produced with Brian Grazer’s Imagine Entertainment. Universal Studios handled the release to a wonderful box-office response nationwide. On the heels of this success, Urban is again in theatrical development with Imagine and Universal on a second Web original called *Pookie Poo*. Elsewhere on the feature front, two other Net series from Jenkinson’s group, *Those Who Walk in Darkness* and *There Goes the Nation*, are in development with Warner Bros. and Alcon Entertainment, respectively.

Coinciding with the theatrical release of *Undercover Brother*, Urban Entertainment made a deal with Black Starz! cabler to broadcast all twelve episodes of the Net series (with the animation bumped up a little for better TV play) in a special programming stunt hosted by the film’s star, comedian Eddie Griffin. At the same time, they created a separate Website for the film, giving it an individual platform for contests, games and other special marketing and promotional gambits tied to the picture’s release.

Urban Entertainment’s relationship with Starz! had actually begun last year when the cable channel partnered in producing five original episodes of the Web series *Cisco and Ripple*, the movie-review-with-an-attitude show, airing them as interstitials in the

cabler’s movie line-up. Protho says they are presently in further talks with Starz! parent, Encore Media Group, which will surely bring more broadcasting opportunities for Urban’s growing library of material.

By sidestepping the frenzy around them, Urban Entertainment has managed to position itself powerfully as a new media player engineering notable models that fuse Internet, broadcast and feature entertainment...a breathtaking ride so far for the youthful company.

FUNNY GARBAGE

Nestled on a lively SoHo street in New York, Funny Garbage maintains a very active Website promoting their ever-increasing variety of media work. Ranging from broadcast animation, interactive television, Websites, games and product design, CEO John Carlin explains that today, their “main focus is a subset of client services — part and parcel with graphic design, information architecture, user interfaces and back-end programming.” Creatively led by co-founder Peter Girardi, Funny Garbage has maintained a wealth of top media clients including AOL/Time Warner, Macromedia and DreamWorks Records. Most recently, Funny Garbage launched Noggin’s new site, The-N.com, and are in the process of developing new sites for Bloomberg and Maria Carey, adding to the scores of successful Website production they’ve already accomplished along the way.

The heyday of Internet series, however — that frenzied period when Funny Garbage created and produced a number of extremely popular interactive Web shows for The Cartoon Network — are gone. “The unfortunate reality,” Carlin states, “is that there is no business for Internet entertainment at present.

We still do limited animation for certain client sites in terms of splash elements in Flash, games and e-cards, but that is more part of a bundle of client service skills than stand alone entertainment development."

Fortunately, and wisely, Funny Garbage began to diversify into broadcast animation and design before the Internet bubble totally burst, enabling their studio to keep afloat. "The market changes affected us quite a bit," Carlin concedes, "but not as much as the terrorist attack on lower Manhattan, 9/11. Actually, the combination of those two forces was almost too much to deal with. Our company is less than half the size it was 15 months ago." He's happy, though, to report that "our creative core remains intact and baring further unforeseeable disasters, we have a good shot at staying in the business and riding a few more opportunities to successful conclusion."

Recently, Funny Garbage enjoyed their first big broadcast success with their work on Comedy Central's puppet show *Crank Yankers*. "We did all the puppet designs, sets, on-air branding, opening animation and transitions," Carlin says, "and that actually developed from their interest in a Web-based animated property, *Raptoons*, which we pitched them and they are still considering for development as broadcast animation." Another Funny Garbage property, *Katbot*, is a good case study of how they are utilizing their Internet skills to pursue television potential. "We developed it as a Web property (animation, Website and interactive games)," Carlin explains. "Within weeks of launching the site in a limited way, we received offers to option the property from several major networks." Signing on with one of them, Funny Garbage then produced an 11-minute pilot, which tested well but, sadly, was put on hold subsequent to 9/11 production freezes. Nonetheless, active development continues at that network with this and another Funny Garbage project entitled *Bro Rabbit*.

On another block, Funny Garbage has a development deal going with Nick's Noggin cabler for their teen girl show *Cassandra*, while continuing to juggle a hefty handful of other projects in various stages of development and pitching. Carlin feels lucky with how well their original concepts have been received in the off-line world. He looks forward to breaking through with their shows "to produce them in a new and original manner that combines digital production with old fashioned drawing, design and direction."

Although the boom-and-bust times have been tough, it's because of those tumultuous months of Web production that Carlin believes his company will come out ahead in the long run. "We learned how to



Gladys Murphy(left), Elmer Higgins (right) and Spoonie Luv (bottom) are all puppets on *Crank Yankers*, Funny Garbage's first venture into broadcast TV. Airing on Comedy Central, this show developed out of the cable channel's interest in one of Funny Garbage's Web animation projects, *Raptoons*. © 2002 Comedy Partners. All rights reserved.

be a real animation studio, which was a great experience. We are proud of what we made and feel a bit like what *Méliès* [the great French experimental filmmaker/magician] must have felt like in the early part of the 20th century. We were on to something that was fun to make and people enjoyed." Still manning the frontlines each day, Funny Garbage is very much out there finding new direction for its creative services



Funny Garbage is developing *Cassandra* for Nick's Noggin channel in hopes of garnering the teen girl demographic. © & ™ Funny Garbage, Inc.

while still evolving both on the Net and off.

FOLLOWING OTHER PATHS

Visionary Media, while on hiatus from any substantial Web presence, is in the process of taking their established Internet property *WhirlGirl* down the road to traditional venues. Founder David B. Williams and company have been busy sweetening the sound tracks and animation on a number of their Webisodes (from their library of over 100 produced), bumping them up creatively to ensure cross-over appeal. Having developed a proprietary solution called FlashCast™ to convert their programming for TV use, Visionary Media will go into production with the first half-hour pilot this month and start lining up new *WhirlGirl* deals between this season's action at MIPCOM and MIPTV.

Gary the Rat, which began life as a popular Web series on Media Trip's once energetic site, is now being co-produced for television by the Emmy Award-winning actor/director Kelsey Grammar (and his company GrammNet) with the series creators Rob

and Mark Cullen. Credited as the first online series to migrate to primetime TV, *Gary the Rat* is in production at L.A.'s Nickelodeon Animation where 13 half-hours of new Flash-produced episodes are being readied for its premiere on The New TNN adult-block debuting early next year.

WHERE TO NOW?

Some believe high-speed access will explode in the not so distant future and — coupled with the number of Web users increasing daily — this could mean significant opportunities for a resurgence of animation online. Mondo Media's John Evershed offered this view: "The Net provides a growth path for content that can grow organically as audiences grow." He calls them 'seed mediums.' "There are precedents," he says, citing comics and standup comedy as two good examples. "These are typically low cost entry points that artists can use to reach an audience. All entertainment succeeds via word of mouth and the Net remains the most efficient word of mouth medium. The trick is knowing when and how to convert to revenue once a property has hit critical mass." Far from fading, Evershed says, "The Internet will be the 'seed medium' of choice for the coming decade."

Throughout the Internet's chaotic beginnings, Urban Entertainment's Nichelle Prothro feels that one thing should be evident to everyone paying close attention: "The content is still king. If you have good content, it doesn't matter what medium you are in, you will thrive."

Mirroring some of these same thoughts over at Funny Garbage, John Carlin concedes that it's "a tough time to try creative things both in terms of the Internet and traditional media." On the other hand, he questions, "When has it not been difficult to try and follow your vision and create new things in the world? We are thankful that we continue to have the chance to try."

Internet animation, then, is far from busted after all and the co-mingling of talents continues to burn brightly — just in different ways — as the winning patterns for Net entertainment continue to unfold. ■

LEE DANNACHER, currently based in New York, is a supervising producer/director of over 350 half-hours of animated television series (including *ThunderCats* and *SilverHawks*), primetime specials (among them the Rankin/Bass productions of *The Flight of Dragons*, *Wind in the Willows* and last year's *Santa, Baby*), as well as a number of home video and feature film productions.



CLASSIC CARTOONS

WINKY DINK returns!

PART OF *WINKY DINK*'S CHARM LIES IN ITS SIMPLICITY, NOT ONLY CONCEPTUALLY, BUT TECHNICALLY AS WELL.

Winky Dink, which premiered in 1953, was the first interactive TV show. Winky Dink and Woofer invited children to help draw them out of tight jams. All images © 1968, 1992 Winky, Inc. and Total Recall Insights, Inc. All rights reserved.

WITH ITS ARRIVAL IN THE AMERICAN HOUSEHOLD AS the primary medium of entertainment, television and children became fast friends. The two have spent hours and hours of time together, in a silent watcher/watched relationship. This dynamic changed in 1953 with the arrival of the *Winky Dink and You* program, a show that Bill Gates has called "...the first interactive TV show." Airing on CBS from 1953 – 1957, *Winky Dink* was a hit. While new episodes were re-introduced for syndication in the '70s, the show has been hidden away...until now. Recently re-issued *Winky Dink* is back as the ultimate low-tech way to entertain.

REMEMBER WINKY DINK

Winky Dink is the name of the series' towheaded hero, who with his dippy canine sidekick Woofer, get in and out of all manner of adventures and tough spots. The hook? The children watching the show are also active participants. After placing a clear plastic sheet over the screen, kids use oil pastel crayons to draw into the scene whatever Winky Dink and Woofer need to move along in the story — be it a staircase, a disguise or a rocket ship. The pastels wipe off the plastic easily with no trace and the screen is ready for the animated duo's next adventure.

Winky Dink and You was created by Ed Wycoff and the late Harry W. Prichett in 1953. At the time the two were employed by an advertising firm that handled one of the sponsors for *Your Show of Shows*. The idea for *Winky Dink* was born when Prichett applied a

piece of acetate to his TV screen in an effort to test different letter sizes for a TV spot. Wycoff elaborates, "...He [Prichett] drew a moustache on someone who was on TV, then he drew a stick figure in a boxing match...it seemed to be fighting with the boxers."

"It was an extraordinarily wonderful low-tech program." Describing how this experience would later influence the creation of *Winky Dink*, he goes on to explain, "We came up with the idea of Fixed Position. You get the kid to draw in a certain space, and we could work the world around that drawing." This concept is employed time and again in the series, when the viewer is asked to trace or draw an object that is turned into something completely different – such as when the tracings of a character's nose and coat button are converted into a submarine.

Part of *Winky Dink*'s charm lies in its simplicity, not only conceptually, but technically as well. "This is a free

WHILE MANY CONSIDER *WINKY DINK* TO BE THE PROGENITOR OF INTERACTIVE TELEVISION, WYCOFF TAKES A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT VIEW...

form of animation," states Wycoff. Due to the economics and demands of 1950's television, "Forget cels and flipping things, we needed to do it quickly and cheaply."

The quick and inexpensive production was achieved by combining aspects of animatics and stop-motion animation. "Winky Dink was a little cut-out," Wycoff explains. "I would move him around free-hand for the camera. The trick of the whole thing is not so much in the style of the animation, but in creating a place for the viewer."

JUST PLAIN FUN

While many consider *Winky Dink* to be the progenitor of interactive television, Wycoff takes a slightly different view: "I think the word is really involvement. It's a very involving experience...In simpler terms it's fun."

The resilience of *Winky Dink* is remarkable. Nearly 50 years after the show's inception, in a market clogged with home video gaming platforms, the idea of drawing on the TV screen with a crayon still intrigues children. "The real key word in the name *Winky Dink and You* is 'You.' You are important. It's [the show] related to the manipulation of a crayon, which to a child is basic...it's a very satisfying experience...an experience that seems to stay."

Also remarkable is the impact *Winky Dink* has had on its viewers. "I'm always pleasantly and delightfully surprised at the retention of memory. Its always gratifying," says Wycoff.

"It's amazing how many people remember it. If I got ten people in a room between 50 and 60 years-old,

more than half will remember it. Most of them would probably start singing the song. It's so unique. Everybody talks about interactive TV, but I've never seen it in the U.S. outside of *Winky Dink*," remarks Adam Snyder of Rembrandt Films, the company that is now re-issuing *Winky Dink* kits and videos through Vanguard Cinema. The basic kit contains one video with nine episodes, a magic screen, magic pastel crayons and a magic cloth to clean things up at the end. Additional videos are available separately, of course. And, don't despair parents, if your children do indeed draw right on the TV screen forgetting their magic screen...the crayon comes right off with a little glass cleaner.

THE FUTURE FOR WINKY

Winky Dink is now available on both VHS and DVD at some Borders, Virgin Records and Tower stores and at <http://www.rembrandtfilms.com>. The DVD's bonus material includes two original Winky Dink episodes from the '50s (the episodes currently on video are from the show's resurgence in the '70s) and both video and audio interviews with Ed Wycoff discussing his part in the *Winky Dink* saga.

Wycoff is far from calling it a day however: "We think we're on the right track. One of the critical problems with *Winky Dink* is proving that it works. I hope that when we have enough success we can extend the concept," he states. "There's a lot more where we could slip in education. We could teach a kid to read and write."

Wycoff is passionate on his emphasis of this point. He describes *Winky Dink* as, "Learning without being taught. You can learn by doing things. *Winky Dink and You* says the kid does it, and you is the best name in the world."

"What you're looking at now is 20% of its potential," he asserts. "I hope that 25 years from now my daughter is playing with the concept. We can do more and we can do better." ■

PAUL FELDMAN is an L.A.-based freelance writer who has covered entertainment industry stories for on-line journals such as the Creative Planet community sites of Director's World and Cinematographer.com.

Who knew 20 years ago that vegetables could be movie stars? Big Idea Production's *Jonah — A VeggieTales Movie* marks the best selling home video's transition to the silver screen. All images Property of Artisan Entertainment.



3D ANIMATION

BIG IDEA Productions: A Success Story Anyone Can Believe In

TEENAGERS IN A TRENDY NIGHT-CLUB WEARING CLOTHING WITH GOD-FEARING VEGETABLES ON THE FRONT? DAVEY AND GOLIATH COULD ONLY WISH FOR THAT.

LET'S SAY TWENTY YEARS AGO, I WENT INTO A BIG PITCH meeting at a major studio and told them I wanted to make a series of films starring talking vegetables that believe in God. After I was done, I'm sure they wouldn't have even validated my parking pass. So how did Big Idea Productions founder, CEO and CCO Phil Vischer sell over 25 million copies of *Veggie Tales* videos and get a multiple feature deal with Artisan Entertainment, with talking vegetables that believe in God?

I sat down with Vischer to discuss the quick rise of his company, and even over the phone, I gained a strong sense of his passion and love for what he does. At times when he was describing characters he'd naturally go into their voices. He's very humble about his success, saying, "Too many people get into film to either be hip or make money or become famous. I never wanted any of that...I just want to tell stories." By the end of speaking with him, I discovered how an artist with a clear vision who takes advantage of an untapped public demand can start a new animation corporation out of his spare bedroom.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In 1986, at the age of 19, Vischer got a job at a post-production house in Chicago. As the most artistically inclined person at the company, he was chosen to take a two-week Bosh animation class in Salt Lake City. He worked on commercials with the Bosh system until the studio bought a copy of Softimage in 1989. In the early 1990s, Vischer took notice to what special effects powerhouse Rhythm & Hues was creating in 3D with their proprietary squash and stretch plug-ins. A few years later Softimage announced that in their

next update they would include lattice deformation, which would allow animators the ability to create squash and stretch type action.

Vischer was now convinced that he could create fun Warner Bros.-type animation in 3D with little effort. For years, he had the idea of creating a quality family film that expressed his Judeo-Christian beliefs, however, he didn't want a lack of quality to diminish the message. With the new version of Softimage, he started experimenting with a simple character with no arms and legs and figuring out how it would bounce and move. He knew that with no limbs the main source of the character's acting would come from the eyes. He used the squash and stretch technique to create eyes that brought the character to life. However, Vischer's wife, Lisa, had only one complaint with Phil's first character — it was a candy bar. She said that if he got kids to fall in love with a candy bar character, parents would hate him. So, Vischer decided to change his character to something that was good for kids and that's how the *Veggie Tales* came to life.

Vischer quit his job and teamed with partner Mike Nawrocki, who came up with the name *Veggie Tales*, to start working on a 10-second film starring Larry the Cucumber. It was the first time that Vischer had done any lip-synch work and Nawrocki had no animation experience at all. In 1991, they shopped the idea around to various

Christian video companies, but got relatively the same answer — “If you make it, we’ll sell it.” Disheartened, Vischer ended up having to return to the post-house job, so that his family could survive.

However, a couple at Vischer’s church thought the idea was too good to put on the shelf. They decided to put up a large chunk of their retirement fund to help pay for the film. Along with family and friends, Vischer scrounged up US\$100,000 to make his first video. In July of 1993, Vischer quit his job again and purchased a Silicon Graphics animation system with Softimage and went to work on his mini-opus in the spare bedroom of his house.

property, knowing that Christian companies had bad track records with general distribution and general distribution companies have trouble with Christian market distribution. Vischer said by the summer of 1994, they were getting “nibbles from major distribution companies.” They met with several companies, but they wanted Vischer to take out all references to God and the Bible verse at the end. He declined. By the next year, the first two *Veggie Tales* tapes had sold 200,000 units. Now, the major distribution companies just wanted Vischer to take out the Bible verse. After some soul searching, Vischer decided not to “sell out.” He said, “I wanted to

IN ONLY 4 MONTHS, THE FILM WAS FINISHED AND THE FLEDGLING BIG IDEA PRODUCTIONS SHIPPED 500 COPIES OF THEIR FIRST VIDEO THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS.

After the little help he received from the Christian video companies, Vischer decided to distribute the film himself through direct-mailing ads in Christian magazines, promising a Christmas 1993 delivery of the video “Where’s God When I’m S-S-Scared?” In an obvious cost cutting measure, Vischer recruited family and friends to provide the voices of the characters, who still remain the voices today. However, after completing the first 2 minutes of the film, Vischer knew that at his rate of 12-seconds per day he was never going to finish the film on time. So, he hired two college students — for very little money — to help out on the film. In addition, he rented a 1,600-square-foot store front between a Spanish grocer and a comic book shop to set up a studio. Vischer and the two students worked a triple shift because they only had one computer. The company’s 1-800 phone number went directly into the animation room and the animators often had to take orders down as they were working. In only 4 months, the film was finished and the fledgling Big Idea Productions shipped 500 copies of their first video three days before Christmas.

WHAT’S THIS

It didn’t take long for the Christian video companies who balked on funding the *Veggie Tales* to notice that Big Idea had created something special. Word Entertainment, one of the largest and most respected Christian entertainment corporations, flew Phil and Lisa to Nashville and wined and dined them. And as Phil commented, this was really nice after nearly starving for the last few months! Subsequently, Word signed a 13 video Christian store distribution deal with Big Idea and the phenomenon was on its way.

In a genius stroke of business savvy, Vischer retained the general distribution rights to the



When Softimage released an updated version of its animation software in the mid-’90s, Phil Vischer used it to create novel, vegetable-based characters such as (from left to right) Junior Asparagus, Laura Carrot, Percy, Annie, Bob the Tomato and Archibald Asparagus.

keep true to what the fans of Veggie Tales expected.”

Then by late 1997, *Veggies Tales* tapes had sold over 2 million units and the popularity was growing. Lyric Studios, who own *Barney*, had no problem with the Bible verse and signed a deal to release the tapes in the mass market. Before the deal was officially signed, word got out that Lyric was obtaining the rights to Veggie Tales and stores started calling in for orders. The projection was that the videos would sell about 300,000 copies in the mass market — they went on to sell 1.5 million!

In 1999, Vischer came up with the idea for making a *Veggie Tales* feature based on the Biblical tale of Jonah and the whale. He knew he could keep the production costs down and felt that if he marketed the film in Christian magazines and bookstores, on the radio and with trailers on other *Veggie Tales* videos that his core audience would come in droves. Already in 47 states, bookstores were sponsoring theater



The feature film's distributor, Artisan Family Home Entertainment, didn't blink an eye when Big Idea insisted on retaining ownership of the movie and its characters and keeping total creative control.

premieres of the new videos. One Baptist church in Orlando had 16,000 people attend one of their theater screenings. Imagine, sixteen thousand people came to see a VHS version of a 30-minute direct-to-video projected on a screen.

After production started on the feature, Big Idea talked to most of the major and mini-major distribution companies about releasing the film. Vischer had no allusions that the film would make \$100 million at the box office, which is the target for every theatrically-released animated movie. Vischer explains, "The major studios don't even know how to launch a film without spending at least \$20 million on P&A (press and advertising)." Continuing, Vischer says, "The more you spend on P&A, the more the film has to make...right now, if *Jonah* makes \$25 million then we'll about break even." For other 3D studio pictures, that gross would be a profound failure.

Another wrinkle that frightened some distribution houses away was Big Idea's stipulation that they would retain ownership of the movie and the characters as well as have total creative control. Artisan had no hesitation with the terms and signed on to release the film. Up until 5 years ago, Artisan was solely a video distribution house, releasing Hallmark and Crayola productions and the direct-to-video 3D animated feature, *Barbie in the Nutcracker*. Their understanding of the video market only made Big Idea's phenomenal success more impressive. Glenn Ross, president of Artisan Family Home Entertainment, says, "We had tremendous respect for the series...and it's very rare to find a production where the audience is so clear."



