

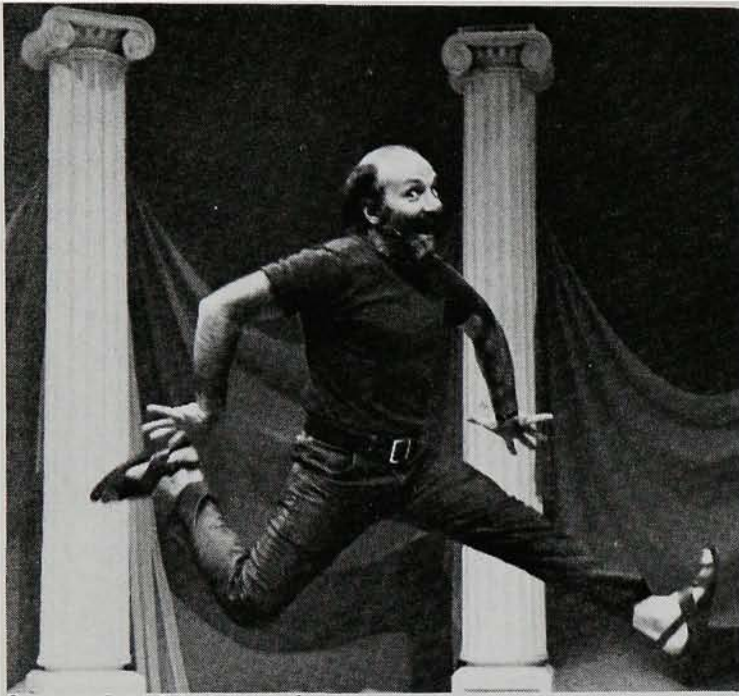
the cheshire bureaucrat

by Ronald H. Blumer

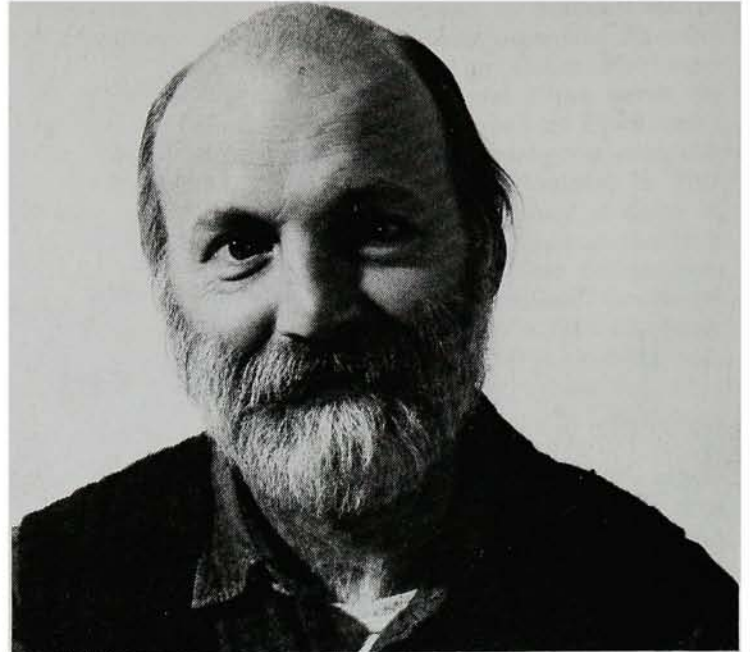
If filmmakers as a breed are a little wacky, people involved in animation form a loony subgroup of their own. One minute's screen time, 720 drawings. A normal person can hardly conceive of the work it takes to produce one short gag — a 10-minute film can be a year's work. Don Arioli is quick to point out that he does not consider himself an animator. "I am interested in telling stories with my films. When I was animating my own films I used all sorts of shortcuts to get to the point. I have no patience with the animation; I want to make one movie a week, not one movie a year!"

Ronald H. Blumer is currently an instructor in cinema at Vanier College in Montreal. Prior to this he taught at Marianopolis College and was a teaching assistant at McGill University and Boston University. Concurrent with teaching, he has also been working on a series of films on aging.

