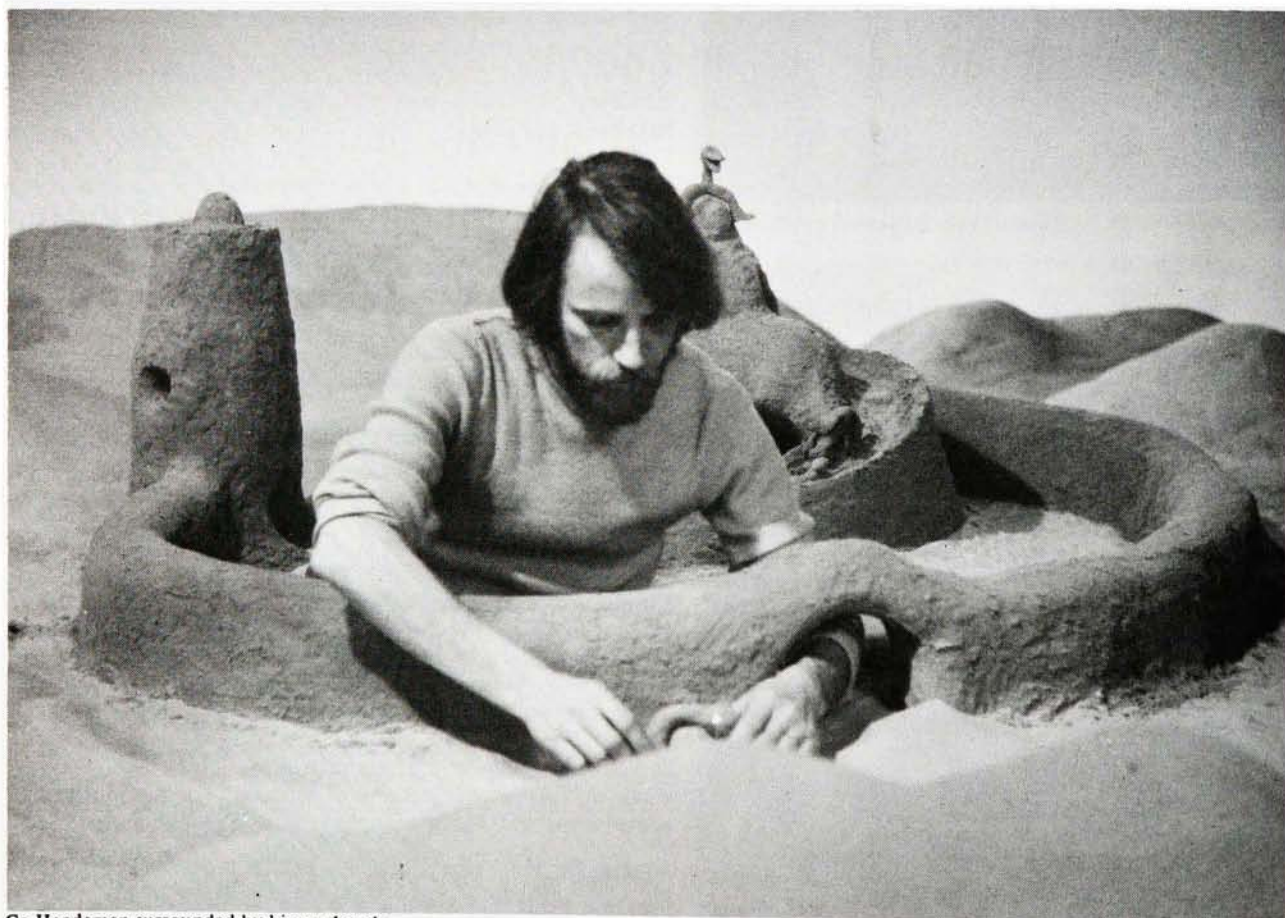


co hoedeman

It is difficult to imagine the amount of concentration, patience, and faith it takes to work over a sandbox for two years, day in and day out, in a windowless basement room and to come up with an Oscar winning animated film. Animators are a special breed, and Joan Irving talked with Co Hoedeman about his work. Michael Mills gives us a short review of *The Sand Castle*.

by Joan Irving



Co Hoedeman surrounded by his sandcastle.

castles in the sand

You'll not find Co Hoedeman at the National Film Board without a guide. The studio he is occupying now, which will be his headquarters for possibly another 16 months while he finishes *Le grotocéen*, a new film, is *somewhere* in the basement. He's set up an island of easy-chair comfort there, surrounded by the widely flung trappings of the film in progress and offers salted peanuts and beer to make it pleasant, but he agrees the windowless environment is not ideal.