During the company's hungry years, Big Idea founder, CEO and COO Phil Vischer declined distribution offers from companies that requested all religious references be deleted.



Vischer's challenge is to present Biblically themed stories in a way that will appeal to children. He strives to make "apples taste like Twinkies." Here, Khalil meets the whale in *Jonah — A Veggie Tales Movie*.

Artisan had so much faith that Vischer reveals, "The whole deal was worked out without even showing them a script."

When asked about dealing with Big Idea's terms, Ross says, "With over 25 million tapes sold, you can't argue with success. What makes me think that I could do it any better?"

A NUMBER OF SURPRISES

Jonah, The Veggie Tales Movie boasts the distinction of being the first animated feature to be completely done in Maya even using the Maya rendering system. The first *Veggie Tales* video was made by three people on a miniscule budget, now Big Idea had over 95 animators (which is still small for an animated feature) working on a multi-million dollar budgeted film. I guess you can't argue with success.

An interesting fact about the film, which hits screens on October 8, 2002, is its central theme of mercy and compassion. With the script and songs completed back in '99, the poignancy of the message is very prophetic. Vischer explains, "We're too obsessed with vengeance. Look at all the *Lethal Weapon* films. The beginning makes us hate the bad guys and the rest of the film is about making them pay. We always make ourselves the good



A combination of production savvy and marketing through Christian magazines, bookstores and media outlets kept the overall budget low.

guys. We can't admit to being bad guys even though we are all bad guys in some way." After you see the film you'll understand why maybe there should be a special screening at the U.N.

Veggie Tales just gets more popular day by day and with 80% of the U.S. saying they believe in some Judeo-Christian religion the audience is huge. Did Vischer ever think back in the spare bedroom that his little creation would have gotten as big as it has? "I really, really hoped. I knew if I could translate the stories in my head to the screen they'd work. I'm just so surprised at how quickly it all came about."

I told Vischer about seeing 10,000 teenagers go crazy when Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato came up on the jumbo-tron at a Christian rock festival. I also told him that my sister's friend's little girl's first word was "Bob." I could feel his smile on the other end of the phone when he said, "That is the pay-off." I told him stories of skeptical parents not wanting their kids to watch *Veggie Tales* because of the religious messages, but when they saw it they loved it. His response was, "That's amazingly cool." But I could hear in his voice that he's heard that same kind of story lots of times.

He told me stories that were even more amazing. He said he'd heard that Larry t-shirts had showed up in rave clubs in Chicago. Teenagers in a trendy nightclub wearing clothing with God-fearing vegetables on the front? Davey and Goliath could only wish for that. Another story he told me was about a very big studio exec, who told him that he and his wife had a tough time deciding on what to let their kids watch. His

mother was Jewish and his father was Presbyterian and his wife is Catholic. He told Vischer that *Veggie Tales* was the only thing they could agree on.

I went on to ask Vischer why he thinks Big Idea is such a success and he had a lot to say about it. He believes the main strength of the company is their philosophy that people come first, products second and profits third. As stated on the company Website, "Profiting is like breathing. As humans, we must breathe to live, but we do not live to breathe. As a company, Big Idea must profit to exist, but we will not exist merely to profit."

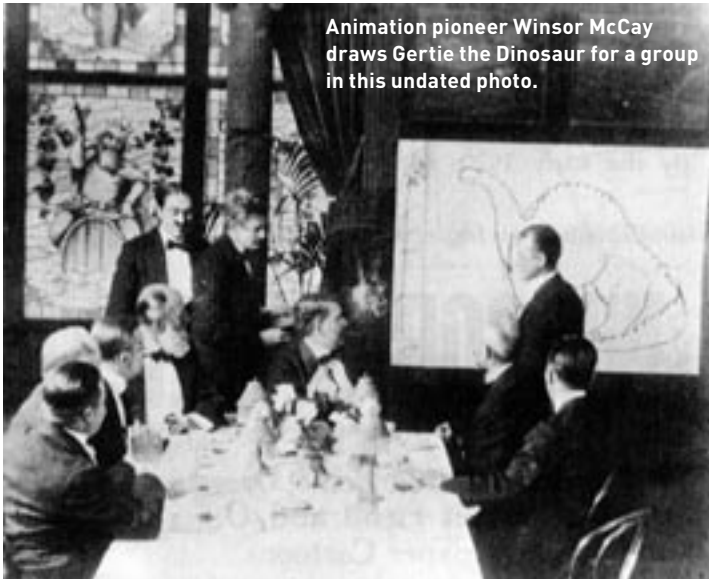
With Vischer it's all about balance. He believes that the Biblically themed stories have to be presented in a cool way to attract an audience. While he contends too many comedies take nothing seriously and paint life as a joke, he realizes earnestness is often taken as corny. Therefore, he tries to balance tongue and cheek humor with sincerity. He describes it like making "apples that taste like Twinkies. It tastes great and it's good for you."

Big Idea's mission statement says they want to become one of the top family entertainment brand names in the world. And Vischer describes his vision of Big Idea how Walt Disney and Jim Henson envisioned their companies when they started — a family owned and run business that is focused on creating quality family entertainment.

The company is still selling videos like crazy and wants to branch out into television. The merchandising arm of the firm keeps growing and new titles like the superhero show *Larryboy* (produced in Flash by Cornerstone Animation) and the action-adventure show *3, 2, 1 Penguins* offer distribution companies and the public more varied entertainment. Even though profits are their third priority, if *Jonah* garners the dedicated following that other recent Christian-themed films like *The Omega Code* and *Left Behind* have, and with the already proven *Veggie Tales* draw, Big Idea might bring in money, for which other companies could only pray. ■

RICK DEMOTT currently works for sound production house BadaBing BadaBoom Productions and animation company Perky Pickle Studios. In his free time, he works as a freelance writer and a regular contributor to the humor Website, *PorkPony.com*.

HISTORICAL



Winsor McCay's Animation Lesson Number One, 1919

THE MOST IMPORTANT TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE HE SHARES WITH US IS WHAT HE CALLS HIS SPLIT SYSTEM.

WINSOR MCCAY IS WELL KNOWN AS THE CREATOR OF the first animated cartoon star, *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914. He also is remembered for his animated recreation of *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, 1918 and for his long and amazing career as a comic strip artist. He also wrote "Lesson One," but his work as a teacher of the art form he helped to create has long been forgotten.

A copy of "Lesson One" printed in *Applied Cartooning, Division 11*, a correspondence course from the Federal School of Applied Cartooning, Minneapolis, Minn., 1919, was shown to me a few months ago by one of my animation history students who remembered seeing an image in the lesson in class. He found it in a "junk store" and had no idea it was a rare document. He considered it an old fashioned oddity and was wondering if it had any value (perhaps the influence of *Antique Roadshow*). It is so obscure that I can find no references to it in printed bibliographies about animation. When I told John Canemaker, author of *Winsor McCay, His Life and Art*, that I had a Xerox copy of it, he asked for a copy. He had seen a 1923 version published by the school. It is mentioned in a footnote in his book.

McCay's 15-page lesson isn't everything you ever wanted to know about the subject, but it does give insight into his work and his optimism for the future of animation. It was one of the very first published



McCay worked hard to make Gertie the Dinosaur's breathing pattern realistic.

accounts of how animation is done. It dates a year before the publishing of Edwin George Lutz's *Animated Cartoons: How They Are Made, Their Origin and Development* (1920), the manual that Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks studied when they were beginning their careers.

TERMS HAVE CHANGED

As you look at the pages of this manuscript reproduced in this issue, one of the first things you may notice is that McCay's terminology is different from our present animation vocabulary. He never mentions animation cels, but says he uses transparent, bond and tracing paper. He says flit and flutter pad while we say flip and flipbook. At one point he mentions that seeing "little flipper advertising pads" gave him the idea that he might be able to create a film based on sequential drawings.

The most important technical knowledge he shares with us is what he calls his split system. He says "it is my own invention." His system was used to carefully lay out and time an entire sequence. He began by laying out the path of the movement for the sequence on page number 0. The finished guide was then used under other drawings that were made on separate pieces of paper placed one at a time over the guide. This gave him the correct position for each drawing.

McCay tells us he began by drawing the first and last images of the sequence (extremes, he doesn't mention using key drawings), and then his center or middle drawing. He calls the center image the split drawing. By the 1930s this was known as the breakdown drawing or the passing position. If he were animating a sequence that was going to end in an odd number of drawings then he would have an even number of drawings on either side of his split and his split would be equal distance from either extreme. He then drew his subject midway between his split and an extreme, and continued drawing in this manner until the sequence was finished. McCay's discussion of drawing for animation ends at this point (Richard Williams' *The Animator's Survival Kit* barely begins at this point) and he moves on to discuss his career, achievements and the future of animation.

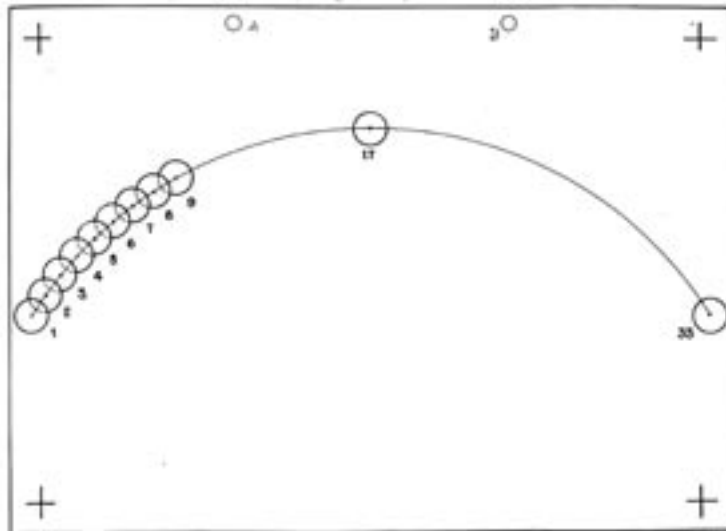


Figure 12
Drawings indicating positions of Figure 12 in Animation, Using the Split System
The circles at the corners indicate registered markings by means of which you place each subsequent drawing in correct position over the one preceding. If you use bonded paper and glue on drawing board you may dispense with registered marks.

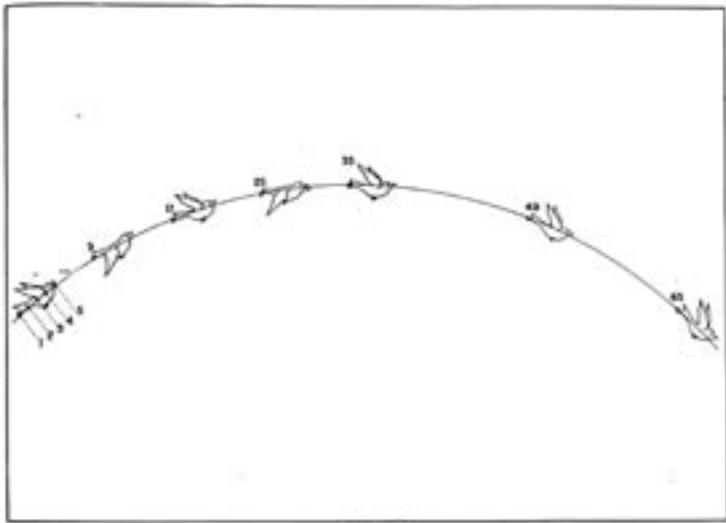


Figure 13
Drawing showing how Mr. McCay utilizes his split system in preparing a bird in flight for animation.

McCay reveals his invention, the split system, in his writings for Lesson One in *Applied Cartooning, Division 11*. All illustrations © 1919 Federal School of Applied Cartooning.

THE REAL BASICS

One of the charms of this publication is how primitive and unsophisticated it is. Most of the basics presented to students today are not discussed. There is no mention of squash and stretch, yet he used it for humorous effect in his first work *Little Nemo*, which premiered April 8, 1911 according to John Canemaker's research. While he does present us with a ball in motion, there is no acceleration and deceleration. His drawing guides or charts show his

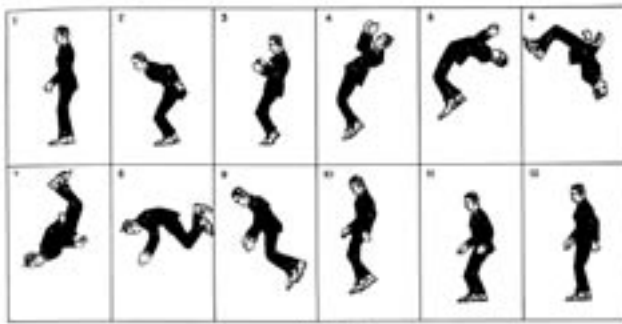


FIG. 5
Backward movement in which the figure returns to same location as on the start.

In his lesson, McCay stresses that the ability to time the progress of an action accurately is essential to good animation.

ONE OF THE CHARMS OF THIS PUBLICATION IS HOW PRIMITIVE AND UNSOPHISTICATED IT IS.

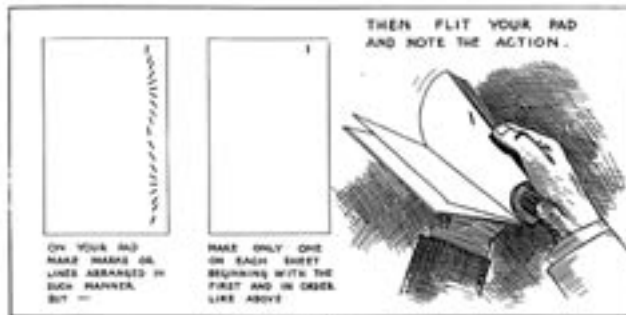


FIG. 7
Then flip your pad and note the action.



FIG. 10
To get animation of drawn figure move different parts of drawing from pad to pad in sequence as the one illustrated above. Always of great number of action of one part use the same in the drawing of each and the body. By having the pad on the table in a steady position (upright) the drawing can be seen in a steady position.

"Flit and flutter pads" are McCay's name for flip and flipbooks.

movements spaced between the extreme positions.

In his discussion of timing he explains that when Gertie is lying on her side he wanted to show her breathing. He realized it doesn't take as long for us to inhale as it does to exhale, but he couldn't get his timing right by using his wristwatch. He says that by watching the second hand on a large clock he was able to figure out the correct timing of the sequence accurately. The movement of Gertie breathing while lying on her side is subtle, natural looking and the sequence is quite charming.

One aspect of his work that has always amused me is his flair for exaggeration and showmanship. He loved exaggerating how many drawings were in his films, so it was refreshing to read his discussion of repeating cycles of drawings as a labor saving method. He says there were over 15 repetitions of the cycle of Gertie breathing while she was lying on her side.

As for his love of exaggeration, he claims *Gertie* required him to make 10,000 drawings (mentioned in a title card in the live-action introduction to the film), yet the animated portion of the film is around 4 minutes long when it is run on a sound projector. (If I had measured the length of time title cards were on the screen the actual amount of animation might only be around 3 minutes long.) *Gertie* was made before cel animation had been invented so each frame of the film was one drawing that included both the star and the background. He had to redraw the background in each frame plus whatever his star was doing. Since his registration system wasn't perfect the background shimmers somewhat. There are close to 5000 frames/images of film in a 4-minute sequence if the projector is run at sound speed (24 fps).

PATENT CONFUSION

A touchy problem for McCay was created by our country's patent laws. He mentions several times that he had created the art production methods he used, but has no desire to patent his techniques. What he doesn't say is that others filed patents for similar approaches to the animation process. Earl Hurd filed a patent application for a process using transparent cels over an opaque background (granted June 15, 1915 and filled December 14, 1914). John R. Bray obtaining a copyright in 1914 for a registration system similar to the one McCay discusses (two round pegs or pins). Bray and Hurd formed a partnership and animators using cels with a pin registration system were supposed to pay a royalty fee for using the Bray-Hurd System until their patents expired.

Nowhere in his article does McCay talk about using transparent animation cels (perhaps to avoid infringing on Hurd's patent?), yet he shows a background drawing of water from *The Sinking of the*

Lusitania, 1918. There is a vague reference to using "transparent paper" (does such a paper exist?). In *The Flying House*, 1921 his last film, he calls himself the "inventor of animated drawing" in one title card and in the next card he announces the work was done "using the Winsor McCay Process of Animation." I suspect he felt it necessary to defend his claim to be the inventor of drawn character animation and that he was troubled by Bray and Hurd patenting key elements of the process.

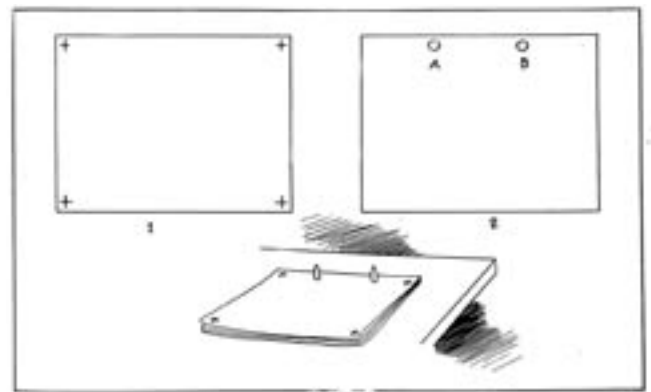
OTHER QUESTIONS AND SPECULATIONS

I can't begin to speculate why McCay wrote this lesson. It appears he assumed the students might not be too sophisticated or talented as he doesn't discuss some of the more complex animation problems he had solved in the making of *The Sinking of the Lusitania*. He was adding rich textures and tones of gray to his complex drawings while his contemporaries were content to draw simple characters that were black lines around white spaces. These artists did not seem interested in creating fine art. Their jobs demanded that they were able to draw their work quickly so they could meet their production deadlines. In contrast McCay loved rich details and seemed to take pleasure in creating sophisticated movements. In some sequences of *Lusitania* it appears that he used several layers of cels to create a complex play of movements between the ship, water and smoke.

The illustrations that accompany the text are, for the most part, not up to McCay's standards. The drawing of Gertie is not from the 1914 film (different background, the film didn't use shading and Gertie's eyes didn't look like circles placed on top of a head). Other illustrations appear to be drawn in an uninspired mechanical manner that is unlike McCay's published work. I assume much of it was drawn by an assistant or even by somebody at the correspondence school. It is possible that only the *Lusitania* images came from McCay's pen.

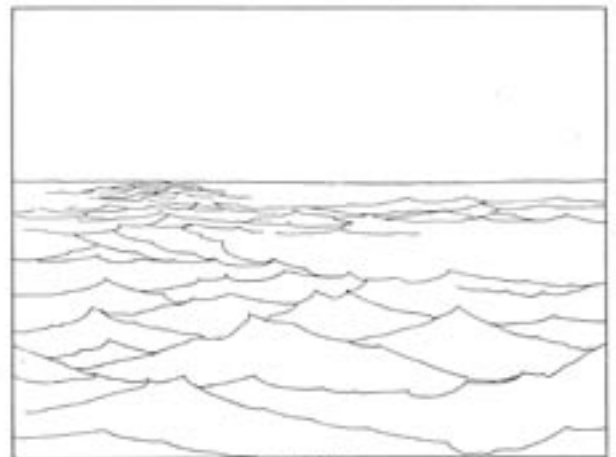
The historic information in the text is useful for several reasons. His mentioning that *Gertie* premiered in 1914 is important as several old books and articles have stated she was animated in 1909. I know a pompous animation teacher who still says she was created in 1909. There must be a lot of other people with the wrong date lodged in their brains as well.

McCay discussing his lack of success with his first two films should be sobering information for novice animators. Unfortunately a lot of projects are begun without everything being fully developed in the creator's mind. If you are a young animator, hopefully your endeavors will be more successful than McCay's first two works. While you won't face the same problems he had, you may be able to avoid others both



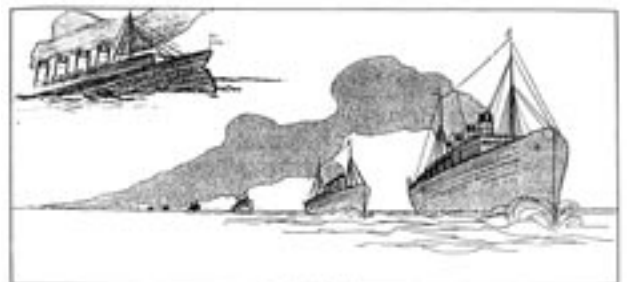
Test Fig. 6
Plan of Registering Drawings

McCay never patented any of his inventions, such as this pin registration system. Instead, John R. Bray and Earl Hurd laid claim to it.



Test Fig. 18
Wave Effects Used for Ocean Backgrounds and Animated Water Effects in the Sinking of the Lusitania.

Although McCay shows us the background drawing of water from *The Sinking of the Lusitania*, he doesn't use the phrase "transparent animation cels."



Test Fig. 37
The Lusitania Moving into View on the Surface and Appearing in the Position Where It Was Struck by the Torpedo.

McCay keeps the discussion of animation problems on *The Sinking of the Lusitania* very simple and basic in this lesson.

big and small by running your ideas past other people.