Like many of those involved in animation, Arioli communicates with few words in a language of gestures and sound effects. He looks and acts like his cartoon characters. Wolf Koenig, former head of English animation at the NFB, hired Arioli 10 years ago as resident genius. From the beginning, it was obvious that his talents lay not in the process of animation, the meticulous drawing of picture after picture which brings the characters alive — Arioli is a storyboarder, one of the rare idea men. In the United States, he could be counting his millions writing one-line gags for MASH or planning out the next Alka-Seltzer ad. His job is to be funny. "The idea of sitting down and trying to be funny is pure tragedy; it can drive you crazy, but when you get it, it's a tremendous sensation. I'm sitting in a restaurant doodling, putting various ideas and pictures together, and then I hit on it. When I kill myself laughing, sitting there alone, I know it must be funny."



One member of the loony subgroup



Don Arioli

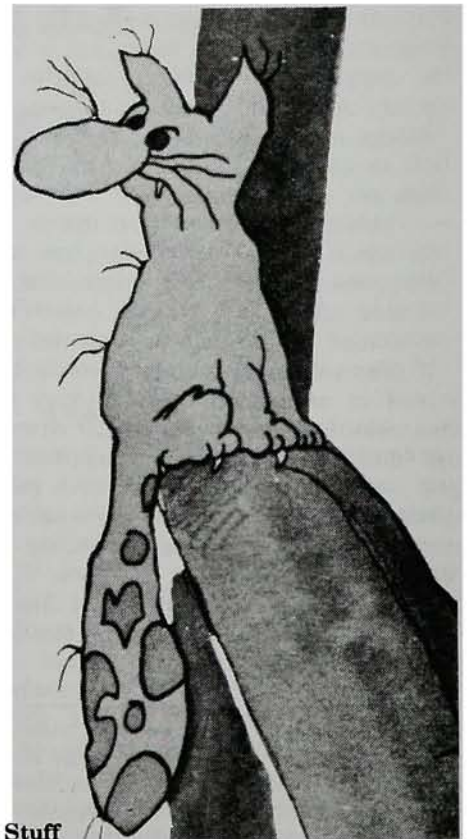
The House That Jack Built was nominated for an Oscar, **Hot Stuff** won an Etrog, and his extremely funny films on smoking, inflation and taxes show that he is not laughing by himself. And this is the exceptional thing about Arioli: he is not only very funny, but funny within the context of the boring old National Film Board – the civil service. “People come up to me and say, ‘Gee, you don’t look like a civil servant.’ (It’s like, ‘You don’t look Jewish.’) I enjoy the challenge of impossible tasks – trying to make fire prevention funny. I like the idea of someone coming up to me and saying, ‘Make a film on coffee cups; it’s got to be short, witty, bilingual and Canadian.’ Grierson’s idea was to get the artists and the bureaucrats together – throw them in the same room and see what happens. I like the process of trying to work out ideas with a group of people who have something they want to say. Coming from totally different backgrounds, communications with Ottawa can be frustrating, but when it works it’s very exciting.”

Arioli has been involved in an enormous variety of projects both in and out of the Board. His speciality, the humor/message package, is of particular interest to educators and he has frequently worked for *Sesame Street*. Arioli films have a distinctive style and humor. He is best with one-liners such as the quick succession of visual and verbal jokes in **Propaganda Message** where he nimbly dances on Canada’s collective sore spots. His power is in the throw-away, the little character popping his head up at the side of the screen and distracting from the action. His stars are invariably little men with beards and short, fat, booby women and again their humor is in the asides, the mutters off to the corner of the screen, the nagging and the relevant irrelevancies. His longer films tend to be his weakest. Like a magician or a stand-up comic, Arioli’s power is in the speed of delivery. He describes himself as a 10-minute-maximum man and his favorite exercise is the one-minute commercial.

Don Arioli is a very young 40-year-old. Before coming to Canada in 1962, he plied a variety of trades, ranging from disc jockey to pouring asphalt driveways to a corporal in the United States Marines. His dream was always cartoons and comics and he took a course in commercial art. “I had half a year’s training in figure drawing. They were training us to be advertising artists, but I couldn’t figure out one end of an airbrush from another. Everything technical threw me; I couldn’t mix colors, I didn’t letter neat, I didn’t understand perspective – I just knew I liked drawing. Very

soon my teachers convinced me I was incompetent so I quit art and joined the Marines.”