At the end of the day, however, he will drive for almost an hour to go home to the family farm, near the Ontario-Quebec border.

Co Hoedeman is an animation artist. The winner of several awards for his earlier films, this year he made the pilgrimage to Hollywood and came back, happy but not strutting, with an Oscar for *The Sand Castle*.

Puppet animation has become his specialty because, he says, he found out early on that he was "good with his hands", and, coincidentally, that he couldn't draw. His style of three-dimensional animation, though it is a widely practiced technique in the European countries — such as Czechoslovakia — which have a tradition of puppet theatre, is not a common technique in Canada. Hoedeman estimates there are three or four other filmmakers here animating with puppets.

His tools are simple enough — three boxes of sand were used in making *The Sand Castle*, and the characters of *Le grotocéen* are small but colorful foam rubber concoctions that wait to impress.

Designed with the fantasy realm children favor in mind, Hoedeman's films nevertheless tackle broader concerns. The theme of *The Sand Castle*, he says, is "man versus nature. I tried to show in the film that one can't outdo the other. We have to live side by side and make the best of it."

Hoedeman, now 37, arrived in Canada from Amsterdam in '1965 and joined the National Film Board, where he has been associated with the French language animation section.

Cinema Canada: *Tell us how you felt, being at the Academy Awards and on stage in front of that audience?*

Co Hoedeman: I was very tense while Paul Williams and Jodie Foster, who were there to announce 'And the winner is...', were naming the nominated films. I didn't know it but first they screen all the films. They started with Ishu Patel's *The Bead Game*. I was so confused that I leaned over to Ishu, who was sitting beside me, and said, 'You got it'. His wife told me no, no. I sat back and tried to collect my mind again, because they do make you rather nervous. They work you up to the tip, the very tip of a pyramid. Then they announced 'And the winner is *The Sand Castle*, Co Hoedeman'. My immediate reaction was that it was about time. I wanted to get it over with — not that I should be the winner, but that they finally announced who it was.

Walking up there I was telling myself to remain collected. I had done my homework and knew what I wanted to say — I wasn't going to say the kind of things people always say, thanking their father and mother and all the animals in the stable. I thought that it would be a good occasion to thank the Canadian people and the filmmakers, and also to say it had all been made possible through the National Film Board.

Joan Irving is a freelance Montreal writer who is presently working in the drama unit at the CBC.

Your response was, as you mention, not in the tradition. Why did you decide to pay tribute to the Film Board on that occasion?

I thought I should say something which I felt was honest — a no-nonsense statement. I had no idea what its impact would be. It was a personal statement; I felt very strongly that it was an appropriate thing to say. When I came back, by the reaction of people, I knew I hadn't said the wrong thing.

You've won many awards before...

Yes, I've won some.

Let's say many. Was it important to you to win an Oscar?

Not for myself so much, but I think it has had an incredible effect on the Canadian film industry, in particular the National Film Board. I think all our animated films will benefit from this prize. Personally, winning the Grand Prix at Annecy with *The Sand Castle* was more important to me because I was among my peers, my colleagues. But who knows where Annecy is? Who knows what that festival is all about? The fact that the Oscar is so widely known makes it very prestigious, to the outside world, though not necessarily to me. That sounds strange, I guess.

You said earlier that your first thought when you heard that The Sand Castle had been nominated was that 'Oscars aren't for Canadians'...

Let me clarify that. The Academy Awards is primarily an American Festival, so the Academy members look at their own films first, emotionally. For that reason it's hard for a non-American film to win. Before the voting system was revised, people could vote even if they hadn't seen all the films, so sometimes knowing that a film had been made by so and so from the United States, the members would vote for it. Now those who vote have to have seen the whole program first.

How did you rate your chances of winning?

Well, I was in a rather uncomfortable position you know, because Ishu Patel's film was also in the running. He's a very good friend and it felt strange to be competing against a good friend. I was, of course, curious about the other two films, John and Fait Hubble's film *The Doonesbury Special* and James Picker's *Jimmy the C*. Picker's was a plastecine film based on the song "Georgia". It was really funny. Considering that animation is still the ultimate in cinema entertainment, I felt that the winning film would have to be funny. The NFB films were, I suspected, too heavy, too serious, and I didn't have that many hopes of winning.