The remaining 6 lessons in this book provide basic instructions on how to work with cut-outs, how to build a drawing table, ways to create movements without having to redo the entire character in each frame, etc. Some of the text focuses on how to create simple eye catching moving images that can be used to promote local merchants in movie theaters. It appears that by 1919 there were jobs available in several cities with firms producing these advertising films. Perhaps you have heard of one or two artists who got their start in the industry creating this type of work in Kansas City — Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks.

There is also an informative section on how to do chalk talks before a live audience. The book tells how to do these talks by using prepared gimmicks and other techniques that have little to do with filmed animation. Including these talks in the book was important in 1919 as animators could earn extra

income presenting them. McCay's Little Nemo premiered April 8, 1911 as a movie short in a theater, and later that month he premiered a different version of the film on a New York City vaudeville stage as part of an in-person presentation. Gertie was also introduced to vaudeville audiences by McCay. The opening page of McCay's lesson includes a drawing of him on a stage standing next to his dinosaur on the screen. ■

KARL COHEN is President of ASIFA-San Francisco. His first book, *Forbidden Animation: Censored Cartoons and Blacklisted Animators*, is published by McFarland Publishers. He also teaches animation history at San Francisco State University.

Paul Fierlinger's DRAWN FROM MEMORY Now Available on Video!

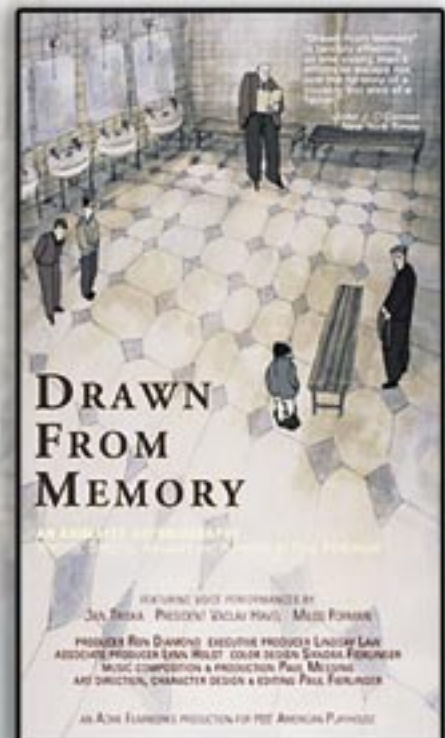
"Drawn From Memory is an extraordinary reminiscence about an improbable but true life, rendered in pen-and-ink images as whimsical as those of James Thurber and words as piercing as those of Milan Kundera. The work, which



could be called *The Movie of Laughter and Forgiveness*, uses the lighthearted medium of animation to heartbreaking effect."

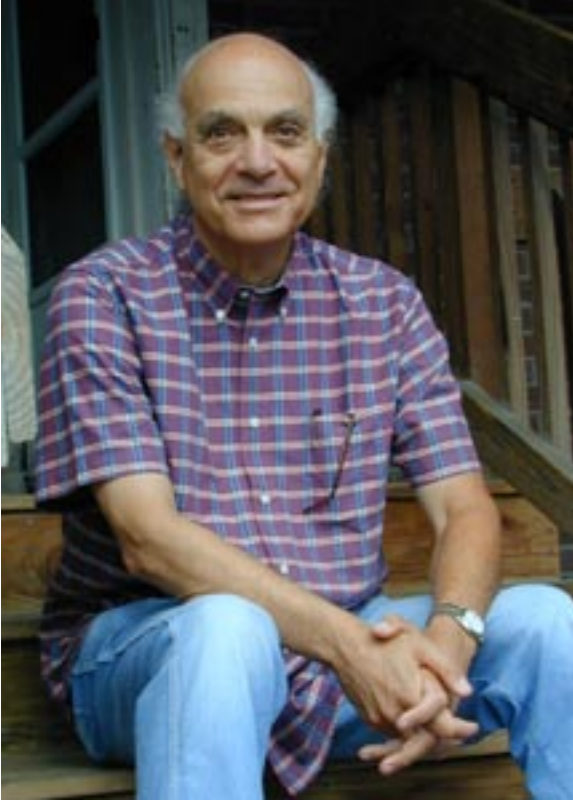
—Carrie Rickey
The Philadelphia Inquirer

<http://www.awn.com/awnstore/acme/drawn.html>



ARTIST PROFILE

DAVID EHRlich: Excavation of a *Flawed Soul*



David Ehrlich. Photo credit
Amanda Weatherman.

EHRlich's FILMS ARE BEAUTIFUL, COMPLEX AND PASSIONATE EXCAVATIONS OF A FLAWED SOUL WHO SEEKS, LIKE WE ALL DO, A HARMONY OR RHYTHM.

"It's all error... There's only error. There's the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That is life."

— Philip Roth / *I Married A Communist*

AMERICAN ANIMATOR DAVID EHRlich LIVES IN THE WOODS, BUT HE'S not lost like Dante, for he knows his way as well as any of us can. These Vermont woods offer Ehrlich a modicum of harmony through their indispensable songs of nature. Films like *Vermont Étude* (1977) and *Dance of Nature* (1991) evoke these natural melodies and their mysterious cyclical routes, but more so, his life and all its borrowed breaths are rooted in the same uncertainty, ugliness and beauty. His images are restless and at times it's as if they, like Ehrlich, are in search of their life; a life that fits; a life that unleashes the soul from confusion, anger and frustration.

This year, at least, life appears to fit David Ehrlich just fine. In May, Dreamland Publishing in France released *David Ehrlich: Citizen of the World* by scholar Olivier Cotte. In June, Ehrlich received the prestigious ASIFA Achievement Award at the Zagreb Animation Festival. And in October he served as Honorary President for the Ottawa International Animation Festival alongside a retrospective of his work, which included not one, but two new films: *Taking Color For a Walk* (2002) and *Current Events* (2002). Not a bad year for ANY independent animator let alone an experimental one.

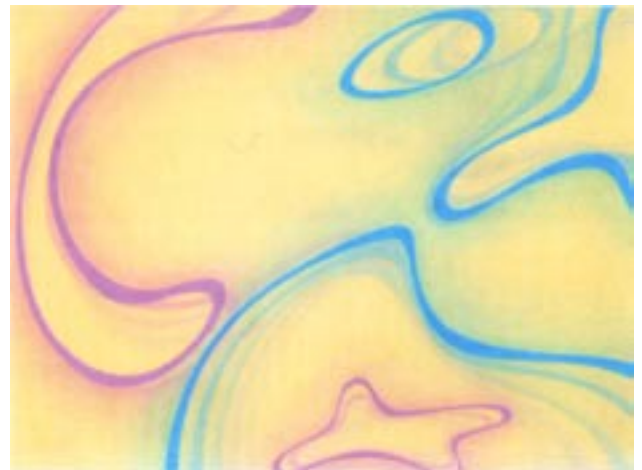
So okay fair enough, this guy got some nice accolades, but who, you ask, is David Ehrlich? First and foremost, Ehrlich is an independent experimental animator. He's been making almost one film per year since 1975. His most acclaimed works include *Precious Metal* (1980), *Dissipative Dialogues* (1982), *Dryads* (1988) and *A Child's Dream* (1990). Since 1992, he's been teaching animation at the ol' *Animal House* stomping grounds at Dartmouth College, and since the mid-1970s, he has taught numerous children's workshops around the world. From 1988-2000, Ehrlich was an Executive Board member of ASIFA International.



ANIMATION AND EHRlich

Ehrlich was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey in 1941. His pops, Max, was an eye surgeon and his mom, Jeannette, raised David and his younger brother, Jeff, and wrote poems in between. As a youth Ehrlich did the things boys were supposed to do (boxing, football) and not supposed to do (draw, paint, sing and tap-dance). He began pre-medical study at Cornell but soon realized that he was taking this road for his parents not for himself and switched to pre-law where he also breathed in courses in international relations and a boatload of Eastern languages and philosophy. His interest in all things Eastern led him, like many after him, to visit India where he apprenticed as a sculptor and studied a sitar like instrument called the veena. Perhaps afraid to get on with life, Ehrlich continued to study after he returned to the U.S.A. in 1964. By the 1970s, he became increasingly interested in the process of creativity and even taught courses on the subject at the State University of New York from 1971-75. All the while Ehrlich continued to paint, sculpt, compose and dance. Animation emerged out of a desire to integrate these different arts and around 1974, he began toying around with an 8mm camera. By 1975, he made his first animation film, the aptly titled, *Metamorphosis*. He was hooked.

Robot (above) and *Vermont Étude* (below), both made in 1977, were Ehrlich's entries into ASIFA. © David Ehrlich.



In 1977, Ehrlich began sending his films [*Vermont Étude* (1977) and *Robot* (1977)] to ASIFA festivals (Annecy and Zagreb). Incredibly, given the amount of activities and initiatives Ehrlich undertook he was in essence a shy guy. Fortunately, animation has always been dominated by open, modest, faulty and caring human beings. Ehrlich was quickly welcomed into this new world and specifically the International Animators' Association, ASIFA.

Ehrlich had joined ASIFA-East (New York chapter) in 1975, but didn't become formally involved on an international level until 1982 when he became part of the ASIFA Workshop Committee. (By the way, during this time, Ehrlich, motivated by his father's struggle with colon cancer, researched and wrote a book about bowel health called *The Bowel Book*.) Beginning in 1985, he co-chaired an ASIFA committee on International Cooperation (remember this was Cold War days) and two of his great initiatives were the collaboration films *Academy Leader Variations* (1987) and *Animated Self-Portraits* (1989). The first film featured a series of leader interpretations by artists from Poland, U.S.A., Switzerland and China, while the second featured a series of self-portraits from U.S., Czech, Estonian, Japanese and Yugoslav animators. Both films went on to win a variety of awards including



Left to right: David with his father Max in 1946; David as an early reader; and with his mother Jeannette in 1943.
© David Ehrlich.

As an activist and ambassador for animation, Ehrlich held workshops in Vermont (top) and Shanghai (bottom), which introduced children to international animators. © David Ehrlich.



a Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival for Academy Leader Variations.

ASIFA UNDERTAKINGS

In 1988, Ehrlich was elected to the Executive Board of ASIFA and served as Vice-President from 1991-1997. In 2000, he retired from ASIFA. During his tenure, Ehrlich was the conscience, voice and legs of ASIFA. While he was never elected President, he was always ASIFA's leader serving as an active bridge between Eastern and Western artists, and as an often-vocal defender of the rights of animation artists.

Ehrlich's support of 'less fortunate' animators was not limited to words. In 1982, he started the Vermont Visiting Animators Program to bring

international animators to do children's workshops in Vermont. Ehrlich then arranged additional screening tours in places like Montreal, New York and New England. The list of animators is astounding: Yuri Norstein, Priit Pärn, A Da, Piotr Dumala, Jerzy Kucia, Michel Ocelot, Borivoj Dovnikovic and on and on. Even more amazing is the fact that from 1984 onwards, Ehrlich funded the visits himself. His motivations were manifold. It gave him a chance to hang out with some friends and was a way of, in his words, "opening up naive, unexposed Americans to different cultures and socio-political systems." The program, which he stopped in 2001, was a success and eventually expanded to California via ASIFA-San Francisco and ASIFA-Hollywood.

WORK FOR WITHIN

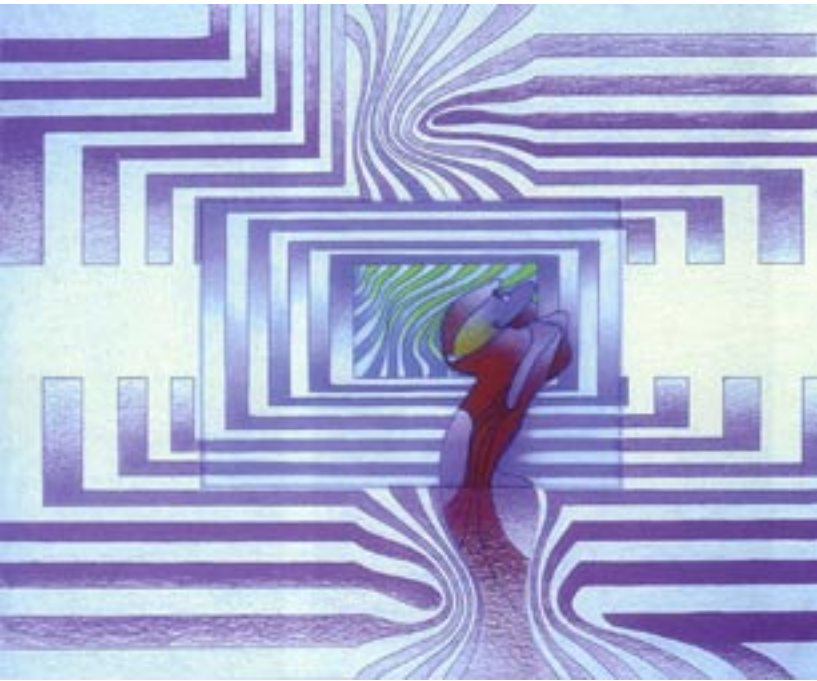
As an artist, Ehrlich is like a Pre-Socratic philosopher, convinced that the essence of life is to be found in the materials of nature (fire, water and air). Throughout his work, Ehrlich sorts through the wreckage of the collision between the individual and society, space and self. Even in his most 'scientific' films like *Precious Metal*, *Precious Metal Variations* (1983), *Point* (1984), *Pixel* (1987), *Interstitial Wavescapes* (1995), and all those other dots, lines and circle type films, there remains a strong connection to the material world of Ehrlich's existence. This is what, for me anyway, elevates him above the cold world of formalism or structuralism or whatever friggin' 'ism' 'you' want to use.

Echoing another fine experimental artist, Rene Jodoin, Ehrlich sees the sights unseen by most of us. He recognizes the subtle effects that time and space have on our (and his) daily lives, and the routines we create within them (e.g. *Robot Rerun*, *Dissipative Fantasies*). Whether it's trees (*Dance of Nature*), bees (*Point*), women (*Dryads*, *Dissipative Dialogues*), or himself, life is always flowing, expanding, contracting, evolving and, most importantly, interconnecting. Potential is the only certainty.

In films like *Dissipative Fantasies* (1986), Ehrlich shatters the gap between him and us. 'We' are implicated in everything that contacts us. Ehrlich not only shows us the world he sees, but also the eyes with which he sees, the ears with which he hears, and the hand with which he feels. For Ehrlich, the separation of individual and world is simply not possible. All is personal and political.

Until 1991 (when he suffered temporarily from a blepharospasm, which diminished his sight, and he began working tactilely with clay painting animation), Ehrlich's films were entirely drawn by hand using prismacolor pencils and later ink markers (*Pixel* and *Point*). Visually, colours dominate the films. They're

FIRST AND FOREMOST, EHRLICH IS AN INDEPENDENT EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATOR.



an integral part of any understanding of his films. Using a 12-tone system (or for you laymen like me — sorta like a single colour colourbar), Ehrlich's expressive, powerful and varied colours not only capture the external flavour of the world around him, but also an internal and deeply personal sense of joy, hope and harmony that is at the core of Ehrlich's humanistic being.

If you look through the back of the *Citizen of the World* book, there are a variety of tributes to Ehrlich from many animators. Most of these tributes speak of Ehrlich's character and seem to avoid dealing with his films. For a variety of reasons, some people (especially fellow animators) are very shortsighted when it comes to Ehrlich's work. Perhaps there are those who cannot get beyond the visual style which often seems like a leftover ode to the psychedelic blots of hippie culture (but in fact is more rooted in Chinese art). Certainly, the 12 tone colour scheme (picked up from serial and Indian music) that Ehrlich uses often looks like a remnant from an acid trip circa Jefferson Airplane. Furthermore, the animation, especially in early films like *Robot* and *Precious Metal* appears hesitant, awkward, downright slow (we post-*Sesame Street* kids expect animation to be fast and seamless). Ehrlich also happens to make non-narrative works in

Dissipative Fantasies (top right) knocks down the walls between the individual and society. *Precious Metal* (1983) (top right) is an example of Ehrlich's "scientific" work. Another acclaimed work, *Dryads* (above), explores the subject of women. All images © David Ehrlich.

a narrative world. But perhaps the biggest obstacle is rooted in economics. These are big films made with small material means. These are one man films made using pencils on paper and as such they (especially the early 16mm films) have a very raw, primitive appearance (i.e. cheap). All these criticisms are understandable but superficial. And fortunately, it appears, given the long overdue recognition that

BEGINNING IN 1985, HE CO-CHAIRMANED AN ASIFA COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION (REMEMBER THIS WAS COLD WAR DAYS)...

Ehrlich is receiving this year (his films are also available on video), that the shortsighted are in the minority.

Ehrlich's films are beautiful, complex and passionate excavations of a flawed soul who seeks, like we all do, a harmony or rhythm. Ol' Chuck Olson once said, "He who controls rhythm, controls." Ehrlich's work is a means of articulating the tuneless tensions in order to find that groove that we all need to ride through life comfortably. Ehrlich's films, like his life, sometimes fail, they succumb to redundancy, and occasionally the GRAND softie in him creeps too strongly into his work and pushes aside the calm quiet of wisdom. But failure, error, it's all life. Yet defeat is momentary. Ehrlich doesn't pitch a tent stake in the ground. He gathers his strength, mends his aches, soothes his ego's sorrow, and gets right back into the game. Led by the same stubborn determination, he resumes his struggle all over again. The sun is new again, each day.

The video *Animation* by David Ehrlich is available from www.facets.org. The book *David Ehrlich: Citizen of the World* is available from www.upne.com. ■

→ [View clips](#) from several of David Ehrlich's films.

CHRIS ROBINSON is the artistic director of the *Ottawa International Animation Festival* and the *Ottawa International Student Animation Festival*. He is also the editor of the semi-annual ASIFA Magazine. Robinson has curated film programs and served on festival juries throughout the world. He writes a monthly column ("The Animation Pimp") for *Animation World Network* and has written for *Salon.com*, *Cinemascope*, *Take One*, *12gauge*, *City Pages* and others. Robinson contributed a chapter on English-Canadian animation to the book, *North of Everything: English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*. He is currently working on two books: *Between Genius and Utter Illiteracy: A Story of Estonian Animation* (March 2003 by Varrak Publishing) and a biography of an ex-hockey player, *Doug Harvey: Like There Was No Tomorrow* (Spring 2004, Boheme Press).



AWN FORUMS

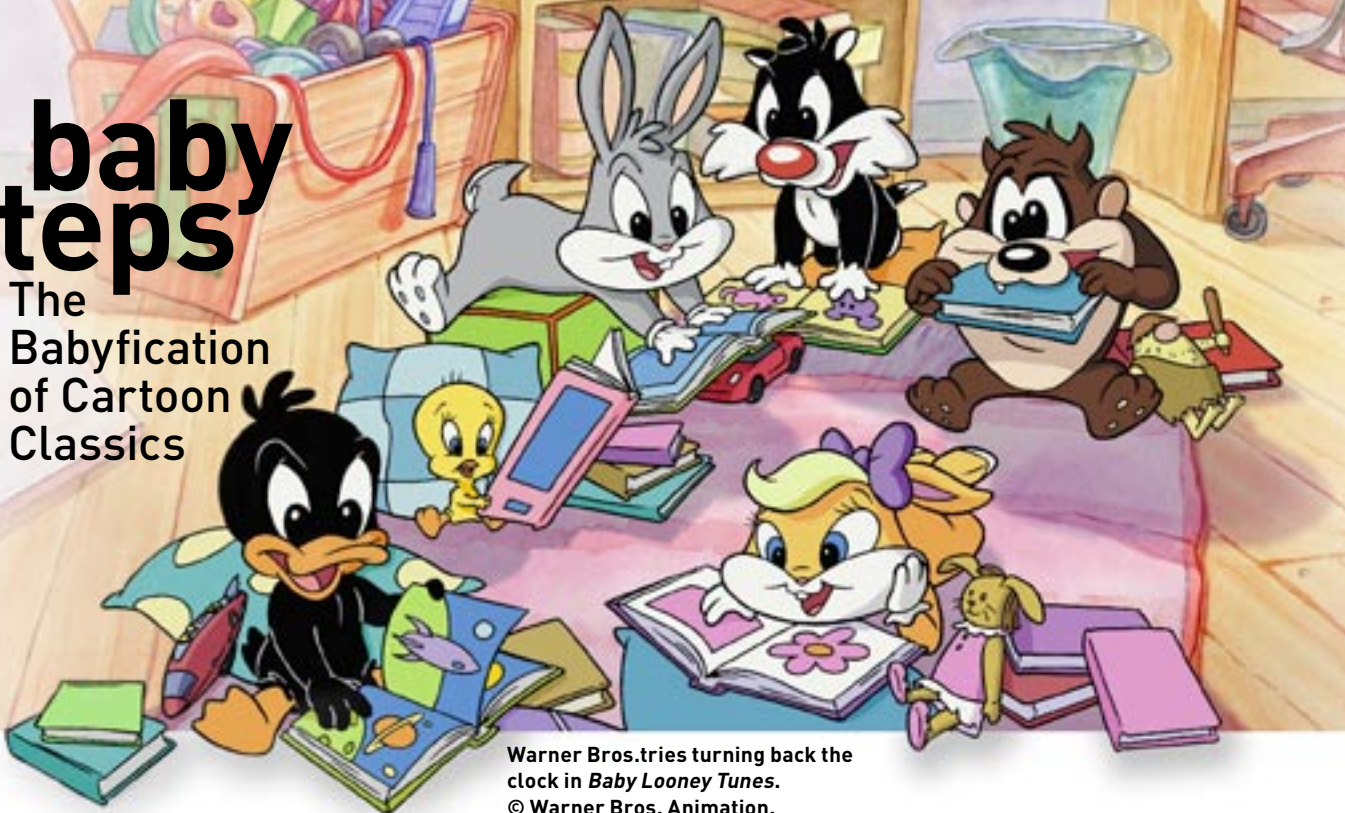
Join in and participate in one of our AWN Community Discussion Forums! Over 2100 members, packed with way over 1,500 threads and 6,300 posts and growing.