In Toronto, he became involved with Jim McKay who runs Film Design, a small creative animation studio. Working virtually alone, he started producing short little animated skits for a CBC kids’ program, *Butternut Square*. “I had never done animation before that. We were doing one story a week, three minutes of animation with a budget of \$100 for each item. (Animation normally costs \$10,000 per minute.) Jim had a rather primitive setup, a 16 mm camera on a greased broomstick that moved up and down and not much else. Every Friday we had to have one of these things ready, and I was going nuts trying to meet this impossible deadline. But I wanted to do it; I had all these crazy stories I’d been



The cat in *Hot Stuff*



GETTING AN IDEA AND LOSING IT.

writing and this was the perfect outlet. Most of it was improvised under the camera. Sometimes when I couldn't do it all in drawings I would grab anything, bottle caps, cigarette butts, dirt and I would move it under the camera – click, click, two frames at a time. I would rush the roll of film to the lab: Sometimes it wouldn't be ready until Friday morning and I would literally run with it to the CBC and it would be on the air that afternoon. I did 39 items like this. As a result I learned discipline, and I learned how to animate.”

His big break came when Film Design was asked to do a short on the vague theme of “Unity and Diversity.” Nobody really knew what it meant, so he suggested an adult cartoon that he had been planning for a long time. The result was **The House That Jack Built**, a brilliant, wry tale of man's ambition and frailty. In this existential Jack and the Beanstalk, a humdrum little man steals a magic mirror from the giant (who in this film is also little). The mirror is magic because upon looking into it, it tells its owner how great he is. Since thinking makes it so, Jack does become rich and successful only to realize how humdrum greatness can be. The film was animated from Arioli's original drawings by Ron Tunis of the National Film Board. In this film he discovered his true strength – establishing a creative interaction between story-telling and animation. “After I started working for the NFB, I slowly began to realize that making films had to be a team effort. Before that, I tried to do everything myself because I didn't feel I could trust an animator with my ideas. I learned that teamwork does not involve just giving my storyboard to an animator and saying I want it done exactly like this. He must interpret the storyboard and if he can apply his own personality to it, if he can actualize the characters and take the ideas one step further, then the result is a better film. When I realized this, when I realized that having the original idea was not everything, I guess that's when my little ego started losing ground.”

Arioli's best film, **Hot Stuff**, shot in 1970, was the result of such teamwork. Made for the Dominion Fire Commissioner, the film had as its unpromising theme fire safety in the home. In this nine-minute short Arioli worked with the brilliant Yugoslavian animator Zlatko Grgic to produce a film which is filled with message, unforgettable and very, very funny. As the house is burning down because of overloaded extension cords, a fork in the toaster, an iron left sitting on a dress, a burning cigar and a nagging wife; the

family cat (a beast which looks like a combination of Little Orphan Annie and W.C. Fields) sits by the front door waiting for his favorite dish, ‘Mouse Flambé’.

The performer in Arioli insists on meticulous casting for the voices of his bizarre little creations. Since he so often creates himself on the screen, he is also his own voice and this is the power of his films. The characters, even if drawn in animated shorthand, are always characters with well-rounded personalities. He speaks with contempt of the robots with moving mouths that pass for animation on Saturday morning television. If there is an Arioli touch in all of his varied work, it is an appreciation for the rich little foibles which make humans human. He looks on animation almost as a form of documentary. “The cartoon character can get away with murder; can say things and do things which in a live-action film would be considered offensive or subversive. People look on them as harmless and innocent but I want my characters to speak little gems. The cartoon character can keep the door open long after emotions, politics and prejudice have made people blind to certain things. Funny animation about serious subjects, like the wisdom of children, cannot be easily ignored.” □

Selected Filmography

Wrote & storyboarded for the National Film Board:

The House That Jack Built
Tax Is Not a Four-Letter Word
In a Nutshell
Tilt
Hot Stuff
A Propaganda Message
Tickets SVP
A Token Gesture

and many TV spots on safety, anti-smoking, environment etc.

Wrote and storyboarded several films for Zagreb Films. Worked on **Yellow Submarine**. Wrote over 50 short pieces for *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*. Acted in **Sweet Movie** and **U-Turn**.

a child's garden of body parts

"It came to me when I was asked by the National Film Board to do a sex film for kids. I figured, why be hypocritical? If you are going to make a film about sex you should not confuse the kids with all those other irrelevant parts of the body. The thing that really inspired me was the fact that dolls don't have anything down there. I grew up thinking that girls pee out of two cheeks. I once thought of starting a company called Body Parts, where you could send the dimensions of your doll and we would send you the appropriate parts which you could then just lick and stick on..."

Don Arioli

or kids fuck the darndest things

