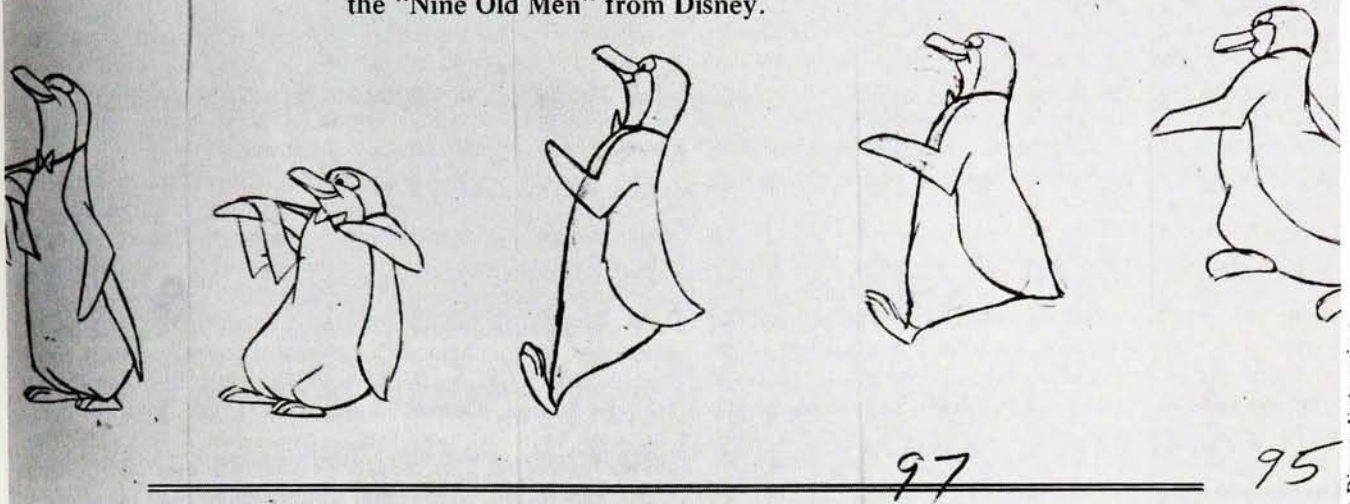If you want to know what the guidelines were that every Disney animator had thumbtacked over his desk and followed while drafting up such characters as the svelt Mickey and his dainty Minnie Mouse, read Jaan Pill's report on a seminar given by two of the "Nine Old Men" from Disney.

disney animation

An example of squash and stretch helping to give life to a character

by Jaan Pill

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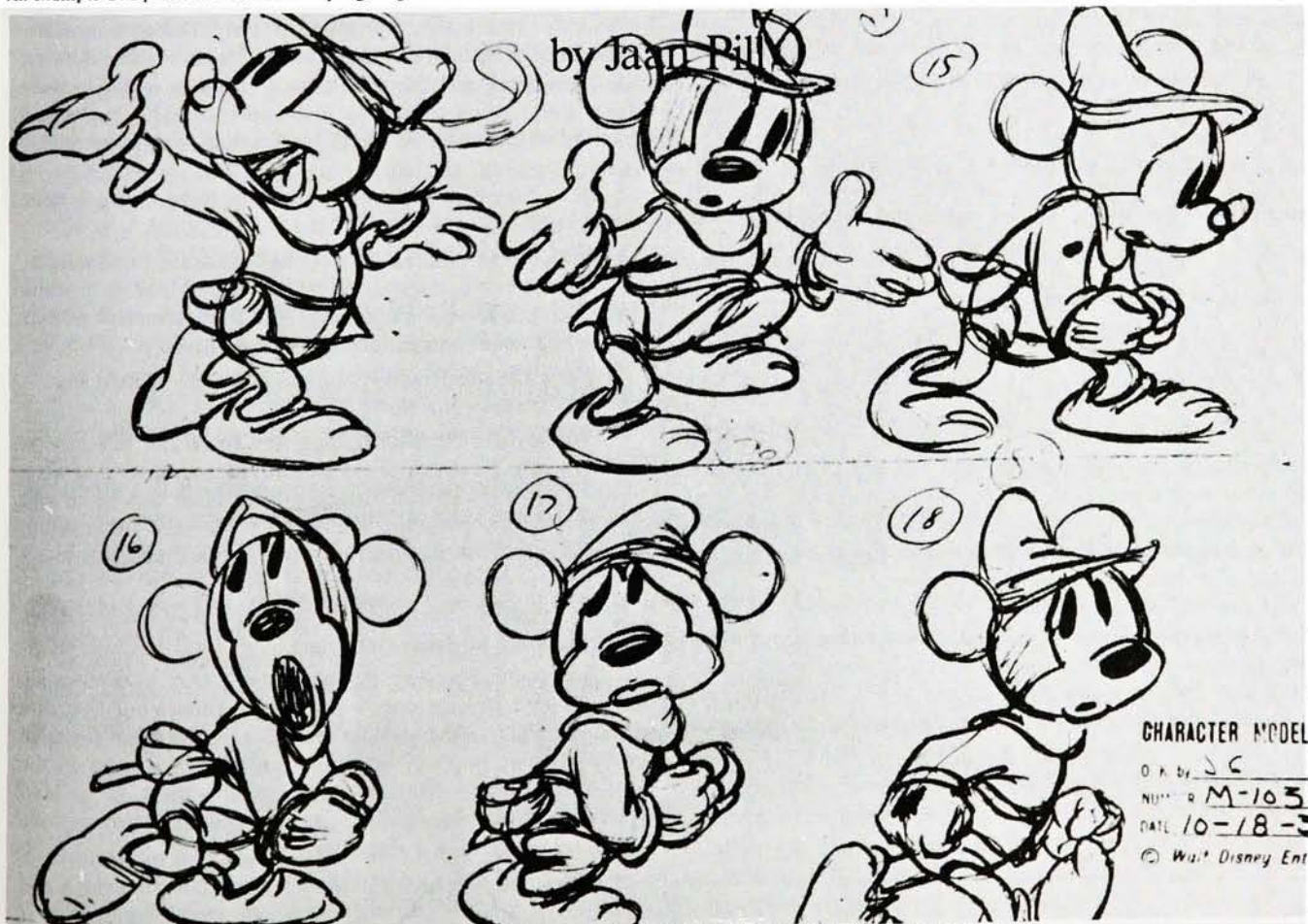
Freddy Moore's Mickey for "The Brave Little Taylor: "The best shaped Mickeys that we've had," says Johnston