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VIEW POINT

baby steps

The
Babyfication
of Cartoon
Classics



Warner Bros. tries turning back the clock in *Baby Looney Tunes*.
© Warner Bros. Animation.

FEW DEVELOPMENTS IN ANIMATION THIS YEAR WERE MORE DEPRESSING THAN WARNERS' ANNOUNCEMENT OF *BABY LOONEY TUNES*.

PERHAPS IT'S INEVITABLE; WHEN CARTOON CHARACTERS REACH A certain age, they must undergo transformations equivalent to the animated version of the fountain of youth. There are numerous ways to do this: They can be completely reconceptualized, as in Cartoon Network's presentation of *Flintstones: On The Rocks*. They can be bent to postmodern humor, as Michael Ouweleen and Erik Richter have done with *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*. They could be simply dusted off and brought back with a shiny new coat of digital ink; witness *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* and *Transformers*. Sometimes they can depict prehistories in which the original protagonists have been recast as their juvenile or baby selves. This option gained wide acceptance during the 1980s and has proven to be the most flawed and aesthetically questionable choice of those listed above.

THE BABYFICATION

Why should this be? Everyone loves little kids and babies, and what better way to build identification with a core audience that consists mostly of children? Both these assumptions may be true, but the concessions are far too great. The first victim in the "babyfication" of cartoons is usually continuity. One of the clearest examples occurred in *The Flintstone Kids* (1986-1988), a series that featured the complete revision of a shared history by the characters; they have now known each other since childhood. This twist is in contradiction of backstory provided in a 1964 episode of the original series. Taking a regressive approach to shows also constricts the range of characterization: the players are frozen in developmental lockstep, their futures (and future personalities) already established.



Muppet Babies (above) was one of the "throwback" series that came of age in the late '80s. TM & © 2002 The Jim Henson Company.

He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (left) gets a digital do-over. © Cartoon Network.



If Reggie Mantle, for example, is a selfless tyke without manipulative tendencies in *The New Archies*, then what indeed happened to him in the intervening years? Could a fearless prepubescent Shaggy, rather than Fred, truly lead the gang of A Pup Named Scooby Doo through their antecedent adventures and then behave as he did in later years? Probably not. These children will never be exposed, as teenagers are, to the perils of drugs, sexual abuse, satanic or religious cults, skinhead literature, or other murky threats of adolescence. We already know that they have made it through these tumultuous years with their ink-and-paint skins intact. So it goes, through cartoons such as *Muppet Babies*, *Yo, Yogi*, and *Tom and Jerry Kids*.

Perhaps the dreariest feature of these "throwback" series is the underlying realization that they are less attempts at revisionism than they are vehicles for marketing cuter, alternate versions of

established characters. They are also an admission that, bereft of original ideas, studios will copycat each other's concepts even if they are less than ideal in the first place. Underscoring this point: The six shows listed above all appeared in the period between 1984-1990. They were all finished as first-run programs by 1993 (or earlier). Happily, the trend of infantilizing cartoon shows gradually died out. The proliferation of animation studios, the rise of creator-driven product, and the availability of cable television markets led to a greater diversity of ideas, helping to kill the much-imitated genre of "babyfied" cartoons. Well, almost.

IS THIS PROGRESS?

Few developments in animation this year were more depressing than Warners' announcement of *Baby Looney Tunes*. Not only was a passé idea being revived, but the infantilization of the Looney Tunes gang was actually a throwback to a throwback. Warner had already tried a similar idea in 1990 when they co-produced *Tiny Toon Adventures* with Steven Spielberg. The main differences between *Baby Looney Tunes* and *Tiny Toons Adventures* are that the classic Warner characters are being used rather than their juvenile distant relatives, and that the Baby Looney Tunes are just that — babies. The featured players are Bugs, Daffy, Tweety, Sylvester, Taz, and a jejune Lola Bunny

(who, in yet another twist of continuity, must have existed well before *Space Jam*). I suppose at this point it is worth noting that Warners two hottest merchandising champs are currently Taz and Tweety. Although Taz is a relative latecomer to the Warner stable and Porky Pig had a fifty-year career at the same studio, there is no baby Porky, his marketing potential having peaked long ago. These twee toons live under the kindly care of Granny, who has un-aged not a bit. An equally important difference is that the once-zany Warner humor is largely absent from *Baby Looney Tunes*. This is not a series aimed at adults in any way, and is mostly unwatchable by their standards.

THE DREARIEST FEATURE OF THESE "THROWBACK" SERIES IS THE UNDERLYING REALIZATION THAT THEY ARE LESS ATTEMPTS AT REVISIONISM THAN THEY ARE VEHICLES FOR MARKETING...

According to the press release, "*Baby Looney Tunes* will give the audience a peek into how these cherished characters developed their distinct personalities and give *Looney Tunes* fans a great new opportunity to enjoy them." After viewing several episodes, I had difficulty obtaining this peek. The BLTs appear to be no different to this observer's eye than sundry other cartoon babies, although glimpses of Daffy's enormous ego are suggested. The stories probably do not help in this regard; were they paced any slower the soundtracks would likely warp. When one watches the Bob Clampett classic *The Old Gray Hare* and thinks about what *could* have been done even with this retro concept, one has to mourn. It strains the imagination to believe that the BLTs would grow up into the same characters that were so deftly handled by Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng, or even Bob McKimson. Still, what is to be expected when bad ideas are revived for another go-round?

Part of me regrets showering such denigration on *Baby Looney Tunes*, a show clearly meant for preschool audiences and the indiscriminating toddler. Mr. Whoopie knows, we could certainly use more harmless entertainment for the younger set, especially with attention spans and network airtime in such short supply. I might add that any series featuring lush watercolor backgrounds, modeling shadows on the characters, and a Granny voiced by June Foray can't be a total loss. What I truly bemoan is the frustrating waste of the Warner characters, who are so much more appealing and vital in their mature incarnations.

Pauvre Lola! Warner's most original character in years, that rare bright spot in the wan film *Space Jam*, has been reduced to a cuddly caddy of coloring books. I have long wondered why Warner pulled this ravishing

rabbit out of its hat only to have her virtually disappear for six long years. Another blown call. Lissome Lola could — and should — have been saved for new, more mature cartoons where she could have been developed more in line with her Averian influences; a cool, sexy sophisticate capable of mercilessly lighting Bugs' fuse before tamping it out with breezy aplomb and a saucy one-liner. Instead, we get a binky-sucking rugrat, much to the discredit of the very studio that produced some of the most cosmopolitan characters in cartoon history. Why not spend the time and resources of the studio on new episodes that at least make a go of recapturing the cartoon spirit that was truly beloved

by three generations of animation fans? Is it really that difficult to script, storyboard and draw fresh farces featuring Bugs, Lola, Daffy, and yes, Porky? This *is* the studio that produced *Animaniacs*, right?

A BETTER RE-DO

Warner might do well to take a look at their longtime competitors Disney in this regard; the studio that once had their thunder stolen by the hipper, funnier Warner cartoons has stolen some of it back. Disney's *House of Mouse* is by no means the best cartoon series on TV today, but it is an object lesson in how to revise characters without sending them back to childhood. To begin with, the premise makes sense; it is not unreasonable to assume that Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy, and other Disney luminaries would open a nightclub after spending long careers in show business themselves. Their personalities are intact but open to revision; Daisy Duck finally has a definitive voice (and longer hair in the framing sequences), but is recognizably herself with more of a take-charge personality. The cartoons that serve as the centerpieces of the show are of recent vintage, and there is an irreverent, modern flair to them. Some of the 1990s Warner spirit has been appropriated by these Disney cartoons; in one self-reflexive moment, a particularly violent sequence featuring Donald Duck is frozen by three "censor monkeys" from Broadcast Standards and Practices who demand that the entire scene be re-animated with proper safety devices and equipment in place. Moments later we see exactly that.

I especially enjoyed the shorts pairing Daisy Duck with Minnie Mouse in a love-hate melange of mishaps. Developing new relationships between infrequently paired characters could work equally well for Warner; witness some of the team-ups between Porky and Sylvester during the 1950s. Perhaps it's time to give it another go. In one cartoon the classic setup of Mickey, Donald and Goofy as men-for-hire is presented, but this time Goofy goes against type when he angrily

PART OF ME REGRETS SHOWERING SUCH
DENIGRATION ON *BABY LOONEY TUNES*...

demands to be team leader and becomes a dimwitted dictator. Another cartoon pitting Donald against his old adversary the Aracuan bird is almost hallucinatory in nature. Similar cartoons couldn't be made with the classic Warner characters?

Because *House of Mouse* has none of the problems in continuity inherent in infantilized cartoons, the fact that Disney characters from different eras are mixed is not a problem. Even if Mickey Mouse predated Ariel by sixty years or so, the latter could not live in the Disney Universe without being aware of who the Mouse was since Mickey clearly came first; thus the Little Mermaid is not particularly out of place when she attends performances. Better still, she (and other older characters) can be used as material for in-jokes that are some of the show's true delights. The conceit proposed in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* — that toons live and mingle in an independent, timeless universe — comes to fruition in *House of Mouse*, and on the whole it works.

Mickey's nightclub act is not without its flaws; *House of Mouse* walks a tricky conceptual tightrope in many ways, but the point is, Disney did not have to stoop to infantilization to keep their characters alive, working and funny. Nor did the show's writers have any explaining to do when they revised relationships and characterizations. That, indeed, is the way it should be. We grow, develop, mature and age; shouldn't our favorite characters be allowed to do the same? If Donald Duck becomes a *maitre 'd*, Birdman an attorney, or Ralph Bakshi's Mighty Heroes middle aged accountants (as they were in one amusing episode of *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*), well, isn't that what the rest of us are doing? Why must our favorite toons be smothered in swaddling cloths or bound by bibs? Nostalgia simply isn't what it's cracked up to be; neither are the *Baby Looney Tunes* nor their animated ilk. While other cartoons are taking giant



Warner Bros.' *Duck Dodgers*, premiering on Cartoon Network in 2004, will take the Looney Tunes crew into the next century and early buzz is good! Courtesy of Cartoon Network.

leaps into the 2000s, it is regrettable to see that Warner animation is taking mere baby steps.

ADDENDUM

After this column went to bed Doc Toon received a press release announcing a new Warners project: *Duck Dodgers*, which will feature the adventures of a fully-grown Daffy Duck and Porky Pig as they battle old nemesis Marvin Martian (who appears to have left his antigravity playpen far behind). The series is set to debut on Cartoon Network in 2004, and it represents a considerable commitment by Sander Schwartz and Warners to keep the Looney Tunes bunch bouncing into the next decade...or in this case, clean into the 31st century. Well, as Porky might say, "Ask and ye shall recei-recei-recei, eh, get what you wish for!" Kudos to Warners for finally reviving their classic characters the way we best remember and love them. ■

MARTIN "DR. TOON" GOODMAN is a longtime student and fan of animation. He lives in Anderson, Indiana.

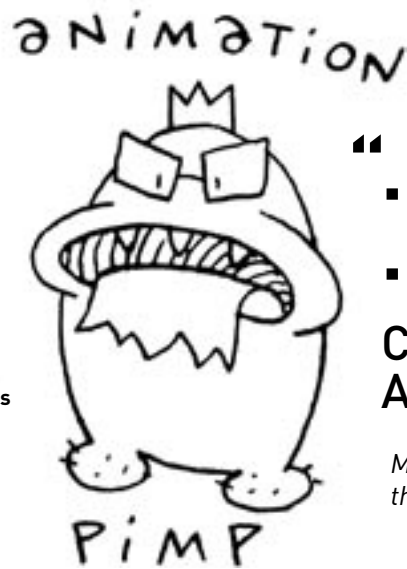


Illustration by Andreas Hykade. Courtesy of Chris Robinson.

ANIMATION PIMP

“...And Never Die ...and Never Die.”

Cartoon Violence – Adding to Our Gun Culture?

Monthly provocative, drunken, idiotic ramblings from the North...

NO AMOUNT OF DENIAL, REPRESSION OR CINEMATIC REJECTION IS GONNA CHANGE THE FACT THAT WE'RE GONNA BITE IT.

TOUCH WOOD. NO ONE CLOSE TO ME, EXCEPT A DOG and maybe a cat or two, has died. There was a sort of momentary grade 9 gal who I tried to ball once whose family and best friend kicked it in high school. When Alzheimer's took over my grandmother, I was devastated, but she's still, technically, alive. Death scares me to no end, less because I'm at HOPEFULLY the half way mark (35) than because I'm a parent now and I want to make damn sure I'm here for my son until he's ready to go it alone. Just writing that makes me quiver with fear. Naturally there's an element of arrogance that's connected with the rise of the industrial age and the shift from state to individual control. And the notion of NOT being assumes being is essential — important. Every once in a while I slip into BAD FUNKS. Standard dark stuff...that often involves an INCREDIBLE head buzzing PANIC that I could die at any moment. The last time it hit me was mid-June. And right in the middle of the damn death funk...this St. Louis baseball player goes and dies. He's 33. Clogged arteries. FUCK. I slept so poorly that weekend. By Monday I managed to crawl out of the dark, demons momentarily gone, back to writing...then later that week I hear that the Who's bass player, John Entwistle died (ironically his few song contributions often dealt comically with death). It's silly to you, but The Who

were the bible of my youth. (I felt better when I later learned that despite a heart condition ol' Thunderfingers was snorting coke) So...right back into the dark. Now Socrates helped me a bit. As he was about to drink poison, he talked about death and the stupidity of fearing what you don't understand. Hey, a valid point, but maybe it's a fear of losing what we have/are. Then again...hopefully...it'll be so quick that it'll be a moot point.

VIOLENT TOONS

Meantime I was watching this new *Justice League* movie from the Cartoon Network and suddenly noticed that despite guns, villains, ships, bombs and all manner of crazy violence, there was an absence of death...and ya ya ya...I KNOW OKAY...t'aint nothing new. That's the nature of Hollywood...all the MEANS without ENDS...all the CAUSE without the EFFECT. Just do it. It was the same thing with *The Powerpuff Girls Movie* (another Cartoon Network production). The girls violently and swiftly destroy an entire city (with apparent pleasure), but miraculously they manage to avoid murdering anyone. And okay sure... it's probably some latent adult release via the creator, but these movies are made for and aimed at kids. Ironically, the films of Plympton and Don Hertzfeldt, which regularly feature pretty gruesome violence, at

WHY ON EARTH WOULD THESE PRODUCERS/EXECUTIVES PERMIT SUCH EXTREME DISPLAYS OF VIOLENCE?

least SHOW the results (hell, they slobber over it!) and are probably BETTER for kids than these other hypocritical cuds.

We seem to have devolved into a world of fuggin TOYS (bizarre given the, "Oh people like us do die," reality of September 11th)...I cannot remember one action animation series (let alone live-action — and as a chum reminded me — remember those *A Team* shows where Murdock would fire a huge bazooka into a jeep and not manage to kill anyone!?) where people are shown dying — the natural friggin desire/result of firing bullets AT people. Now mark this down folks, cause you won't hear it often, but I've always respected Disney for *Bambi* and *Dumbo* and even *The Lion King* because death is at least addressed, confronted, out and open. Beyond animation...*Homicide* had a brilliant episode with Robin Williams all from the p.o.v. of a family who've just seen their wife/mother gunned down while on vacation. And hell...even *Buffy* dealt with it (according to my gal). Okay, it's one thing to have Daffy, Bugs and Elmer beating the tar out of each other with no cause...clearly these are caricatures, exaggerations, dark comedies (for KNOWING adults)...but this action hero nonsense is set in the 'natural' world.

CONSEQUENCES DO EXIST

Now I don't give a hoot about the issue of entertainment influenced violence (I grew up playing toy gun related games and have YET to kill anyone). This isn't a so-called bleeding heart liberal call for the reduction of violence in entertainment. I got a brains and two hands, I can turn the damn television off...no...what I'm baffled by is the utter lack of common sense/logic. I'm talking mindset/philosophy here. IT's not just cartoons...remember all those pretty greenish bombs dropping all over Iraq back in the early 1990s? Man they were beautiful. Do you remember the images of the results of those bombs? The decapitated heads of children? The burned women and men? Of course not. Because we are never shown this material. Even after September 11th...the truly graphic images were, THANKFULLY, not shown (although I did watch that ABC documentary by the French guys and I'll never forget the sound of the 'thumps' as bodies fell). I'm not saying we need to see all these corpses...but then again maybe we do?

Maybe that's a way of driving into the heads of many of us that firing guns, dropping bombs, gutting, slaying, etc. actually have CONSEQUENCES, that is DEATH, loss of life, pushing up daisies, ground ZERO. Aside from the planes...I remember the image of the lifeless fire dept. priest and that AWFUL AWFUL medium shot image of people at the windows/ledges of the WTC building after a plane hit. But we don't see it. All we see are tears, dirt and U.S. flags. That's not enough. And hey, let's turn to Afghanistan, Sudan, etc. where the U.S. has killed hundreds of innocent people. How many reports did we get about lost families? Did we hear from any heartbroken wives over recent lost husbands? Did we see any footage that suggested human loss? No, of course not (at least in the mainstream news), 'cause that might actually make us question the actions of our countries.

(After I wrote this section, I heard an incredible story on the news that some Canadian police were asking kids to turn in toy guns because they felt that not only were the guns looking more realistic, but more to the point, they were contributing to a gun culture mentality. That is an astonishing and courageous thing for a cop to say today.)

TAKE A SERIOUS LOOK

Now there have been some interesting takes on death in animation — but naturally it comes from the indie side. Caroline Leaf's *The Street* (taken from Mordecai Richler's book) addresses the death of a grandparent from a kid's p.o.v. Pierre Hebert's *Souvenirs of War* is a blunt depiction of the deadly results of war. Estonian Heiki Ernits made a funny piece called *Jacob and Death* (1994) in which a man convinces death to let him live forever, only to find that when everyone else dies and the world changes, he finds himself very alone. In the end, he virtually begs death to end his life. And boy the Aussies are obsessed with death. Check out *Uncle, Dad's Clock*, *Sarah Watt's film...I can't remember the title...but it's about losing a child...* and specifically Dennis Tupicoff's heart-wrenching films *The Darra Dogs* and the recent, *Into the Dark*.

There's just so much blatant hypocrisy going on here: violence without responsibility, violence without effect, denial of death.

Why on EARTH would these producers/executives

THIS ISN'T A SO-CALLED BLEEDING HEART LIBERAL CALL FOR THE REDUCTION OF VIOLENCE IN ENTERTAINMENT.

permit such extreme displays of violence in *Batman*, *Superman*, *Justice League* and *Powerpuff Girls* BUT not permit ANY hint of the results of these actions (beyond destroyed buildings), especially considering the HUMAN damage we saw done by the relatively recent destruction of three buildings in REAL life? How is this justified as RESPONSIBLE? Is this to ensure that children grow up continuing to believe that guns are cool so they remain easy prey for Armed Forces recruiters? I don't know about the U.S. but before almost every feature in Canada there is this stylish, fast cutting Canadian Armed Forces ad that claims that it's all about responsibility, technology, learning and teamwork... As my Asian friend Arnold once said, BAHAAHAHAHA.

I'VE ALWAYS RESPECTED DISNEY FOR *BAMBI* AND *DUMBO* AND EVEN *THE LION KING* BECAUSE DEATH IS AT LEAST ADDRESSED, CONFRONTED, OUT AND OPEN.

A DOSE OF REALITY

Well, writing this ain't making me feel a whole lot better about the prospect of not breathing anymore. At least with all this mass media nonsense, I can use my brain and hand to just switch the television off. Sure it bothers me to come across the asinine shows or to see my 4-year-old suddenly fixated with the war toy section, but hey, I got a choice. If producers, creators and executives ain't gonna pull their heads out of their ass/wallet then thankfully there are logical parents who can actually speak with their kids and explain the consequences of these 'toys' and that particular cock driven alternative lifestyle choice. Ya know what? Why start or stop at toys? Go get the kid a real gun, take him hunting or to the firing range. Let him fire off a few rounds at a frog or the family pet, or better still, if there's a terminally ill (or close to it) loved one around, load her up and let the kid give

granny or Uncle Charlie their peace (and yours!)...or lower the enrolment age for the armed forces. Ever see Ivan's Childhood about the kid soldier? That was great. They're small, flexible and unmarried. Sure they can be a bit undisciplined and wild, but once potty trained they're pretty low maintenance. Best of all, I bet they're phenomenal with guns 'cause morality ain't really crept in yet...and heck, given recent events, some of these kids are gunnin' to go so there's very little emotional baggage involved. Plus, lots of other countries are doing it!