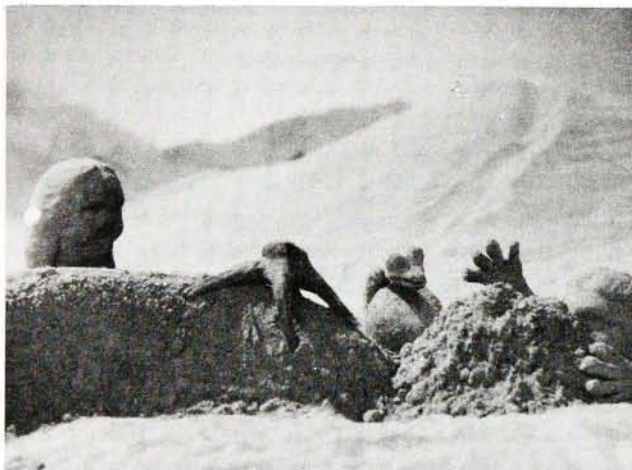
But he did win. Co mentioned to me later that the strangest thing about it all was that people came up to him later to ask for autographs! When he was invited to the recent University of Southern California film course as a special guest to present the animation program, the evening of screening and discussion drew an audience of 1800 people.

I've seen two recent films, The Sand Castle and Tchou Tchou. Tchou Tchou is made with highly colored wooden building blocks, while in The Sand Castle you used a very fluid substance, one almost without color. Do you want to talk about those two different techniques?

I don't try to stick with any particular technique. In *Tchou Tchou* I built a story and a whole fantasy world with blocks. In *The Sand Castle* I wanted to create a different world again, one with sand. You have to ask yourself what the sand is all about: in *Tchou Tchou*, what wood and blocks are all about. With the sand it came down to smooth forms, no sharp edges. The characters had to be created to fit the landscape. You work with the different textures of sand, even the different colors. I had to discover all that. But technique is always open to me.

Are you experimenting with different techniques for the sake of experimenting, or are you...

I did that, like all filmmakers do, because there is so much to be learned. But it's like learning and teaching yourself how to hold your hammer. The moment you have discovered how to hold it, you should not need to think of it anymore, and rather, you can concentrate on the subject. Animation is a rather big hammer; there are so many different facets to it. I've spent a great deal of time and many many years to master — to try to master — all the different animation techniques. Now it's more a question of trying to find an interesting subject and developing it into a good story. Then you think of the tools and technique needed to make it come out best.



Creatures creating themselves.

Where do you go for your subjects?

Anywhere. It just happens that I do a lot of daydreaming. My mind is continuously working. You see something and you translate it into film... It would be nice to make a film about rope or about metal. All those different ideas come and go. When you think you've got an interesting idea, you give it some extra thought. That way slowly, slowly it evolves in your mind.

Both Tchou Tchou and The Sand Castle were made with materials children know well. Do you try to relate to children in particular?

Some of my other films were not made as children's films but those two were. And I feel it's important that you make a film for children with material that children can identify with. However, I think sand is something universal; adults, as well as children, identify with it. But since I am often with children, it inspires and helps me to develop my own ideas.

Do you work with children apart from your own?

Being with your own children, it all happens so casually. If you do it with others, say in a classroom context, the situation easily becomes forced.

Some of the figures in The Sand Castle were almost mythological; they don't appeal only to children.

No, because the whole story is an accumulation of different ideas and it is me who then interprets them. I design the characters and interpret them in a way that is not necessarily childlike.

Do you think you'll always work with fantasy or the fantastic? The film you are working on now, Le grotocéan is based on an underwater environment.

I've made a number of films based on existing stories, but I feel most comfortable working with my own ideas, and creating a fantasy world. You can explore the world — the whole mythical world with animation. There are no limits. If you work out your own ideas you know what your limitations are and you try to work with that.

How do you keep going over a period of, say, two years on one film?

Very easily. Each day is a new day. It's like knitting a sweater of many different patterns. Each day you stitch some more and change the pattern. The fact that there's always something new happening keeps me going quite nicely, but I must admit that sometimes it's pretty painstaking. The actual shooting demands a lot of concentration. When you can see the results on the screen and can say, 'I think I've succeeded in conveying a particular idea'. That keeps you floating.

How do you feel about The Sand Castle after having worked on it for so long?

I still enjoy it because it serves its purpose very well, I think. Children identify with it and love it. The thing that worried me while I was working on the film was how adults would react to it. And I feel that there again I succeeded because there is something of the child inside of us, and it comes out. To succeed in all ways is not easy. You don't know if your film will succeed when you first finish it. Screenings for your colleagues here at the Film Board or anywhere will not tell you. The film has to prove itself in time, not at festivals but with plain exposure. People talk about it and there is a snowball effect. If you succeed, it's through this snowball effect.