Recently retired Disney animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, the last active members of the original Nine Old Men, hand-picked by Walt Disney to head up his studio's animation department, came to Toronto late in February for a week-long visit (February 27 – March 3) to Nelvana Limited, producers of A Cosmic Christmas.

The visit was jointly sponsored by Nelvana and the Ontario Arts Council. It was arranged by Nelvana as a means of encouraging professional development among its animators, who are currently completing production on Nelvana's new TV special, The Devil and Daniel Mouse.

The program included a series of lectures at Nelvana on the use of characters (with illustrations of characterization from Snow White and other Disney films), as well as on staging, scene-planning and putting it all together.

Much has been written about the impact of Walt Disney films around the world. The Disney approach has been criticized in the past for reducing whatever it touched such as folk tales and literary classics, into the limited frame of reference that the Disney Studio could understand, through the process of "Disneyfication". The recent lecture-demonstrations by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston at Nelvana Limited, however, did not deal with this aspect of Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse.

Instead, the duo presented a clear and lively outline of the procedures which animators at the Studio developed in the last 45 years in creating the Disney animated shorts and features.

The gist of the first Thomas-Johnston lecture, concerning the use of characters, was that the old-time Disney animators were aware, at all times, that what went into individual drawings would eventually turn up in the mind of the viewer. They also made a point of reaching out and grabbing the audience with strong statements which carefully controlled its attention.

In the course of the lectures Thomas and Johnston made it clear that the connection between individual drawings, scenes and sequences on the one hand, and the viewer's mind on the other, is less easily achieved than might be expected. Among the obstacles is old-fashioned artistic self-indulgence. Another is lack of precise intentions.

Of the first of these problems, Ollie Johnston commented, "One of the dangers we find is that you fall in love with yourself, or your drawing, and it's easy to say too much, and lose your audience, by trying to make it too complicated."

Johnston said the answer to this problem is to stop trying to tell the viewer too many things: Instead "Let them see only what you want them to see. Like a magician. He only shows what you're supposed to see. He doesn't complicate it. It is not how great you are or how funny you can be. It is just what the scene is in the picture for."

The second obstacle, lack of precise intentions, is more subtle. As Frank Thomas remarked, "Everything you draw is going to mean something to the audience; sometimes it just means that they're confused, and they think, 'What's he trying to say?' But everything you do is communicated. So you'd better put up there what you want them to see. You want to tell them just what you want them to know, and nothing else."

With these two major obstacles out of the way, how does the animator make the connection between the drawings and the viewer's mind? The connection is made through symbols which operate on a number of different levels. As Johnston remarked, the intended message in a Disney film is constructed in the audience's imagination through the use of symbols which the audience will readily recognize and accept.

For example, the cartoonist uses a standard lexicon of symbols of facial expression and posture to depict a wide range (and the subtle gradations) of emotions. Another level of non-verbal communication involves "acting symbols" in which specified variations in ways of moving tell an audience something about different characters.

Thomas demonstrated the role of acting symbols with the example of how different characters would throw away a piece of paper. The paper can be dropped casually, or as if it's very precious, or in the different ways a person who is near-sighted, arrogant or sneaky, drops it.