Death was-is-will be. No amount of denial, repression or cinematic rejection is gonna change the fact that we're gonna bite it. Thinking/talking/showing death ain't a bad thing because you are at least acknowledging its existence and in doing so are better stirred to get off your ass and live the life that gives you pleasure before you don't have that choice. ■

CHRIS ROBINSON is but a man. His hobbies include squirrel taunting, goat thumping, meat dancing and elderly peeping. You can find the results at <http://asifa.net/robinson>

Note: Readers may contact any *Animation World Magazine* contributor by sending an e-mail to editor@awn.com.



BOOK EXCERPT

Prague, *A Change of Life*

An excerpt from Gene Deitch's book, How To Succeed In Animation (Don't Let A Little Thing Like Failure Stop You!).

AFTER SIGNING ME UP AND EXPLAINING HOW TO obtain a passport, Snyder once again took off for Prague. I had accepted this weird offer only as a chance of getting my two pet projects produced, that was all. My plan was to do the absolute minimum of messing with these people's films, get my own projects into production, and then get safely home, the sooner the better.

A ROCKY START

When Snyder arrived in Prague, he hastened to convey his "good news" to studio production manager Zdenka Najmanova. "Darling," he said, placing a reassuring hand on her sturdy little shoulder, "I am bringing you the best animation director in America to show you how to improve these films."

Zdenka was so thrilled with this news, she promptly resolved not to speak to me. I can only imagine the torrent of nasty Czech words that must have cascaded through her head. The thought of some smart-assed American hotshot hobnailing over her finished movies created in her a generous serving of advance hostility.

During those first days, I screened some of my UPA films for the staff. I needed to show them that I was really a professional, and that my advice was worth listening to. After that, I seemed to get increased respect, and was no longer viewed as a troublemaking interloper. That made things a lot easier.

The great moment came when I was finally able to get my own two film projects started. When explaining the storyboard to the staff, I tried to act it out, as I usually did to my own UPA, Terrytoons or GDA staff.

What was hilarious in this case was that it all had to be translated. I would enthusiastically act out the scenario, and each time I came to a gag point, there had to be a pause for translation. Then, everyone would laugh at the gag. It was like seeing a movie that was 20 seconds out of synch! It was talk-pause-laugh, talk-pause-laugh, talk-pause-laugh, throughout the entire demonstration!

I was delighted that they liked my projects, which were so culturally different from their own. I had brought with me the dialogue soundtracks for my two new films, which I had recorded in New York, and I was ready to give the individual scenes to the animators that Zdenka had recommended. So we were all into a working relationship.

I RESPECTED THEIR WAY, BUT YET THERE I WAS, WITH THE TASK OF PRODUCING ANIMATION MOVIES FOR MY AMERICAN CLIENT...

WAIT! HOW DO YOU DO THIS?

The unexpected difficulty was that the Czechs had a totally different system of animation notation and camera instructions. The Czech artists who set up the animation studio just after World War II certainly had a passion for this art, but they did not really know how to go about it.

All they had to learn from were bootleg black & white prints the Germans had duplicated from a couple of Disney features. They figured out basically how these films were made by running them on what

they called a “Kinox” machine, a gadget made out of old projector parts that allowed a film to be run frame-by-frame and viewed on a plate of frosted glass, more or less like an American-style “Moviola.” Working “backwards” in this way, they more or less figured out how the animation drawings and backgrounds should be organized.

They completely ignored — and didn’t even know about — the general world standard of using exposure sheets on which ruled lines represented the frames of film! The studio was tightly gripped by an old guard

Design,” as we so elegantly labeled it in the old UPA days, the Prague studio had no category at all for layout. Layout and scene-planning were still my specialty, and I wanted to develop assistants to do this work. But the Czechoslovak Socialist bureaucracy had not created a layout category for the studio, so Zdenka had no way of paying anyone to do layouts. We had to label the work differently, but gradually a few young people took to it, and today they are the major directors in the studio.

THEY COMPLETELY IGNORED — AND DIDN’T EVEN KNOW ABOUT — THE GENERAL WORLD STANDARD OF USING EXPOSURE SHEETS

clique whose pride did not allow them to accept the thought that there might be a better, easier, or more logical way to organize the work. It was a mindset I was to struggle against for at least 20 years, with success coming slowly and partially. I used to kid them about the way their animation drawings looked. All around the edges of the photographed area were numbers. There was the production number, the sequence and scene number, and then a list of the numbers of all the film frames onto which that particular drawing would be exposed. Animation drawings frequently repeat of course, and in the case of walk-cycles, or other cycle actions, the drawings repeat often. Quite frequently there were more numbers on the animation paper than there was drawing! And routinely, when there were corrections, the sheets became further filled with crossed out numbers, or inserted series of numbers when action had to be extended. All of the corrected numbers had to be carefully traced onto the cels by the inkers. It seemed totally bizarre to me. I saw many cells that had only eye-dots drawn on them, but enough numbers to look like an algebraic conundrum.

Even more maddening was in their format and framing system. We based our film layout practice on the Acme, and later the Oxberry, system of camera field formats, with the smallest possible format being the 1-field (rarely, if ever used), and progressing outward numerically, each field being numbered according to its width in inches. The Czechs labeled their largest format number-1, and used larger numbers for progressively smaller field sizes! And whereas we calculate all of our camera moves from the center of the fields, which remain constant no matter how we may move in or out, the Czechs perversely measured their camera moves from the lower, left-hand corner of the fields.

Then there was layout. Forget “Production

THE SILVER LINING

So why in the world did I even want to cope with such problems for over 40 years? The fact is that I fell in love with the dynamic little production manager, with Prague, and with the possibility to do the kind of films I had been denied doing by my ouster from Terrytoons. I decided to learn their system, to teach them mine, and to try to get the twain to meet.

As much as I felt their system to be an illogical and cockeyed way to go about animation, I realized that what got onto the screen was all that really mattered. They did make great films. Their system did work, so if they were used to it, and it worked, well God bless them! The important thing was that they were good animators, and animation filmmaking was in their bones; it was a strong tradition in the country. In an earlier chapter, I hypothesized that the first “animation shows” took place in caves, 35,000 years ago. That is my opinion, but a fact is that the tradition that produced animation in this country really does go back that far! I’ll explain...

One of the first things I noticed about the way they worked, is how they related to the figures they were animating; they referred to them in just that way, that they were animating figures. An American animator is far more likely to say, “I’m animating Mickey,” or “Bugs,” or whomever. An American animator’s goal was traditionally to create an illusion of life, and we think of our characters as real personalities. We almost always use lip-sync — our characters must appear to be really speaking. The Czechs had a diametrically opposite approach. The mouths did not move as they spoke dialog and the eyes did not really look. There was no great consideration to weight or the laws of physics. There was no real development of character. All of those things were secondary to a symbolic approach to storytelling. They felt that American animation left nothing to the imagination; that we “shoveled it to ‘em.” They preferred to suggest, to mime. And that is where their ancient tradition came in. The same Alexander Marshack who had told me about the cave paintings, invited me to an exhibit of artifacts he had installed at the New York Museum

of Natural history, objects he had found in his archaeological work. Among the objects on display was the oldest articulated puppet ever found. It was 35,000 years old and was found in the territory of today's Czech Republic! That ancient tradition of puppetry eventually evolved into the Czech animation style.

I respected their way, but yet there I was, with the task of producing animation movies for my American client, who (heaven forbid!), had no wish that our films would reveal their Czechoslovak origin. They had to look like "American cartoons."

Willy-nilly, I had to teach the Czechs the American style of animation. Amazingly, they were eager to learn. But of all the technical problems I mentioned, the one that was the greatest block of all to communication was still something else: "You say tom-ah-to, and I say tom-ay-to" is one thing, but what if you say "metrage," and I say "footage?" As the world is "globalized" the confusion over the array of electrical plugs, the range of voltages, PAL, SECAM or NTSC TV standards, region-limited DVD players, pounds and kilograms, miles and kilometers, inches

and centimeters... Well animation footage/meters may not be the most earth-shaking of problems, but one of many disjoints that must come together if we are to live in a truly global village. ■

To find out more on Gene's career in the world of animation, read his book *How To Succeed In Animation (Don't Let A Little Thing Like Failure Stop You!)* online at <http://genedeitch.awn.com>. An AWN exclusive.

GENE DEITCH is one of the last surviving members of the original Hollywood UPA studio of 1946 and the instigator of the CBS-Terrytoon "renaissance" of 1956-1958. He was also: Animation Department Chief of the Detroit Jam Handy Organization, 1949-1951, Creative Chief of UPA-New York, 1951-1954, Director at John Hubley's Storyboard, Inc. New York, 1955, President of Gene Deitch Associates, Inc. New York, 1958-1960, Creative Director for Rembrandt Films, 1960-1968, and star director for Weston Woods Studios, Inc., Weston, Connecticut, 1968-1993. He has worked for over 40 years with the Prague animation studio, "Bratri v Triku."



The Animation Scene

ANIMATION WRITING



This opening scene from *The Lion King* sets the stage for the rest of the film. © The Walt Disney Company.

EACH SCENE SHOULD BE VISUALLY INTERESTING AND NEVER TALKY...

WHAT IS A SCENE?

REMEMBER THAT SWEEPING SCENE OF AFRICAN splendor in the opening of *The Lion King* where all the animals arrive from near and far to pay homage to the new royal cub? A scene is a single event or conversation between characters, occurring during one period of time and in one single place, that moves the story forward toward a climax and resolution. One event, one period of time, one place!

PLANNING YOUR INDIVIDUAL SCENES

Okay, you may have already roughed out your scenes in an outline. But now you need something right on the mark with focus and polish. Consider these:

- What will this scene accomplish? Scenes may have a main point and a couple of minor points. Each really important bit of plot information in your script probably requires a separate scene.
- Who's in this scene?
- Where does it take place and when?
- Who's driving the scene? (Usually it's one person or animal, but it can be an inanimate object or even an act of nature.)
- What do they want? What's their attitude?
- Who's putting up obstacles? Why? What does this person want?
- Is there subtext, people talking around a problem or hiding it?
- Are people being direct in what they want or indirect?

ONCE YOU'VE MADE YOUR MAIN POINT, THE SCENE IS OVER.

- Where is the tension or conflict? Tension can also be created by conflict already established earlier or what we anticipate might happen next.
- What happens in this scene? How does it move the story forward and add to the audience's understanding? Each scene should change the status quo. The hero should be closer or farther away from his goal than he was at the beginning of the scene.
- How does this scene reveal character and motivation through each character's behavior?
- Does the scene have a catalyst or inciting incident at the beginning? (Usually, scenes do.)
- Does new information come out in the middle, spinning it off in another direction? (Often, scenes do.)
- Does the scene build to a climax?
- How are you going to make it funnier or more dramatic?

Stay away from the clichés and easy solutions. Do the unexpected. Add a twist. Scenes normally depend upon action, rather than dialogue. Use complications, obstacles and sudden reversals. Use character relationships, subtext. What's happening under the mask? (But remember that subtext may go over the heads of the preschool gang.)

WHERE TO START AND END YOUR SCENE

Although scenes usually have a beginning, a middle and an end, you can choose to cut off any one or two of these to make your scene more effective. The beginning or ending of a scene is often unnecessary, and the scene is better without it. You want to come in late and leave early, cutting off any exposition or filler that isn't absolutely needed. You only need the essence. And in comedy you need the gags! Individual scenes can be as long or as short as is necessary to tell the story and fit into the pacing of the whole. But young children have a short attention span. Short scenes with lots of action, gags and characters that are kid relatable help to keep your script on track. Once you've made your main point, the



Character motivation and plot should be developed in every scene. Here it looks like Franklin is getting something to think about. © Nelvana Limited.

scene is over. Nothing should be extraneous!

THE OPENING SCENE

Often this is a gag scene in a comedy, a scary action scene in a mystery, a character-developing scene in a feature. Usually, beginnings and endings of scripts have some relationship to each other. For cartoons it's best if this opening scene can advance the plot...with the star...on the first page. In a shorter cartoon we want to know what the star wants, who opposes him, and what terrible thing will happen if the star doesn't obtain his goal...and we want to know it right away. What does the star have to face and how is he handling it? In a feature you have more time to develop character and set mood in the opening scene. We must like your characters well enough to take this journey with them and root for them to win. Grab the audience in the opening scene or they won't stay around for the rest of the story. A teaser or action opening keeps the audience glued to their seats. Series like *Rocket Power* and *Jackie Chan Adventures*



Jackie Chan Adventures typically kicks off each episode with an action scene. TM & © 2001 Adelaide Productions, Inc.

often have action during or even before the opening credits. And get into the story right away. You can fill in any missing pieces later.

EACH SCENE

Each scene should be visually interesting and never talky (unless this is specifically a talky animation series). Plot points should be made visually. Show, don't tell! Cut anything that won't keep the kids rolling on the floor with laughter, sobbing into their Kleenex, or sitting on the edge of their seats with their mouths gaping like a farm boy at his first sighting of alien crop circles. Cartoons should be funny all the way through; even the adventure stories usually have funny scenes and a general sense of humor. Put in all your motivations. What's the motivation of the story in general? What's the motivation of the star and the villains? Why? Add complications to these motivations for both. Why does the witch need her brew right now? How does the ghost appear? Inquiring minds want to know! Give your hero difficult choices. Add powerful imagery and symbols where you can. Where a scene takes place can affect mood. Keep descriptions to a line or two. Each scene should be easily understood by the viewers and by others who work with the script (executives, production crew, etc.). Avoid complicated

visual ideas, subtleties, unknown objects or actions where a lot of explanation is necessary. Adding complications to the plot doesn't mean adding complications to confound the viewer. Be clear. Remember to let one of your characters read any signs you might have, as your international viewers may not be able to read English, and the younger kids may not be able to read at all.

FITTING THE SCENES TOGETHER

Normally, one scene should lead us into the next. An action in one scene can lead to a reaction in the next. At the end of the scene you want your audience eager to find out what will happen next. An image or sound at the beginning of a scene can remind us of an image or sound from the one we just saw. Each scene fits into the rhythm of the whole. For overall pacing action scenes may need to be broken up with a quiet character building scene or a comedy scene, especially early in the script. Vary your scenes and your sequences of scenes. Vary locations. Vary shots. Go back and forth between action and character insight, comedy and action, the negative and the positive. Vary scene lengths. Vary pace. Look at your scenes. Would they be more effective rearranged in another order, or would it be better to combine some of them? Use your best storytelling instincts to make your story compelling, moving, action filled and funny! Build to a big climax. Then tie up the loose ends, quickly. And leave them giggling with a gag! ■

JEAN ANN WRIGHT *has been teaching animation writing and development since 1996 and currently teaches for Women In Animation and The Animation Academy. Recently, she started her own consulting business. She's sold her writing to DIC, Filmation and Hanna-Barbera. She enjoys serving on the Los Angeles board of Women In Animation and judging for the Emmys and the Annies.*

Avoiding Time Vampires

CAREER COACH



**OBSERVE THESE RULES TO
AVOID BEING A TIME VAMPIRE.**

IN OCTOBER, WE CELEBRATE HALLOWEEN — A TIME WHEN WE CAN masquerade as vampires. But one kind of vampire is out all year — the time vampire. What is a time vampire? It's someone who continually takes up lots of your time, keeping you from doing other stuff in your life. This person is not a friend, but a fiend — taking all he or she can from you and offering little, if anything, in return. Here's how to deal with time vampires and make sure you do not become one yourself.

Time vampires lurk on the phone.

PHONE TRICKS

LEAVING MESSAGES

When leaving a message, be succinct but provide enough information so the person receiving the message can take appropriate action. If you have a question, ask it. If you have information, give it. Speak clearly and leave your full name and full phone number, including the area code. Speak slowly and loudly enough and repeat the number so the person can return the call. Never assume the person has your number.

To avoid playing phone tag, leave a specific time you can be reached by phone, if you need to speak in person. If you don't need to speak in person or don't need a return call, say so. But leave a message stating what you need and any action required.

If you expect a return call, please have an operable answering machine. If you are on the phone a lot (like I am) or online a lot (like me), look into getting a voice mail system which eliminates the need for call waiting and for an answering machine. You'll never miss a call again, even if you have roommates or teenagers using the phone.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

When you reach a person by phone, identify yourself with your full name and the reason for your call. Be conscious of the other person's time and get to the point as quickly as possible.

Be pleasant and you will get a lot more accomplished in a quicker amount of time.

If you are seeking information, have a pad and paper ready to take notes.

It is rude to put someone you have called on hold while you take another call. If you must take another call, don't leave the person on hold, but ask if you can call them back again instead.

Do not start a phone conversation with "What's going on?" or "Any news?" Get to the point, don't chat. If you are calling a studio to follow up on a job application, say so. If you are calling to find out if there are jobs available in your specialty at a studio, say so. Be courteous and remember to keep your conversations brief. If necessary, set a clock next to the phone with a timer on it. Try not to stay on the phone longer than 3 minutes unless you are consulting on a large project and telecommuting.

Do not linger. Lost on how to end the call? "Thanks for your time."

TIPS FOR PHONE CALL RECIPIENTS

Return calls as promptly as possible. I like to use email because I can return calls during off hours and have a written record of the "conversation."

If you find it difficult to get anything done during the day, try not answering the phone at all, but return all calls before the end of the day. It may help to return all calls in a certain time period so that you are not interrupted by the phone during the day.

If you receive professional calls on your answering machine or service, be sure you leave a professional outgoing message identifying yourself and the number called.

Don't hesitate to cut off telephone solicitors quickly. If you feel bad about this, realize that their time is valuable too. Since you are not interested, let them get to the next call as soon as possible.

CELL PHONES

When meeting someone face to face, don't take a call.

Don't use your cell phone when doing something else to which you should devote attention. If you must use your cell phone while waiting in line at the grocery store or bank, make sure that you end the call before you get to the front of the line. If you are not done with the call, let the people behind you go in front of you until you finish.

Observe these rules to avoid being a time vampire. Don't associate with people who violate these rules. They are time vampires who will devour every last drop of your precious time.

Thanks for your time. It's been a treat. ■

PAMELA THOMPSON is a career coach and recruiter. She speaks regularly at colleges and universities on career issues. She does not have a cell phone or pager but she still spends too much time on the phone and answering email.

AWN'S ONLINECHAT IS NOW LIVE!

AWN is pleased to announce that our online chat room is open! So, drop in, start a discussion and get to know your animation comrades around the world. Be sure to check in regularly for an opportunity to chat with noted animators and industry professionals scheduled to appear.

<http://www.awn.com/vchat>

ANIMATION TUTORIAL

HOW TO DRAW ANIMATION: Shoulder Motion

MY BOOK, *HOW TO DRAW ANIMATION*, HAS FOUND ITS WAY into many animation classrooms. So I was delighted when the people at Animation World, a Website I frequent, asked me if they could reproduce some of the art from the book. My aim in creating the book was to marry art instruction with appealing characters. Appealing characters lie at the heart of animation; and it always struck me that unless you create great characters, it's pointless to put so much energy into making them move. If you are interested in learning more about character design (both cartoony and semi-realistic types), as well as in creating fluid, convincing motion based on fundamentals and more advanced techniques, then give these pages a look. Although the examples given are of 2D animation, the same principles may carry over to 3D.

Last month we covered "Acting and Dialogue." This month I am going to conclude with a look at shoulder motion...a frequently misunderstood concept.

The motion of the shoulder is often misunderstood. The chest is *not* a square box with the arms sticking right out of the corners, no matter which way the figure is reaching. Amazingly, the only point where the shoulder bones actually connect to the main skeleton is at the spot where the clavicle, or collar bone, meets the sternum, or breast bone (see fig.46-2).

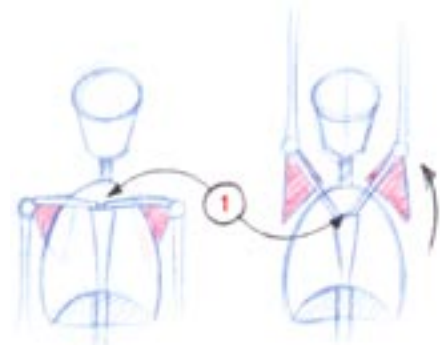
The scapula (shoulder blade) moves around freely and can assume some surprising positions.