How will Canadians be able to see your film?

To start with, it will have theatrical distribution. It took quite a while to arrange, but it has already been shown in Ottawa. Also, the film is available to the general public, free of charge. Then there are the special screenings, an evening here, an evening there.

Have all your films had as wide a distribution as The Sand Castle will have?

Each film differs. Some of my films had theatrical distribution while others did well in general distribution. One of the first films I made was a documentary and it has been widely screened in schools. So you don't just make films to be seen in the theatre. You make them for specific audiences too.

You work with a fairly small team. If, for instance, we were to compare the animation studio you're presently working in with The Disney Studio where they are working in much larger teams...

The reason they would be working with such large numbers is that they have deadlines. At the NFB it's not necessarily like that. I can make my film entirely by myself, or I can work with a large crew. But the type of films I make don't require large crews. **The Sand Castle** was made entirely from start to end, except for the music and editing, by myself. There are two people working with me on **Le grotocéen**. But the fact is I've learned to master a number of things. I can do the camera work and lighting so it's not always necessary to have a lot of help.

Did you come to Canada expecting to find work at the Film Board, and hoping to work there in a personal way, and have the opportunity to develop.

No. There were a number of different reasons I came to Canada. For one, the adventure. I was still young enough to want to find out what the other side of the world was all about. Another reason was that living conditions in Holland were rather difficult. When you're young and want to start a family, living accommodation there is difficult to come by. So we just decided to try another country.

The Sand Castle

d: Co Hoedeman, ph: Co Hoedeman, ed: Jacques Drouin, sd: Co Hoedeman, re-rec: Jean-Pierre Joutel, m: Norman Roger, Administration: Jacqueline Marquis, p: Gaston Sarault, p.c. National Film Board (1977) col: 16mm blown up to 35 mm, running time: 13 minutes, 12 seconds.

Sandcastle is a delightful animated children's film. The central character in the story is the Sandman, who is revealed by the wind and the drifting sand. He comes to life and molds himself a mate and a whole menagerie of funny and sometimes erotic creatures. They romp around the sand-dunes and together build a sandcastle which is to be their home. Inevitably the wind returns and threatens; their time has come. Soon they are covered by drifting sand and the cycle is complete.

A simple story, but then the best ones are.

The film uses standard puppet animation techniques of molding the form of the character over a wire frame. This allows for the puppet to be rigid while filming one frame at a time but pliable enough for the animator to make the desired movements.

However, this film did not break away from the limitations that seem to be imminent in puppet-animated films. The timing and 'pacing' (acting) tends to be too mechanical. Some of the creatures could have moved a lot faster to contrast with the heavier, slower ones. In a film without dialogue it is only movement which gives us



Hoedeman arranging a love dance.

an insight into personality. Puppet animators shy away from "extreme actions" (Distortions of the character for one or two frames of the film to add punch to a movement.) I wonder why? Because this is common practice with 'all animators'. Unfortunately the music did nothing to alleviate this situation and tended to plod along and serve as nothing more than background filler.

However, these observations should not detract from the tremendous creative and technical effort that Co Hoedeman has put together to produce this film. It truly earns its success.

This year the voting precedents for the Academy Awards were changed for the animated and live short subjects. Only peer groups were allowed to cast votes for the winners this year. A great improvement over previous years, where, although peer groups would nominate nominees the final voting was thrown open to the entire Academy, many of whom had not even seen the short subjects.

So we can look forward to the NFB being a regular winner of Oscars from now on.

Michael Mills

Michael Mills is a Montreal-based animator who has made, among other films, "The Happy Prince".

You and your wife?

Yes. And it happened to be Canada because I felt most sympathetic towards Canada. In addition, of course, I knew the National Film Board was here, but I didn't set my hopes on working here. In the back of my mind though, I wanted to continue filmmaking. As it happened, within the first two weeks of our arrival it was settled, and I began working here.

Would you be able to work the way you do if you were not at the NFB.

I don't think I can answer that because I never really tried to work outside the Film Board. But I have seen how other people do it. We are in an incredibly favorable situation; I don't have to hunt for money in order to express my free ideas. I don't have to sacrifice my ideas to please a producer, or an investor for that matter.

In your lifetime, are you going to have time, artistically speaking, to make something other than animation films?

I think I'll probably always do animation films. But life has much more to offer than just filmmaking. Being on the farm with our animals — my wife is a farmer — is one step in that direction. I love photography and darkroom work, things like that. Whatever I do, I'm a professional filmmaker, and I love making films. But not 24 hours a day. □