A variation of acting symbols is found in the symbolism associated with a character's movement toward or away from the camera. After a screening of The Ugly Duckling during the first lecture, Thomas noted, for example, how the main character went off over the horizon when it was sad. "I've always wondered," he said, "they go off over the horizon when they're sad. They never climb uphill, they never come towards you, they always go away, and down. They never go away uphill, either. You try it sometime, the only one that really works for you is you go away and go down. That's a feeling of depression. It's symbolic."

In the first lecture Thomas and Johnston presented the Nelvana audience a list of 14 points drawn up 45 years ago by Freddy Moore, one of the top early Disney animators, which Disney animators used to put above their drawing tables, one item per day, as things to keep in mind in establishing that connection with the audience. The quotations which follow are from Frank Thomas unless otherwise noted.

* First, does it have appeal? Is it something that you want to look at?

* Is the staging based on a unity of ideas? For example, has a consistent eye direction been figured out in a scene which depicts several characters? Do the characters read as a unit while maintaining individual personalities?

* Is this the most interesting way to do it? "Would anyone look at it besides your mother?"

* Is this the most entertaining way to do it? "It's easy to do too much. You can always be funnier, and so you keep trying to be funnier and finally you've done too much and you've lost the point of the scene." (On the other hand, added Thomas, sometimes the scene needs that extra touch that makes it sparkle.)

* Are you in character? "Is this the way the character would do it and no other character?"

* Are you advancing the character? "Are you repeating things you've already done? Let people know your character gradually. Pick one characteristic that works best for each scene." (Other pointers from the duo: Don't use up all the most interesting traits right away; usually there are at least six traits to each personality; and it often takes two or three sequences to establish a character.)

* Is this the simplest statement? Don't cover up the scene with useless action, and "Know what you're trying to put

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Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, the last of the Nine Old Men

over because otherwise you'll never be able to judge whether you've done it."

* Is the story-point clear? "Why is this scene in the picture? You usually fall in love with the drawings you are making... and you forget what you were supposed to be doing."

* Is the secondary action working with the main action? Ollie Johnston gave the example of an expression getting lost if it's combined with simultaneous movement across the screen: "You've got to take the time in your scene to show the change from one expression to the other. You have got to take the time to do it so the audience can read it."

* Is the presentation the best for the medium? "You are in a crude medium. There is no way of getting the refinement, the delicacy you'd like to get. You cannot get shading worth anything... So it is even more reason to make your drawings simple and strong."

* Are you being too special? Thomas remarked that prettiness alone won't hold an audience beyond ten minutes. "You can dazzle them for ten minutes and then you are going to lose them, because nobody can take it longer than that, unless they are high on something."

* Do you have two-dimensional clarity? Is it easy to read? Does it look good with the background? Is the silhouette clear? One way to test it is to take the drawing and color it in.

* Do you have three-dimensional clarity? Does your drawing retain its solidity as it turns? Is there space between volumes? Are the characters standing on the floor plane? Since drawings can creep up as you work on a scene, it is sometimes useful to use a grid for a floor plane to keep them anchored.

* Do you have four-dimensional clarity? This refers to continuity over time. "The shapes change as they move," said Johnston, "and you get the squashing and the stretching, and that has to happen at the right place and the right time. If you don't do enough of it, it is stiff; too much and it is squishy."

Thomas and Johnston discussed other points as well especially the value of mentally rehearsing each scene before acting it out on paper.

"One of our biggest problems with the young guys," Johnston said, "is to keep them from picking up their pencils the minute they get the scene. In other words they want to start moving the character around right away. One of our top animators from the old days taught us that it is much better if you sit there, for half the time: say you had a scene that was going to take you two days to do; if you would sit there and think about it for one day, you would animate it just as fast as if you drew for two days and made a lot of mistakes."

Throughout their lectures, the Disney duo emphasized the role mental imagery plays in developing a character. Thomas remarked that it is easy to talk about how the animator must know the character's thoughts and feelings, but that sometimes you go through a scene and you haven't shown it and have shown something else instead.

Another topic was dialogue. Johnston said, "It is important that dialogue is not used as a crutch. What you are trying to do is express thoughts with this. You want to phrase your dialogue so that you don't move the guys so much that you cannot see the attitude that you are expressing.

"In other words you are not just illustrating words; you are illustrating thoughts and ideas... the way the character walks, stands, sits and listens will reveal the meaning of his words. This requires... the ability to make the character come to life for the audience by action as well as words. What we strive for is acting, not action. I think that is very important. You are not just moving guys; you are trying to make them act, and that includes every drawing in your scene, not just the key poses... they have all got to have that feeling of acting."

After the lecture, I asked Nelvana's Clive Smith about his studio's response to the Californians' visit. He said it was a real treat, "There is so little of this kind of animation being done anymore. You almost think you are working in a void. In a sense we are because there is such an enormous age gap between the people of Frank and Ollie's generation, who started this and developed it... and the people who are doing it now.

"Most people are doing the Saturday morning stuff, because they are either not willing to risk the kind of money that is involved in full production, or they are just not interested. For the two generations to meet like this I think is an incredible thing. It is really going to be one of the few opportunities to pass on any of this kind of thing first hand." □