And so concludes our six excerpts from Chris Hart's text. If you'd like to read more of his animation tips, they can be found in: How to Draw Animation by Christopher Hart. New York, New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, a division of VNU Business Media, Inc., 1997. 144 pages. ISBN: 0-8230-2365-6 (US\$19.95) ■

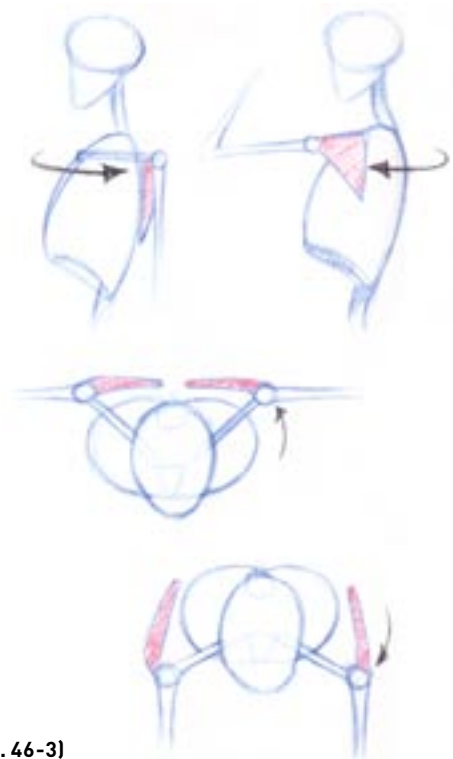
CHRISTOPHER HART has written and illustrated many successful "how to" cartoon and animation books for Watson-Guptill, in addition to writing for many studios and networks like NBC, Showtime, 20th Century Fox, MGM and others. He is also the author and on-screen host of a popular art instruction CD-ROM series. Hart has worked in animation, comic strips (Blondie), and magazines, including contributing regularly to Mad Magazine.



(fig. 46-1) All images © Christopher Hart; illustration by Chrystal Klabunde.



(fig. 46-2)



(fig. 46-3)

Cool Comic-Con 2002

EVENT REVIEW



ANY SUCCESSFUL PARTY HOST WILL TELL YOU THAT THE magic ingredient to making your bash successful is that elusive quotient: cool. You can't plan for it, you can't fake it and you can't manufacture it. If you're lucky and have brought together the right people and circumstances, something cool might just happen. This year's Comic-Con International, held August 1-4 in San Diego, broke attendance records. Held in the football field length Convention Center, crowds swarmed the multitude of exhibitor booths, screenings, panel discussions and workshops. At one point on Saturday the registration line was reported to be over a mile long! With all that activity something special had to be going on. We invited five attendees, writers Mark Evanier and Scott M. Gimple, animation executives Jason VanBorssum and Scott Mitchell Rosenberg, and anime expert Fred Patten to share the cool things they experienced at Comic-Con this year.



With 63,000 visitors on hand, this year's Comic-Con broke all attendance records. Above, Syd Mead signs books at the AWN booth. Photos courtesy of Dan Sarto.

THE ABSOLUTE COOLEST THING THAT I SAW AT THE 2002 SAN DIEGO COMIC-CON WAS THE ENTHUSIASM OF EVERYONE THERE.— SCOTT MITCHELL ROSENBERG



One from the heart: Mark Evanier's cool pick was the emotional reception author Ray Bradbury received. Photo courtesy of Mark Evanier.

ANIME AND MANGA SEEM TO HAVE DEFINITELY "ARRIVED."

— FRED PATTEN



Cornerstone Animation brought Big Idea's direct-to-video *Larryboy* to superhero life at its Glendale studios. © Big Idea Productions.

MARK EVANIER

Mark Evanier is an animation writer (Garfield), comic book writer (Groo the Wanderer) and historian.

I was honored to moderate a mess of panels at the convention, all of which were enormous fun and some of which were highly enlightening. But the moment that stands out is from when I got to introduce Ray Bradbury to an audience of a couple of thousand admirers. Mr. Bradbury was confined to a wheelchair due to recent illness and it seemed like a miracle that he was there at all. But we got him up the stairs and onto the stage and, when I said his name in introduction, the crowd leaped to its collective feet and just applauded and applauded and applauded. I suppose if you heard it or saw a videotape, it would look like any kind of wild, tumultuous applause. But standing up there right next to Mr. Bradbury, seeing the sparkle in the eyes of all in the first few rows (as far back as I could see) and seeing all that it meant to Ray...well, that wasn't just a cool moment to be remembered for a while, then discarded. That was a keeper.

FRED PATTEN

Fred Patten has written on anime for fan and professional magazines since the late 1970s. A regular contributor to AWN.com, he has also written the liner notes for Rhino Entertainment's The Best of Anime music CD (1998), was a contributor to The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons, 2nd Edition, ed. by Maurice Horn (1999) and Animation in Asia and the Pacific, ed. by John A. Lent (2001).

The coolest thing that I saw was definitely the increased presence of anime & manga. There were several huge displays on the level that previously only the major American comic book publishers like DC and Marvel had: A.D.V. Films' launch of its new Newtype USA anime magazine with its free premiere issue; the TOKYOPOP "Mangaland" booth; Bandai and Pioneer both handing out DVD samplers of their anime titles; Viz launching its American edition of a popular Japanese manga magazine; and others. Anime and manga seem to have definitely "arrived."

JASON VANBORRSUM, PRESIDENT & CEO, CORNERSTONE ANIMATION INC.

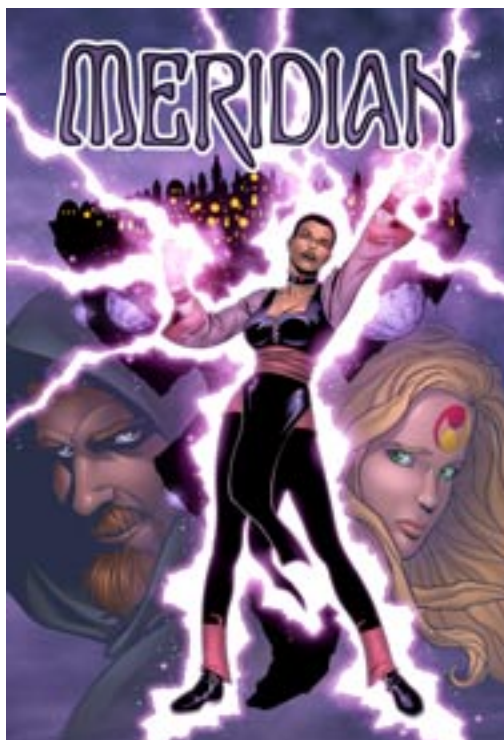
Based in Glendale, Calif., Cornerstone Animation Inc. is a full-service animation company providing CG, traditional and Flash animation for film, TV, interactive games and the Web. Cornerstone's clients include The Walt Disney Company, Focus on the Family, Mattel, Fox Television and Big Idea Productions.

The Cornerstone Animation contingent at this year's Comic-Con included Larry Whitaker (Chief Creative Officer), Bill Dely (Art Director & Co-founder) and myself. We were absolutely blown away by the vibrant excitement at Comic-Con this year, and with the expanded size and scope of the San Diego Convention Center.

But the coolest thing we saw, hands down, was the CrossGen Comics booth. The word "booth" doesn't accurately describe CrossGen's set-up, however. "Pavilion" is more like it! Cornerstone's principals were on hand to publicly announce our acquisition of the film & TV rights to CrossGen's hit comic *Meridian*, and we were impressed to see that the CrossGen execs took a backseat to the artists and creative staff who were on hand to meet and interface directly with the fans.

WE WERE IMPRESSED TO SEE THAT THE CROSSGEN EXECS TOOK A BACKSEAT TO THE ARTISTS AND CREATIVE STAFF

— JASON VANBORRSUM



CrossGen is moving to the big screen with two upcoming projects: Cornerstone Entertainment acquired *Meridian* (left), while *The Way of the Rat* (above) will be produced by Branded Entertainment for DreamWorks. *Meridian*® and CrossGeneration Comics® are registered, copyrights and trademarks 1999-2000. CrossGenerations Comics, Inc. All rights reserved. Reuse and/or reproduction in any form are prohibited. Used with permission.

With their signature yin-and-yang-like sigil shining above the action like a beacon, CrossGen was a constant draw for an endless stream of fans, media representatives and industry professionals alike. More buzz than a beehive!

SCOTT M. GIMPLE

Scott M. Gimple is the creator/executive producer of Fillmore!, currently showing on the ABC Kids Saturday morning cartoon block. Along with writer-artist Bill Morrison, Mr. Gimple is also readying Heroes Anonymous, a new bimonthly comic from Bongo Comics to be published in 2003.

I'm not a huge *Star Trek* fan *per se*, but every year without fail, I make time to attend the sublime "Klingon Lifestyles" panel. For the uninitiated, the "panel" consists of fairly elaborately made-up and costumed men, women and kids, putting on the equivalent of a Klingon-version of *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

These latex-foreheaded folks go for it — yes, some of them require hits off of their asthma inhalers during the show, but dammit, THEY GO FOR IT! As the show started, one young fellow in a Sandman shirt began heckling. Suddenly, a teen with dyed hair and an ironically-worn Jar Jar shirt whipped around to face the Kling-Heckler. He passionately, angrily made his point that making fun of forty year old men dressed like Klingons was as bad as what the "regular people" do to "Comic-Con people" in the "outside world." (That's the gist I got between the obscenities, at least.)



Kling-heckling added drama to the "Klingon Lifestyles" panel at Comic-Con this year. Photo courtesy of Scott M. Gimple.

The Kling-Heckler sat in embarrassed uncomfortable silence. The Atticus Finch of Comic-Con turned back around. Up on the stage, a heavyset Klingon in glasses made an obscure joke about Romulans. It was a surreal, wonderful moment. It was the coolest thing I saw at Comic-Con.

SCOTT MITCHELL ROSENBERG, FOUNDER & CHAIRMAN, PLATINUM STUDIOS.

Platinum specializes in identifying comic book properties that adapt well to the big and small screens. Among Platinum's projects are Men in Black and Showtime's sci-fi series, Jeremiah.



Cowboys & Aliens is a comic book that Platinum Studios is currently developing as a feature film.™ & © Platinum Studios, LLC.

The absolute coolest thing that I saw at the 2002 San Diego Comic-Con was the enthusiasm of everyone there. Really...this was the highest-attended Comic-Con ever, and everyone was "into" it. I noticed fans with smiles on their faces, and an eagerness toward meeting with creators, meeting publishers and visiting the small press tables to see what's coming out. What was on most fans' minds? That comics, creatively speaking, are at a fantastic point right now. It's cool to read them, and cool to be a part of them.

Creators were smiling too. Why not? With the success of comic book characters in other mediums now booming (although they've been in other mediums for over 50 years!), creators are having an easier time now getting their stories published, and then getting in front of TV/movie development people. And nope, it's not about money — it's about seeing their characters brought to life.

So...what's cool are comic book characters — both those that make them and those that enjoy them. ■

DARLENE CHAN is managing editor of Animation World Magazine. After receiving a bachelor's degree from UCLA, Darlene happened into the motion picture business and stayed for 14 years. She served as a production executive for Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures, Davis Entertainment and Motown. She produced *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) for Warner Bros. In 2000, she joined Animation World Magazine.

FUTURA

BYD MEAD IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST SOUGHT AFTER VISUAL FUTURISTS CREATED THE LOOK FOR MOVIES LIKE *BLADE RUNNER*, *TRON* AND *MISSION TO MARS*.



BYD'S MOST POPULAR BOOKS, *OBLAGON* AND *SENTURY* ALONG WITH LIMITED EDITIONS OF "THE 200TH RUNNING OF THE KENTUCKY DERBY" (LITHOGRAPH SIGNED AND NUMBERED) AND OTHER HARD TO FIND POSTERS AVAILABLE IN THE [AWN STORE!](http://www.awn.com/awnstore/)

[HTTP://WWW.AWN.COM/AWNSTORE/](http://www.awn.com/awnstore/)

WORDS OF ADVICE

Producing Animation in the Third Millennium

ALMOST EVERY MAJOR MOVIE THAT WE SEE TODAY INCORPORATES, IN SOME FASHION, AN ANIMATED COMPLEMENT OR MAKE-OVER.

DRIVING ALONG THE HIGHWAY THROUGH BURBANK, California, if you don't blink, you might glimpse the heavenward spire of an overgrown sorcerer's hat. This *Fantasia*-inspired architectural curiosity sits perfectly at home on the Walt Disney Feature Animation studio lot, and it is where Mr. Roy Disney himself sets up office everyday. It also happened to be the venue for a special industry event on August 17, 2002, sponsored by the New Media Council of the Producer's Guild of America. The focus of the day's seminar? Something unassumingly titled, "Producing Animation in the 21st Century."

Naturally, one hundred years ago, it would have been impossible for animating entrepreneurs to imagine how the medium would look today — or, for that matter, the cultural context in which it would be created and commercialized. So, it is with a similar sanguine myopia that we squint toward the next one hundred years, and continue in the great animation tradition for imagining the impossible.

The four-hour panel discussion was expertly hosted and moderated by Catherine Winder, noted co-author of *Producing Animation* (Focal Press, 2001). Winder has served as a creative executive with Fox Animation, helping to oversee the establishment of Blue Sky Studio's feature development. Winder was also the founding producer of HBO Animation and its acclaimed animated series Todd McFarlane's *Spawn*; as well as the producer of Peter Chung's *Aeon Flux* for MTV.



Joel Kuwahara, producer of WB's *Mucha Lucha*, would like to see television animation revitalized with more independent projects instead of remakes of older properties. Photo credit: James Ng.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MANY ASPECTS

The day's event was intended, in part, to explore the breadth of animation currently being produced. With this in mind, the panel was introduced, and asked to give their seasoned insight on "their" present-day niche within the industry.

Don Hahn, whose distinguished career with Walt Disney Studios began in 1976 on *Pete's Dragon*, has helped to produce such films as *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, among others. Hahn spoke briefly on the increasing overlap, and blurring, of live-action and animated filmmaking. The techniques for one kind of filmmaking almost inevitably benefit the other: whether in terms of using live-action editing styles, camera movements and other "visual language" in animated stories; or using

Walker offered an overview for how traditional 2D skills and processes are translating into the increasingly favorable and 'sexy' medium of 3D animation. In contrast to the typically rigid, linear planning associated with 2D films, 3D animation allows for a bit more freedom and flexibility. Whereas 2D animation involves only designing environments that the camera will see, 3D building, texturing and lighting generally requires much more attention to the tiniest possible details of a shot. In some respects this is good, because one can essentially then shoot "coverage" for their scene. Yet, in trying to streamline the 3D process, some of the 2D sensibility for shot planning is coming into play, such that a team can scale back on the amount of global detail that its modelers and texture artists need to create.

Charles Grosvenor earned his stripes at Hanna-Barbera from 1978

GIVEN OFTENTIMES SMALL OR NONEXISTENT BUDGETS, SHORT FILMS REQUIRE A GREAT AMOUNT OF DISCIPLINE AND COMMITMENT.

storyboards, animatics, digital effects and set construction in live-action. Almost every major movie that we see today incorporates, in some fashion, an animated complement or make-over.



Lori Forte, producer of *Ice Age*, feels that humor is one of the most important traits an animation producer can possess. Photo credit: Sam Urdank. © 2002 Twentieth Century Fox. All rights reserved.

Lori Forte, who also began her career with Disney, was the producer behind Fox Animation's *Ice Age*, shepherding the project from script to screen. Forte gave her perspective and experience on what it means to bring a story idea all the way from development through delivery. Unlike other mediums (e.g., television or even live-action features), the process for crafting an animated story can sometimes be downright glacial, which suits her just fine. From a creative

standpoint, being able to mold and hone a story over the several years of its production is not only challenging, but rewarding.

John Walker, formerly an associate producer with Warner Bros. on *The Iron Giant* and *Osmosis Jones*, is currently a producer with Pixar, working on Brad Bird's new action-adventure comedy *The Incredibles*.

through 1992, first as model designer and layout artist, and then later as supervisor and associate producer for such television series as *The Pink Panther* and *The Smurfs*. Now, for the last several years, Grosvenor has served as the producer and director for Universal Studio's successful direct-to-video franchise *The Land Before Time*.

Grosvenor discussed the pipeline for creating home video features, explaining that the process is very straightforward without much time or room to reinvent the wheel. Still, even within its modest budget, with proper planning and strategic use of resources, a quality of vision can be brought to the final product, both in terms of artistry and story.

Richard Raynis has produced extensively in both animated primetime television for *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill* and *Futurama*, and in children's television for *Men in Black*, *Ghostbusters* and *Starship Troopers*, to name a few shows. While differentiating between the two kinds of programming, Raynis emphasized the live-action half-hour comedy format that much of today's adult-targeted animation is built on. He explained that, for traditional 2D television series, following the standard production model of the last 15-20 years, much of the story is worked out



Charles Grosvenor, producer/director of the direct-to-video franchise *The Land Before Time*, explained in detail the process of creating home video features. Photo credit: Flammarion Ferreira.

and refined during pre-production, before being shipped overseas for actual animation.

Joel Kuwahara, who oversaw animation production at Icebox.com, brought to the table a glimpse into *Mucha Lucha*, the frenetic and flamboyant Flash-animated kids show, which is leading Kids WB! to a number one ratings spot. With a roughly \$300,000 budget and 8 weeks schedule per episode, Kuwahara highlighted the differences in production methodology of Flash-based versus traditional properties. Macromedia's Flash software is used in building character models, storyboard and backgrounds, and then this pre-production is shipped, via ftp, overseas for animation. Dailies are received, again via ftp, with some in-house fixes and revisions made at the end of the whole process. The overall pipeline remains in the computer, from start to finish, helping to shave off time and money in producing the show. Unlike the slower process of traditional television animation,

butterflies flutter around the visitor's silhouetted form, coming to rest on the edge of the shadow or to dance away, as appropriate.

Stephen Fossati, last but not least, co-founded Chuck Jones Film Productions with Chuck and Linda Jones, producing theatrical short cartoons for Warner Bros., and executive producing Chuck Jones' online series *Timberwolf*. Currently developing a computer animated television series based on the well-known work of writer and illustrator Edward Gorey, called *Gorey Tellers*, Fossati talked about the merits and challenges of working on short-form animation. Given oftentimes small or nonexistent budgets, short films require a great amount of discipline and commitment. It can be difficult to go back and make changes once production is under way, so it is essential, Fossati suggests, to plan "down to the frame" every intended movement and moment. Perhaps one of the failures of many short animations, including those produced for

the Internet, has been a lack of rigor in taking short-form animation seriously, with the attendant challenge for crafting a complete story, with beginning, middle and end.

WITH A ROUGHLY \$300,000 BUDGET AND 8 WEEKS SCHEDULE PER EPISODE, KUWAHARA HIGHLIGHTED THE DIFFERENCES IN PRODUCTION METHODOLOGY...

with its inevitable rushed retakes, more accurate and timely creative feedback can be given, according to Kuwahara, using the digital production model.



"Trans-media" opportunities was the subject of Obie Scott Wade's talk. Photo credit: Timothy Fielding.

Because the animation files are vector-based, the show is also immediately available for scaling and outputting to various platforms of distribution.

Obie Scott Wade is presently a development consultant for Disney TV Animation, as well as a writer on projects for other studios. Wade, formerly the creator and producer of the award-winning Web series *Julius and Friends*, based on the characters of Paul Frank's clothing franchise, broached an insightful and inspired

look into the potential of "trans-media" (i.e., the opportunity to extend a property across various markets of commerce and exhibition). In articulating his fascination and interest for creating "immersive spaces" (for example, for museums and theme parks), Wade described one interactive exhibit he helped to produce, where a computer tracks the shape, position and movement of a visitor's shadow against a screen. From this information, animated

EVERYONE HAS AN OPINION!

From here, the conversation opened up to an overview of producing for animation, in more general terms, with a question being posed and then everyone throwing in their ideas and opinions. I'll recount the answers to three of the most pressing questions.

While it is assumed that producers have creative control over production, this, as Don Hahn light-heartedly admits, is an illusion. The fact remains that any show is a huge collaboration, with directors, artists, executives and technicians all contributing. Rarely will a project be the singular vision of one individual. (At the end of the day, this is part of the magic and miracle of the medium, in cajoling out of the slow-motion emergency of production some collective act of creation.) What, then, are the traits of a good animation producer?

Without hesitation, Lori Forte answers, "Humor!" Over the haul of four years, one has to help maintain enthusiasm and focus, "in mediating and compromising among everyone, with as much grace and patience as you can muster."

Stephen Fossati agrees: "Patience. It's such a long process, from concept to completion, you have to constantly remind yourself that even though you're bored seeing [the project] for months and months, the audience will still appreciate it."

"You have to work with everyone to include them in ownership of the film," Don Hahn comments. A producer serves as a kind of buffer or middle man,

“YOU HAVE TO WORK WITH EVERYONE TO INCLUDE THEM IN OWNERSHIP OF THE FILM.” — DON HAHN



Veteran Disney animation executive Don Hahn spoke about the overlap between live-action and animated filmmaking. Photo credit: Eric Charbonneau.
© Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Hahn says, “in protecting artists and executives in each of their sides of the process.”

Because so many intensely creative minds are involved, Charles Grosvenor remarks, “It is a very delicately balanced team, and has to be respected.”

John Walker says, “Setting priorities is paramount. It is a very delicate process, getting everyone to work together. Quality itself is never a problem. Artists, by their nature, seek to do their best work. It’s usually more a problem of too much quality, in one place. We need artists who are creative, but who are also able to work within parameters, limitations of budget and schedule, and who can accept direction.”

In pitching animation ideas to studios or executives, the consensus was to “sell your vision.” What kinds of properties are producers considering and choosing for animation?

Lori Forte answers, “Things that would be impossible or prohibitive in live-action ... coupled with engaging characters and story, of course. I tend to look for features that appeal to all ages.”

Don Hahn adds, “Plus, animation should provide an iconic world, or fantasy space, that you can inhabit...”

