

plasticine and puppet people

by Neil Warren



First Hunt from the *Inuit* series, Animette Canada's fourth series of puppet-animated films

The world of animation, Disney, and the cartoon character. But what of the three-dimensional group – the puppet film? Puppets? Immediately you associate strings, marionettes, or even a 'Punch and Judy'. Yet the process of puppet animation is much more involved than simply pulling strings... and it's fighting for recognition and a place in Canada's film industry and culture. In Europe, as everybody knows, puppetry is a tradition, particularly due to the influence of Jiri Trinka and his followers. They created a sort of 'theatre of the old', where the emotional magic of animation gave life and personality to a totally 'dead' thing, and people could lose themselves in these films. Well, a part of this culture and magic is finally starting to develop in this country. More independent groups are breaking away from the conventional cell work, and exploring new areas in the three-dimensional field.

Neil Warren is a 'plasticine' puppet animator presently freelancing for CBC and independent groups. Graduated from Conestoga College, Film in 1975, he is working on a children's short ('plasticine') for TV at the moment, as well as a promotional film. His first professional experience was with Animette, Canada.

Take, for example, 'plasticine'. That miracle substance that you can bend, shape, mold into almost anything. When combined with the film medium, it can be given 'life' and accomplish any number of fantasies. The material is becoming increasingly popular in commercials, childrens' shows, and even current events programs, mainly due to its abstract appearance and malleability. The major problem encountered with 'plasticine' is its lack of resistance to heat, but with several large fans surrounding your miniature set, you can keep your actors 'cool' enough to manipulate.

Cineplast, formed by Marc Chinoy in 1969, used the 'plasticine' technique to a great extent. Peter Dewdney, who is now with Nelvana Ltd., worked with Chinoy on a number of projects, the first being a series of animated inserts for *Sesame Street*. The beginning films were very abstract, using a transformation technique of one character flowing into another – with a complete absence of sets and props. After a series of these segments, Cineplast became involved with commercial work in, variously, advertising for beer, childrens' vitamins, and paper towels. They drifted towards other media with these projects, including plastics and paper, but in 1972, returned to 'plasticine' when Taurus Films of Germany approached the company with a pilot for a proposed series titled *Wildman*. The completed program was successful and launched the series. As a result, Cineplast moved to Munich, leaving a few memories, and the challenge for other 'plasticine' animators in Canada to take over where they left off.

Yet animators of this sort are scarce at the moment. I believe there is a group involved in Quebec, as well as Ray Ethier of Crawley Films, Ottawa, and myself. Peter Dewdney, who spent several months with Chinoy in Munich, felt that North Americans are less receptive to the 'plasticine' /puppet medium than Europeans, but this attitude is already changing, and hopefully the technique will develop and expand here in Canada within the next few years.

Equally as popular as 'plasticine' animation is the puppet group. Animette, Canada produces puppet films for children, at a small production company located in Thornhill, Ontario. Its goal is to create a visionary world with imaginary characters to which children, its main audience, will relate. Directed to an age group close to dolls and puppets, their films present a simple moral or message to the small fry, without being too overbearing. A child's psyche can relate



Experiment, from the series *Welcome to Our Small World*, puts its emphasis on teaching, with lessons in chemistry, mathematics and basic shapes

to the medium, and in a sense, learn what the puppets are trying to teach – and that's what the producers, Ali and Milo Kubik, find rewarding. The money is minimal, the publicity is almost nil, but it's mainly love of the work that keeps them going. And there are never enough of these films for kids.

By definition, three-dimensional animation is an exacting process giving simulated life to an inanimate object, via single-frame exposure. It is a technique involving hours and hours of tedious work in tiring body positions. The principles of live-action filmmaking are basically involved, except that in animation, one or two people are in charge of everything. Sets, props, characters are all on a miniature scale, with their boundaries confined to a huge table top. Actors are constructed from wood and metal ball and socket armatures. (I suppose the advantage over live action is that the characters are not capable of forming a union.) Perspective is very important, as well as a certain amount of stylization in the puppets. The Kubiks try not to be bound by reality, as their intention is not to imitate life, but to create an imaginary world with imaginary creatures who do not talk, but rather speak through pantomimed actions. It creates a visual, almost universal language. The characters are simple, yet possess an air of gentleness and purity without being too wholesome. They are in a totally different class from the science-fiction and commercial animated puppets common in US features and shorts.

The Kubiks both worked professionally in Czechoslovakia – Milo in the film business and Ali on the stage, in opera. Ali's first encounter with three-dimensional animation came through Slovak Cinematography, a group trying to establish a special studio strictly for puppet work. In August of 1968, the Kubiks left the country with their daughter Milada and son Peter, to settle in Canada. They hoped to continue their careers in filmmaking in totally new conditions in a different cultural climate, and after the usual hardships, they secured work with the CBC in Toronto. The Kubiks have been in the animation business for six years now, and this is the first serious initiative by the professional press to discuss their work. Otherwise, nobody seems interested. They are not publicity-seeking people, but need to be known in order to continue working. The Kubiks see puppet animation in its pioneering stage here, useful for commercials, promotional and educational films. Unfortunately, there is still that fight for recognition to be won against cartoons.

Animette, Canada has produced four series of films distributed commercially in Toronto. Each series provides children with fables that roughly parallel their own experience. The first, **Adventures in the High Grass**, involves a community of bugs and their experiences in ecology and nature. The second, **Welcome to Our Small World**, involves the same characters in a variety of stories concerning elementary science. The third series, with the stylization closer to human proportions, takes a trip to the farm with **Lisa and Her Friends**. The emphasis in these films is on human values. The final series, **Inuit** involves 13 films based on Eskimo folklore. Each is a separate, original tale written by Ali Kubik. The stories encompass a wide range of elements, both fantastic and imaginative, and the Kubiks felt that in doing the series, they would be contributing to the enrichment of Canada's culture.

In the four series, a total of 52 films were produced by Animette, Canada. That's almost four and a half hours of film shot frame by frame. Mathematically, that is 270 minutes, which equals 15600 seconds. As there are 24 frames per second, it was necessary to make 374,000 clicks of the camera shutter and miniature movements of the puppets. This calculation gives us an idea what puppet animation means in reality, and clearly shows the amount of patience Ali Kubik must possess to bring her 'actors' to life. □