“Artistically,” John Walker suggests, “we can do more here in the States than we have, as already done in Japan.” Perhaps in echo of the rhetorical question of why paint a tree when you can photograph it, Walker comments, “It’s like what Brad Bird says, in that animation offers the same possibilities, or more, than live-action. Brad just happens to prefer to tell his stories through animation.”

In approaching or encouraging financiers to invest in a film, what distinguishes a project with a \$5 million budget versus one with \$50 million?

Everyone agreed that animation, from an investment standpoint, is a high-risk business, but one with potentially great returns, in the form of ancillary materials, video rentals, serialization, and the like. The common wisdom deems that you get what you pay for, but when looking at films such as those of Hayao Miyazaki, one realizes that cost does not have to limit artistic integrity. Conversely, a lot of money does not guarantee that a film will be entertaining, successful, or have a good story.

Lastly, in the opinion of the panelists, what is the state of the animation industry?

"SETTING PRIORITIES IS PARAMOUNT."**— JOHN WALKER**

For television, says Richard Raynis, "There has been a lull for primetime, and a movement towards 'branding,' as seen with Cartoon Network."

Joel Kuwahara says, "I understand that recycling older properties is done for purely business purposes, but I would like to see more independent properties given a chance to grow, a chance to revitalize television animation."

In being able to take advantage of asset libraries, more 3D television animation may also be on the way, if costs can be amortized over the course of forty episodes, or mitigated with the help of overseas studios.

The Internet seems, for the time being anyway, to be defunct with regards to commercial animation. There is some indication, however, that the revenue model is changing, returning to the successful early paradigm of television, where shows were individually sponsored by companies or promotionally underwritten by other funding sources.

As far as direct-to-video animation is concerned, we can expect more of the same. Original properties, without "pre-awareness," may have a difficult time finding a market, but with steady video and DVD sales, including the persistent and pioneering example of Big Idea's "VeggieTales" franchise, the opportunity is real.

Concerning big screen feature work, everyone felt that 2D animation would always be around, and not elbowed out of existence by an encroaching 3D style. It is ultimately a matter of directorial choice, and both styles serve as interesting and strong ways to tell their stories.

WRAP-UP

Following the day's panel discussion, which was filled with informational gems, given the special venue of the event, we were treated to a handful of clips from Disney's upcoming animated feature *Treasure Planet*. (Hint: Martin Short's robot character may appear 2D, but he is 3D-constructed and animated, and seamlessly integrates with the other onscreen 2D action. "Ah," we nod in recognition, "the future.") All seminar attendees were also treated to a stack of film titles on DVD, generously donated by the participating studios, including Universal Studios, Disney and Twentieth Century Fox. Now those were some nice bonuses!

As we sit, however uncomfortably, on the cusp between the 20th and 21st centuries, we can rest in the knowledge that, as long as we have life in our



Richard Raynis, producer of both primetime and children's animation television, sees corporate branding as a major trend in TV animation today. Photo courtesy of Richard Raynis.

lungs and stories to share, animation will have a growing and vibrant future in our culture's media.

With other fledgling outlets for animation only beginning to peek-a-boo over the horizon of our fancy and imagination, including portable devices, on-demand programming channeled through our televisions and game consoles, or some real-time holographic deck where we will all congregate, the possibilities are beyond our immediate forecast. Sometimes, truly, the future is not only stranger than we imagine; it is stranger than we can imagine. ■

The New Media Council was formed in May 2002 to encourage the confluence of traditional and new media entertainment. Council members are some of the most experienced producers and production leaders in the fields of digital filmmaking, iTV, animation, gaming and Web development. The Council serves as both a resource to those interested in learning more about the New Media Council's practice areas, and as collaborators with conventional producers interested in expanding their production and/or distribution capabilities. The seminar was produced by PGA New Media Council board members: Iyan Bruce and James Fino.

For more information about the PGA and their upcoming events, visit their Website at: <http://www.producersguild.org>.

GREG SINGER lives in Los Angeles and loves animation.

CINEMA REVIEW



Spirited Away to the Working World

Miyazaki's unique visual style is rich and complex when compared to other animated movies. All images © 2002 Nibariki. TGNDTM. All rights reserved.

SPIRITED AWAY IS ALSO, SURPRISINGLY, ONE OF THE BEST FILMS MADE ABOUT ENTERING THE WORK FORCE.



Director Hayao Miyazaki's work always contains a nurturing sense of humanity and kindness, even when the world is dark and full of malevolence.

HAYAO MIYAZAKI'S *SPIRITED AWAY* STARTS OFF WITH A VERY LARGE detour. Ten-year-old Chihiro is in the back of a car, driven by her parents, traveling toward a new home in a new town. On the way, they are strangely drawn to a beguiling, and apparently deserted, town. Chihiro is creeped out by the place, but her parents insist on exploring, and they eventually find a restaurant with platefuls of delicious food lying about. Chihiro has no interest in eating any of it, but her parents dig in, and turn into pigs. Not figuratively, either. They sprout snouts and curlicue tails, and chop-sticks become useless: mom and dad slouch to the ground, suddenly quadrupedal. Night falls, and the inhabitants of the town slowly come into focus: a grand parade of spirits, gods and witches, crystallizing out of the air.

It's here, in the exploration of the spirit world, that *Spirited Away* spreads out into one of the most visually baroque films ever made. Its look and density are so unique, rather than comparing it to other films, I found myself comparing it to paintings: intricate Byzantine art, or ancient Buddhist frescoes of the universe — religious art suggesting transparent skyscrapers or towering hives honeycombed with buzzing spirits — windows opening onto fantastic figures, each one particular and strange, each inhabiting its own individual corner of the vast cosmological blueprint.

A WORLD OF TERROR

It would be easy to get lost in the thicket of detail, as Chihiro herself feels lost, but Miyazaki understands that one can give free reign to the imagination, so long as there is one primary hinge, one central conceit, that the fantasy swings on. As well as being an inventive fantasy in the mold of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Spirited Away* is also, surprisingly, one of the best films made about entering the work force. In order to free her parents from their porcine slavery (and to

MIYAZAKI HAS TRANSCENDED SCENE STRUCTURE, AND THE ONLY WAY TO “EMULATE” HIS EXAMPLE IS TO DIVE DEEP INTO ONE’S OWN UNCONSCIOUS.

divert them from their eventual destination of some spirit-figure’s dinner plate), Chihiro has to throw herself on the scant mercy of Mistress Yubaba. Yubaba is a witch who runs the town, and more particularly its bathhouse, where the Shinto-like gods of the surrounding countryside come to get washed. Chihiro must work in the bathhouse to win her parents’ freedom.

And here is the hinge that *Spirited Away*’s fantastic world swings on: the bizarre, endlessly fecund spirit-world is actually the “mundane” adult world, seen from the margins — at the gate of entry, as it were, with all its grotesquerie and strangeness fresh and intact.

The work at the bathhouse is like most work embarked upon at the beginning of one’s employed existence, at the bottom of the ladder, with no skills or training to one’s credit. It’s work made up of dimly understood responsibilities and routine humiliations. I’ve never worked in a bathhouse, but with stints at janitorial and dishwashing work long-buried on my resume, Chihiro’s bathhouse posture brought back pungent memories: back bent over, sleeves rolled up, arms up to the elbow in other peoples’ muck.

Those who have been at the work for a longer time, who have made a home there, make up a society geared to codes and habit that seem, to the greenhorn, as impenetrable as the rituals of a long-dead religious order. The more humanoid creatures who work in the bath house — and Yubaba herself — have strangely proportioned, outsized faces that look like masks (the painted makeup on the women heightens this effect) — just as age becomes a mask. In the adult world, personalities have settled into place. Possibility has ossified into actuality.

Along the borders of the story are more disorienting nightmares of adulthood. Child-rearing gets a nod when Chihiro is locked in a room with a buffalo-sized baby (it seems a possibility he might eat her whole). She is given a taste of the daily commute



Working class heroes: Chihiro (left) and Lin, a no-nonsense bathhouse girl, clean up after a foul smelling spirit.



The assistant manager (left) and frog foreman keep a watchful eye at the bathhouse. *Spirited Away* is one of the best movies about entering the workforce.

MIYAZAKI'S PICTURE OF THE WORLD AS AN ULTIMATELY HUMANE PLACE, WITH ITS MOST ABIDING COMMUNITIES RULED BY KINDNESS, IS PROBABLY HIS CHIEF ACHIEVEMENT AS A FANTASIST.



Chihiro's parents, before they are transformed into porcine characters. Their predicament could be an allegory for when children commit parents to nursing homes.

on a tram-ride filled with ghostly gray passengers (the passengers, embarking then disembarking to their anonymous lives, are translucent as clothes that have been through the wash several times too many). Over all the activities in the bathhouse hovers the mysterious, tactile strangeness of sex, and the unpredictable metamorphoses of the body. The bathhouse clientele is composed of weird fleshy creatures — some bulbous, some pale, some disturbingly inflated or deflated — that look as if a force even greater than puberty had had its way with them.

Even the predicament of her parents carries strange echoes of adult experience. Her parents become pure animal appetite, no longer able to recognize her, moved beyond words and beyond the bonds of memory — just as Chihiro can barely recognize them, once they've been mixed in with all the other pigs at a pig-farm. It could be a pitch-black comic take on committing one's parents to the nursing home as they disappear into the haze of senility, and being confronted by the awful leveling of old age, as it erases differences of sex and personality — reducing loved ones to bodies that need to be fed, and washed, and set to sleep in their little identical cubicles.

A WORLD OF DELIGHT

All of this probably makes it sound as though *Spirited Away* is dour and downright terrifying. I certainly can't think of anything scarier than being a gainfully employed adult. But the terrific energy of Miyazaki's fantasy makes this world of terror a world of delights. And thankfully, while Miyazaki may approach things that are threatening or scary, these "negative" forces aren't fodder to manipulate his audience down the pathway of his plotting. Good and evil aren't jerry-rigged to provide an engine of "conflict" in his films: it's hard to find a bona-fide villain in his work with Studio Ghibli (the only one that can be reduced to such is the antagonist of *Laputa*). In *Spirited Away*, we come to find the tyrannical Yubaba has her own problems (for one, that buffalo-sized baby is her own), and while she may not be quite sympathetic by the end, she's become absolutely fascinating. She displays a terrific charisma that has to be admired. To neutralize her entirely would be a great disservice — the kind of Pollyanna maneuver that even kids (or maybe especially kids) know is bunk. The world can't be "solved." But it can, with the right perspective, be made a little more comprehensible, a little more enthralling.



Even though Chihiro is scared at the beginning of her journey, by film's end she is taking initiative and finding joy in her new strange world.

Miyazaki is an interesting case as a director, in that his body of work is of a very high order, and yet it's hard to single out a film of his as a "perfect" one. He has certainly directed sequences that are compressed masterpieces of timing and framing, and *Spirited Away* features one of his best: the arrival of a "stink god" at the bathhouse, who Chihiro must clean her first night on the job. This sequence is a case-study in masterful pacing, escalating on its own internal logic before delving into sly ecological commentary, and then, even more unexpectedly, jetting forward into some pure fount of dream-imagery (this is where its utility as a case-study ends — Miyazaki has transcended scene structure, and the only way to "emulate" his example is to dive deep into one's own unconscious).

MIYAZAKI'S VISION

Ultimately, though, despite the number of impressive set-pieces, *Spirited Away* becomes too much of a good thing: the intense energy of its imagery gets dissipated by the time the film meanders toward its amiably low-key resolution. Miyazaki's close friend and fellow director at Studio Ghibli, Isao Takahata, has been less prolific than Miyazaki, but he has a surer grasp of story structure, of building his sequences toward a satisfying whole (his *Grave of the Fireflies* is the best film Studio Ghibli has made). Takahata, however, doesn't seem to elicit the same amount of affection as Miyazaki, which may have to do with the fact that Takahata's personality doesn't make itself as forcefully felt through his work. The lack of focus toward the end of *Spirited Away* isn't fatal to the film — ultimately, when the movie is over, one doesn't

chiefly savor its sequences or incidents, or even the audacity of its imagination. One rather savors the worldview that seeps through it, which is an eminently kind one.

More than Miyazaki's visual motifs and thematic preoccupations, what makes his films a "body of work" is their deep-seated humaneness. Repeatedly, his movies present a somewhat threatening world that the protagonists penetrate bit by bit, and the more they understand its intricacies, the less malevolent it appears. In *Totoro*, the forest gods will whisk you to see your sick mother, convalescing in a city far away. In *Nausicaä*, the poisonous forest that seems to be taking over the world is actually purifying it. In *Laputa*, weaponized robots become keepers of a skyborne arboretum. In *Kiki's Delivery Service*, a thirteen-year-old girl arrives alone to a bustling city, to be treated as a member of an extended family. Miyazaki's picture of the world as an ultimately humane place, with its most abiding communities ruled by kindness (though the kindness might be distorted or misdirected at times), is probably his chief achievement as a fantasist.

THE U.S. VIEW

It will be interesting to see how *Spirited Away* plays with audiences of American kids. They'll certainly be less anxious than adults about issues of cultural translation. From the perspective of a *gaijin*, at least, *Spirited Away* seems very Japanese, fed by a rich folk culture that seems both fascinatingly exotic and tantalizingly obscure. One eye-popping scene, for instance, features a dragon being attacked by a swarm of paper birds. These paper birds are never



Miyazaki shows us a world of terror and a world of delight in *Spirited Away*. Here, Chihiro remembers falling into a river and nearly drowning as a young girl.

explained; one assumes they have some mythological significance. Kids, however, won't worry about it, they'll just take the scene for what it is: magic. If there are any directors more capable than Miyazaki of showing how magic looks, I'm unaware of them. After a brief sequence where Chihiro is levitated, against her will, down a long hallway of doors, and then whisked past tall, ornately painted jars standing in rows, my wife leaned over to me and whispered: "They should've hired Miyazaki to direct the Harry Potter movie."

CHIHIRO IS LESS DYNAMIC THAN MOST OF MIYAZAKI'S HEROINES, BUT HER ORDINARINESS, AND LACK OF "HEROIC" DIMENSIONS, IS PART OF HER APPEAL...

The hitch there would be that, while Miyazaki could creditably be drawn to the light-gothic European ambiance of the Harry Potter books (he's always had a weakness for castles), I think the child protagonists would fail to spark his imagination — they're romanticized in a way he'd probably find uninteresting. Some early reviews of *Spirited Away* complained that Chihiro is a dull character, but to my eyes Miyazaki has been incapable of making an uninteresting heroine since the cipher love-interest of *Castle of Cagliostro*. Chihiro is less dynamic than most of Miyazaki's heroines, but her ordinariness, and lack of "heroic" dimensions, is part of her appeal (her near-paralysis, huddled on a stair when she's first abandoned in the ghost-town, is both entirely believable and entirely sympathetic). In fact, it's her denial of self, more than any precociousness or



Chihiro encounters the mysterious and transparent "No-Face," one of the many spirits she meets during her journey.

bravado, that allows her to succeed: first, refusing the food that turns her parents to pigs, and then refusing or giving away money and magic tokens that are offered her by the mysterious figures that appear in the bathhouse. It's something so culturally alien to mainstream American entertainment, it comes across as revelatory: a heroine who ascends into the world on steps of renunciation. ■

CHRIS LANIER is an animator, writer and cartoonist living in San Francisco.

ANIME REVIEWS

New from Japan: Anime Film Reviews

AROUND 1995, JAPANESE ANIMATION (ANIME) BEGAN pouring into North America, Europe and across the globe in video form. Most of these titles were unknown outside of Japan and never covered by animation journals. Whether a title is highly popular or very obscure, a high-quality theatrical feature or a cheap and unimaginative direct-to-video release, they all look the same on a store shelf. Therefore, *Animation World Magazine* will regularly review several new releases (including re-releases not previously covered) that have merit and about which our readers should know.

Ceres, Celestial Legend. V.1, Destiny. V.2, Past Unfound. V.3, C-Genome. V.4, Resolve. V.5, The Progenitor. V.6, Double. V.7, Requiem. V.8, Denouement.

TV series (24 episodes), 2000. Director: Hajime Kamegaki. 3 episodes/75 minutes. Price & format: DVD bilingual \$29.98. Distributor: Viz Video.

Aya Mikage is an extroverted high-schooler. She and her twin brother Aki are brought to their rich grandfather's estate for their 16th birthday party. Aya is shocked when he announces that Aki is to become the new head of their clan, but she must be killed. An unexpected powerful blast levels the mansion and Aya is whisked to safety by a mysterious but handsome stranger.

This teen romantic action fantasy gets off to a rousing start as the stunned Aya discovers that everything she thought she knew about herself and her normal life is false. She is the direct descendent of Ceres, a heavenly angel who came to Earth in the distant past and married a mortal, and is now expected to reincarnate in Aya's body. Or maybe Ceres was an extraterrestrial stranded on Earth who keeps her psyche alive through alien technology. What Aya (and the audience) think they know changes from episode to episode as new legends and theories of truths behind legends are investigated. In any case, there are rival ruthless factions who are determined to possess her for her mighty supernatural or superscientific powers.



Ceres, Celestial Legend, Volumes 1-8. Cover illustration from Anime Art Gallery: *The Art of Ceres, Celestial Legend*. © Yuu Watase/Shogakukan • Bandai Visual • Studio Pierrot.

The 24-episode series (an adaptation of a popular tragic romance manga novel by Yuu Watase, animated by Studio Pierrot, broadcast April 20 - September 28, 2000) spans Aya's transformation from a carefree tomboy to a frightened young woman. The confusing-enough changes of adolescence are compounded by the fears of losing her body and mind to the emerging powerful personality of Ceres. There is the horror of isolation from family and friends, as those who hope to control Ceres murder anyone they think might aid Aya. Above all, there is romance: romantic humor as she and one teen savior, Yuhi, who try to keep their relationship on a chaste hero and rescued damsel-in-distress level, start to develop embarrassing adolescent hormonal stirrings toward each other; romantic horror as Aya's beloved brother Aki is possessed by the personality of Ceres' ancient lover and starts to attack her incestuously; romantic mystery as Toya, the handsome agent of one of her enemies, announces that he has had a change of heart and he will save her from them instead (can she believe him?). Not all of the unexpected plot twists or explanations of mythology as ancestral memories of space aliens are convincing (one of the ruthless enemies turns out to have an unselfish motive; still, a noble goal does not excuse his murderous means), but the serious attempt to keep the viewer intellectually guessing is an admirable one. By the halfway point the romance has become serious. Both Yuhi and Toya recognize that the other truly loves Aya, and each believes that the other is the better man to protect her, so the viewer is kept wondering which of them will be first to sacrifice himself unselfishly so Aya can live happily with the other.



Hamtaro. Photo credit: Cartoon Network.

Hamtaro. V.1, Hamtaro and the Ham-Hams. V.2, Ham-Hams Head Seaward. V.3, A Surprise Party! V.4, A Ham-Ham Christmas! (more to come)

TV series. Japanese premiere: TV Tokyo, July 7, 2000; most recent episode #118, October 4, 2002. U.S. premiere: The Cartoon Network, June 3, 2002. Series director: Osamu Nabeshima. 3 episodes/75 minutes. Price & format: Dubbed video \$12.98, DVD \$14.98. Distributor: Viz Video.

Ever since the success of *Pokémon*, the American TV industry has been looking for "the next *Pokémon*" from Japan. Those who are concerned about the confrontational violence inherent in TV cartoons derived from video games (*Digimon*, *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *Monster Rancher*, etc.) have been hoping for a next *Pokémon* that is kinder, cuter and cuddlier. It looks like they have found it in *Hamtaro*.

Totoko Hamtaro (usually translated as *Hamtaro's Tales*, although "totoko" — one of numerous onomatopoeic words in the Ham-Ham language — is closer to "scampering" or "trotalong") began in 1997 as illustrated children's stories by Ms. Ritsuko Kawai in *Little School Second-Grader* magazine published by Shogakukan, the educational/entertainment conglomerate also responsible for *Pokémon*. It became popular enough there that Shogakukan gave *Hamtaro* star treatment with picture books, pop-up books, origami books and hamster care books. The anime TV series, produced by Shogakukan Music & Digital Entertainment (with animation production by TMS Entertainment), premiered in July 2000. It quickly became the



Hamtaro is the kinder, gentler kin to *Pokémon*. Photo credit: Cartoon Network.

top-rated children's show on TV Tokyo and replaced *Pokémon* as the #1 licensed character in Japan. The first theatrical feature, *Trotalong Hamtaro: The Great HamHamland Adventure*, was released on December 15, 2001; it was in the box-office top ten for six weeks and grossed \$18,623,382. The second theatrical feature, *Trotalong Hamtaro: Princess HamHamHamja's Dreams!* (the promo pictures show an "Arabian Nights" setting) is scheduled for December 14, 2002. The first 52 TV episodes have been shown in the U.S. on The Cartoon Network starting in June. Shogakukan's U.S. subsidiaries, Viz Communications and ShoPro USA, are set to start releasing translations of Ms. Kawai's books and videos of the TV episodes beginning in October.

Hamtaro is a golden hamster, the pet of 10-year-old Laura (Ryoko). In the premiere episode Laura and her parents move to a new home, and she enters the 5th grade. It turns out that all her new classmates have pet hamsters, too. Hamtaro, bored at home alone, gets out of his cage and sneaks out of the house to explore his new neighborhood. He finds that all the other hamsters come out to play while their human friends are at school, too. Hamtaro, a natural leader, proposes they build a clubhouse under a big tree. The Ham-Ham Gang is not quite as numerous as *Pokémon's* 151 "gotta catch 'em all" menagerie, but there are close to two dozen hamsters (Oxnard, Pashmina, Boss, Bijou, Howdy, Jingle, Snoozer, etc.), each of whom has a distinct fur pattern and personality. Some stories feature the Ham-Hams interacting among themselves while their human friends are at school; others involve Hamtaro helping out Laura without her knowledge ("The Search for Dad's Glasses!").

Pilot Candidate. V.1, The Academy. V.2, Training. V.3, Working Together. V.4, The Test.

TV series (12 episodes), 2000. Director: Mitsuru Hongo. 3 episodes/75 minutes. Price & format: DVD bilingual \$24.98. Distributor: Bandai Entertainment.

When this debuted on Japanese TV as *The Candidate for Goddess* (12 episodes cutely numbered 0 through 11, January 11 through March 27, 2000), it was heralded for its unusually high-quality CGI sequences in the traditional cel-animation TV anime medium, as well as being an anime version of the popular sci-fi manga serial by Yukiru Sugisaki. The CGI work is of almost theatrical quality, and is emphasized in DVD extras with CGI supervisor Shinji Takagi talking about the challenges of working with CGI for a low-budget TV production. This was a co-production of the Production I.G. and Xebec animation studios; presumably the former did the CGI and the latter did the cel work.



Pilot Candidate, Volumes 1-4. © Yukiru Sugisaki-WANI BOOKS/ Bandai Visual-TCFG Committee. English adaptation © Bandai Visual. All rights reserved.



Screenshot from *Pilot Candidate*. © Yukiru Sugisaki-WANI BOOKS/Bandai Visual-TCFG Committee. English adaptation © Bandai Visual. All rights reserved.

Unfortunately, stunning CGI visuals and some imaginative clothing designs are about all that *Pilot Candidate* has to offer. The 4088 A.D. "space cadet" plot follows Rei "Zero" Enna as he and other mid-teens from various artificial space colonies come together at an interstellar training academy to learn to pilot giant battle robots against living space monsters, which threaten humanity's "holy" last habitable planet. Zero and his dorm-mates become pals (except for the one ruthless kid determined to outscore everybody else); they learn to get along with their tough-but-fatherly instructor; they come to idolize the actual robot pilots who are barely older than they are, and are traumatized when one is killed in battle; they discover that training is tougher than they imagined but they sweat it out; they face the tensions of their first real missions; and so on.

But beyond the clichés, the story is so incoherent as to imply that a *lot* of background from the original manga story has been left out. Why are all the giant battle robots built in the form of stylized Greco-Roman goddesses like the Statue of Liberty and the Clio Awards statuette; and why can there be no more than five of them? Why can only boys pilot the Goddesses (except that the ace Goddess pilot is a woman; a commented-upon but unexplained exception), while their "repairers" (mechanics) must be girls? Why are the fearsome CGI space monsters called "Victims," and why are humans barred from living on the last planet under their control? The planet is named Zion but it looks exactly like Earth; is this unimaginative art design or is it supposed to signify that Zion *is* Earth renamed? After his first

couple of weeks at the academy, Zero comments offhandedly that he is being kept so busy that he has forgotten what his mother and friends back home look like; it soon becomes clear that he really has forgotten everything about his past. This attention-getting clue that there is something mysterious about him is not followed up. Considering that the final episode ends frustratingly on a cliffhanger, these and other undeveloped plot threads suggest that *Pilot Candidate* was intended for a much longer series but was aborted early. Bad ratings, or was the budget used up by the CGI work sooner than expected? There are also incongruities that cannot be excused by an unfinished story, such as the far-future culture with strange names such as Hiead Gner and Rioroute Vilgyna, exotic architectural and clothing designs, and references to improved medicine and genetic engineering for better bodies; but the brainy nerds still wear thick glasses and people light their filter-tip cigarettes with Bics. And dig the funky American 1950s beauty-pageant style opening theme music!



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Real Bout High School. V.1, Enter the Samurai Girl. V.2, Netherworld Battle. V.3, Strange Journeys. V.4, The Final Battle.

TV series (13 episodes), 2001. Director: Shinichi Toukairin. V.1, 4 episodes/100 minutes, V.2-4, 3 episodes/75 minutes. Price & format: DVD bilingual \$29.99. Distributor: TOKYOPOP.

Adolescence is an emotionally confusing period, and *Real Bout High School* summarizes the feeling nicely in this frothy mishmash of humor, drama, historical tradition, first-romance angst, sports action, battles against demons, parody of kiddie TV you're now too old for, and adult political-suspense thrillers, in just 13 episodes. Daimon High School is a

private academy with an emphasis on confrontation. All disputes are settled by "K-Fights," ranging from formal duels in a sports ring to ninja battles that careen across the campus, refereed by Principal Todo in sports-commentator style. Sixteen-year-old Ryoko Mitsurugi is Daimon's current K-Fight champion, a tomboy who is beginning to develop romantic feelings toward her kendo (traditional wooden swords) coach Tatsuya Shishikura whom she had previously viewed as a big brother. Rivals are two previous K-Fight champs; senior Azumi Kiribayashi, a haughty traditional samurai girl who also has designs upon handsome Tatsuya; and Shizuma Kasanagi, a vulgar punk delinquent who is an expert at street-fighting martial arts. Ryoko gets a part-time job promoting a local seafood restaurant as "Magical Waitress Oyster Lulu," a parody of all the *Power Rangers*-type kiddie TV superhero programs. Then a magic pendant draws Ryoko temporarily into the fantasy world of Solvania where she must fight real demons. The first couple of times Ryoko thinks she is dreaming, but the magic soon draws Azumi and Shizuma with her into Solvania where the three must learn to work as a team. Next the monsters start to materialize in Toyko, threatening Ryoko's schoolmates and friends in battles alternating between grim and comical (when Ryoko has to fight them in her embarrassing Oyster Lulu costume). It keeps getting worse: some ruthless organization (a Mafia-type gang? a government agency?) wants to seize Ryoko's dimension-shifting power (which she can't control herself), so she must now also fight ominous *Men In Black* assailants. But simultaneously her team of friends and defenders grows, including some unlikely allies. Episodes are themed, and the viewer never knows what to expect next — fast-paced action drama, slapstick comedy, tender romance, comical romance (Tatsuya barely survives judging Ryoko's and Azumi's K-Fight cooking contest), grim horror (with the Japanese dialogue amusingly studded with some Occidental horror names like "Lord Alhazred" and demon-sword "Schwartzkaiser"), conspiracy-theory suspense, Summer beach-party silliness and more. *[Samurai Girl] Real Bout High School* was a 13-episode TV serial (July 30 - November 24, 2001) produced by Studio Gonzo, based on the manga by Reiji Saiga (story) and Sora Inoue (art) serialized in *Dragon*, one of Japan's leading role-playing gaming magazines; but with new character designs by popular anime stylist Keiji Gotoh (*Nadesico* and *Gatekeepers*, among others).



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Soul Hunter. V.1, Taikoubou's Mission. V.2, All the Queen's Men. V.3, The Spoils of War. V.4, Game of Kings. V.5, City of Fire. V.6, The One That Got Away.

TV series (26 episodes), 1999. Director: Junji Nishimura. V.1 & V. 6, 5 episodes/125 minutes; V.2-V.5, 4 episodes/100 minutes. Price & format: DVD bilingual \$29.98. Distributor: A.D.V. Films.

The Yin dynasty ruled China from about 1800 to 1100 B.C. It fell when the last Yin emperor became such a dissolute tyrant that the people rallied behind one of his nobles who became the first Chou emperor. *Soul Hunter* is a 26 episode adaptation (July 3 - December 25, 1999) of a popular manga by Ryu Fujisaki that tells this story emphasizing all the fantasy that Chinese folk tales added to it before written history, throwing in modern anachronisms for humor. Emperor Zhou was not naturally dissolute; he was enchanted by the demoness Dakki, who took the form of a beautiful concubine (portrayed as a 20th century airheaded party girl with a vicious streak). The leaders of those who rise against the Yin are not just rebelling nobles and peasant Robin Hoods; they are given magical weapons by the divine Immortals. At least half the series is spent watching all the heroes screaming, "My magic weapon is more powerful than yours!" and battling among themselves for supremacy while Dakki cutely but sadistically tortures the people with her demonic monster pets. Fans of superhero comic books will love all the macho combats using flying boots, water battleaxes, enclosing bubbles, death dust, homing missiles of stone, and the like, many of which have modern

military targeting devices. There are also several Heavenly comic-relief talking animals, although this title (rated 12+) is too bloody for young children. The nominal protagonist is Taikoubou, a cocky but naive adolescent Immortal, who is assigned to "seal away the souls" (kill) of Dakki and her 365 demonic minions who are plaguing the humans; but there are so many main characters and so many supporting characters that each DVD's extras include a "relationship tree" to list the cast and their connection to each other. There are also lengthy extras of "historical background" giving enough background on Chinese history to set the scene, and "translator notes," which gives similar background on Taoist mythology to explain the overlaid belief of the difference between the Immortal World and the Human World. (Some Immortals give humans magic weapons to fight for justice. Others give humans magic weapons just to watch them fight, manipulating humans like pawns in a fantasy role-playing game. The Immortals get into fights among themselves over their own morality. Should they interfere with humans even from noble motives, or let the humans control their own lives?) The translator notes also build up an imposing list of archaic Chinese

words for demons, gods, divine implements and magical actions, until by episode 15 or so the characters are talking about using their Kongenji or Kaitenju Paopei to houshin their adversaries and it sounds normal.

The animation by Studio Deen is barely adequate, and the convoluted plot with alliances shifting from episode to episode plus the crowded cast make the story hard to follow. But the situation is fast-paced and dramatic enough that viewers will want to watch the next episode to find out what happens next. *Soul Hunter* may also interest some viewers enough in ancient Chinese history and Chinese mythology to make them want to learn the real stuff. ■

FRED PATTEN has written on anime for fan and professional magazines since the late 1970s. He wrote the liner notes for Rhino Entertainment's *The Best of Anime* music CD (1998), and was a contributor to *The World Encyclopedia of Cartoons*, 2nd Edition, ed. by Maurice Horn (1999) and *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. by John A. Lent (2001).

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FILM REVIEWS

Fresh from the Festivals: October 2002's Film Reviews



WITHIN THE WORLD OF ANIMATION, MOST EXPERIMENTATION OCCURS within short format productions, whether they are high budgeted commercials, low budgeted independent shorts, or something in between. The growing number of short film festivals around the world attest to the vitality of these works, but there are few other venues for exhibition of them or even written reviews. As a result, distribution tends to be difficult and irregular. On a regular basis, *Animation World Magazine* will highlight some of the most interesting with short descriptive overviews.

This Month:

The Mosquito and the Horse (Estonia, 2001). 11.5 min. Dir: Mikk Rand (Estonia). Computer Graphics: Raivo Möllits. Designer: Jaanus Orgusaar. Produced as a personal project at Multi Film Ltd. and Nukufilm. Contact: Rikk Rand, Multi Film, C.R. Jakobsoni 14, Tallinn 10128 Estonia. Tel: +372 6009237. Fax: +372 6009238. Email: info@multifilm.ee. Web: <http://www.multifilm.ee>.

Tongues and Taxis (USA, 2000). 7.5 min. Dir: Michael Overbeck (USA). Produced at Rhode Island School of Design. Contact: Mike Overbeck or Hyun-Ho Kang (distributor). Email: mikeoverbeck@hotmail.com or ho@skunk.tv. Web: <http://www.mikeoverbeck.com> or <http://www.skunktv.com>.

It's Alive! (USA, 2001). 2.5 min. Dir: Terry Ziegelman (USA) and Paul George (Venezuela). Lead Anim: Stephen Johnson (USA). Technical Dir: Jamie Kirschenbaum. Produced at Savannah College of Art and Design. Contact: Terry Ziegelman. Email: z_depth@hotmail.com. Web: <http://www.itsalive3d.com>.

Caged (USA, 2002). 3 min. Dir: Ashley Hoffman (USA). Produced at the University of California, Los Angeles. Contact: Ashley Hoffman. Email: hoffmana@ucla.edu.

Shadowplay (USA, 2002). 15.5 min. Dir: Dan Blank (USA). Co-prod: Cynthia Allen. Composer: Ryan Shore. Sound Des: Clilly Castiglia. 2D Anim: Louis Mitchell, Bill Moore, Alex Woo. Contact: Dan Blank, Danmation Pictures. Email: danmation@mac.com. Web: <http://www.danmation.com>.

THE MOSQUITO AND THE HORSE

Over his ten-year career, Estonian Mikk Rand has established himself as an award-winning puppet animator, working in both the short film format and for television. In *The Mosquito and the Horse* (2001), Rand has combined a mixture of live-action and animation techniques, both traditional and computer-generated, in a film clearly reflecting the director's influences: Tim Burton, Jim Jarmusch and David Lynch.

The film's narrative is based on a traditional Estonian fairytale, telling the story of a group of mosquitoes that challenge a horse to a contest of strength. As the film begins, it evokes an almost documentary sensibility, in part through its use of voice-over narration (in English). Though the film might at first seem to be a relatively traditional work, it is not long until this impression changes, and drastically. The character design and voice recording, along with fantastically unrestricted cinematography and editing, combine with folk songs (sung in Estonian, with English subtitles) that might be described as 'quirky' or maybe just 'really odd.' Some dialogue is presented in 'word bubbles' printed on the film as well. So much is going on, on so many levels, that the film defies its viewer to look away — and who would want to? It's all wonderful. *The Mosquito and the Horse* clearly demonstrates how successful a film can be operating outside the classical Hollywood model.

The Mosquito and the Horse was made for television as a personal project within the Multi Film and Nukufilm studios, with support from the Estonian Film Foundation and the Cultural Endowment of Estonia. It employs a variety of production tools: dpsReality Animate, MAYA Alias|Wavefront, Creatoon, and Digital Fusion. It has screened at film festivals around the world.



The Mosquito and the Horse. © Multi Film 2001.



Tongues and Taxi. © Michael Overbeck.

TONGUES AND TAXIS

I distinctly recall watching *Tongues and Taxis* (2000) at a film festival screening of student works and thinking that it stood out from the rest quite clearly. The reason, basically, is that its characters and story are remarkably interesting, surprising and imaginative — I hate to add — 'for a student work.' Essentially, it tells the story of a man who becomes angry and bites off his tongue. His pet cat comes to the rescue with a staple gun, which readies the man for his trip to the doctor, where the tongue launches into adventures of its own. The cat comes through again at the end of the film, as the tongue — which grows to gigantic proportions — threatens the city. The story rests somewhere between a dreamlike stream-of-consciousness work and a perfectly synchronized almost linear narrative.

Director Michael Overbeck explains that *Tongues and Taxis* grew out of a 'blind storyboarding' process, in which he drew up a storyboard from a single picture and gathered ideas for actions and characters as he drew. The result, he explains, is that he began by developing visual gags and characters, with themes and plotlines emerging later. Watching the film, one can see how his process influenced his work, in a positive way. Clearly apparent, too, is the influence of Monty Python, Richard Condie and especially Gary Larsen. Overbeck created the film as his degree project at Rhode Island School of Design using Flash 4 and Maya 2.0 to create its images, as well as Final Cut (for sound editing) and After Effects. It has shown at a wide range of festivals across the world and has won several prizes.



It's Alive! © 2001 Paul George/Terry Ziegelman.

IT'S ALIVE!

Drawing upon the conventions of the horror film genre, *It's Alive!* (2001) tells the story of a creature who brings to life a little Frankenstein-like dog. To suggest the look of an old movie, a 'scratchy' effect is added to the muted color images in the computer-generated production. English-language dialogue is included on black and white intertitles, suggesting a silent film aesthetic. In creating *It's Alive!*, the two directors of the film approached the project from very different perspectives. Terry Ziegelman drew upon his background in illustration and painting, using a self-described 'pragmatic approach,' while Paul George came to the project with training in music and a more improvisational attitude.

The directors endeavored to create stylized characters and animation, avoiding a photo-realistic look that they felt might overshadow the film's story. The project originated with George, who designed its characters, drawing inspiration from Chuck Jones and Tim Burton. Originally, Zeigelman, who is currently employed by Big Idea Productions, was brought on the project as a lighting/texture artist. However, he took over as the project's director after George accepted a position at Digital Domain. *It's Alive!* was completed as a graduate thesis work at Savannah College of Art and Design. SCAD later

developed it into a promotional DVD, using it as a showpiece to represent its student work.

A wide range of software packages were used in creating *It's Alive!*, including Maya, Deep Paint, Photoshop, Renderman and After Effects. Many textures and backgrounds were painted traditionally and applied digitally. The film has shown in various film festivals, including the World Animation Celebration, where it won second place in the Student category.



Caged. © Ashley Hoffman.

CAGED

Ashley Hoffman's computer-generated work, *Caged* (2002), was created as a second-year work at the University of California, Los Angeles Animation Workshop. It tells the story of a girl who ventures into her basement and finds a caged object, which looks a bit like a piece of crumpled paper. She takes out a key, removing it from the cage and attaching it to a leash. Eventually, the once-caged object breaks free of the leash and the basement and soars upward, joining birds in the sky.

The girl character that appears in the film is somewhat reminiscent of a Jiri Trnka figure in that the face is fixed in its design. The entire production is relatively spare in detail, no doubt reflecting the fact that it is not a more fully developed graduation project. Backgrounds are composed of variously shaped geometric forms. No dialogue is used; sound is limited to effects. The only color images appear at the end, as the paper object flies into a blue sky. MAYA was used for modeling, animation and lighting, while Photoshop was used for titles and Premiere for sequence assembly.

Hoffman describes her influences as including Faith Hubley and Nick Park, for their strong personal styles, as well as Piet Kroon, as one example of an independent animator who challenges viewers to "fill

in the blanks and find the meaning of the story themselves.” This seems to be a goal that Hoffman is working toward, as she seems most interested in how her open-ended story is interpreted differently by each viewer. While Hoffman’s work is satisfying in its simplicity, I think *Caged* would have benefited from the addition of visual and thematic layering. Otherwise, a project tends to become a technical exercise without revealing much of the ‘personal style’ that Hoffman finds admirable in artists such as Hubley, Park and Kroon.



Shadowplay. © Dan Blank 2001, Danmation Pictures.

SHADOWPLAY

Dan Blank created *Shadowplay* (2002) at the New York University Tisch School of the Arts, as a Junior/Senior Thesis project for the Animation Production Workshop. Like the other films discussed here, digital technology was employed by Blank, but in a different way. While images were created using traditional tabletop and 2D techniques, the animation itself was recorded with a Nikon digital still camera. Adobe After Effects and Photoshop also were employed.

Shadowplay is a challenging project in more than one way. First is subject matter. The film tells the story of a boy named Akio, who is killed during the bombing of Hiroshima. The flash of the bomb seared Akio’s shadow into a wall and it is that shadow which goes around the city, searching for his family and trying to make sense of what has occurred. Few animated films have taken on this topic or any drama as emotionally-engaged; the Japanese features *Barefoot Gen* and *Grave of the Fireflies* come to mind, though of course they are on a much larger scale. The second challenge comes directly out of the first: creating compassion for a character that has no facial expression and is relatively

limited in what it can do. Related to this is creating sets that can reflect the scale of devastation that occurred; naturally, Blank is limited to a relatively small set (he worked in a 10 x 20 foot room), and it seems his interest is actually in relating a very small, personal part of the larger story.

A third challenge, I think, is the length of the film, which runs 15 minutes. It is difficult to sustain the story and compassion for this particular character throughout such a long period. Blank’s work would have had a stronger impact if it had been shortened somewhat, perhaps by three to five minutes. The personal stories of other victims woven into the film give it depth; I like the numerous ‘still’ illustrations on walls that are used to launch these stories. However, Akio’s interaction with his family and, in particular, his subsequent search probably is given too much time. The 2D shadow animation was recorded first in the production process. Perhaps its pacing was relatively difficult to assess at that early point.

Having said that, there is still much to be commended in the project, including Blank’s sensitive treatment of this significant topic — and the fact that he took it on in the first place. Noteworthy, too, is the level of professionalism evident in the production. In terms of sound, an area all too often overlooked in student productions, *Shadowplay* is quite ambitious. An original score by Ryan Shore was recorded by an orchestra of fifteen, including a blend of Japanese and Western instruments and sounds. Voice talent includes accomplished Asian actors from film, television and theater. Brand himself has done voice-overs and has interned at MTV in New York. The production of *Shadowplay* was supported through a George Heinemann Production Grant, a Charles & Lucille King Foundation Scholarship, the Richard Protovin Award, and several other grants and awards. It has been screened at several festivals within the United States and already has won several awards. ■

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MAUREEN FURNISS, PH.D. is founding editor of *Animation Journal* and author of *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (1998). She teaches in the Department of Film and Digital Media at Savannah College of Art and Design, in Georgia, and is currently writing a book related to animation production.
