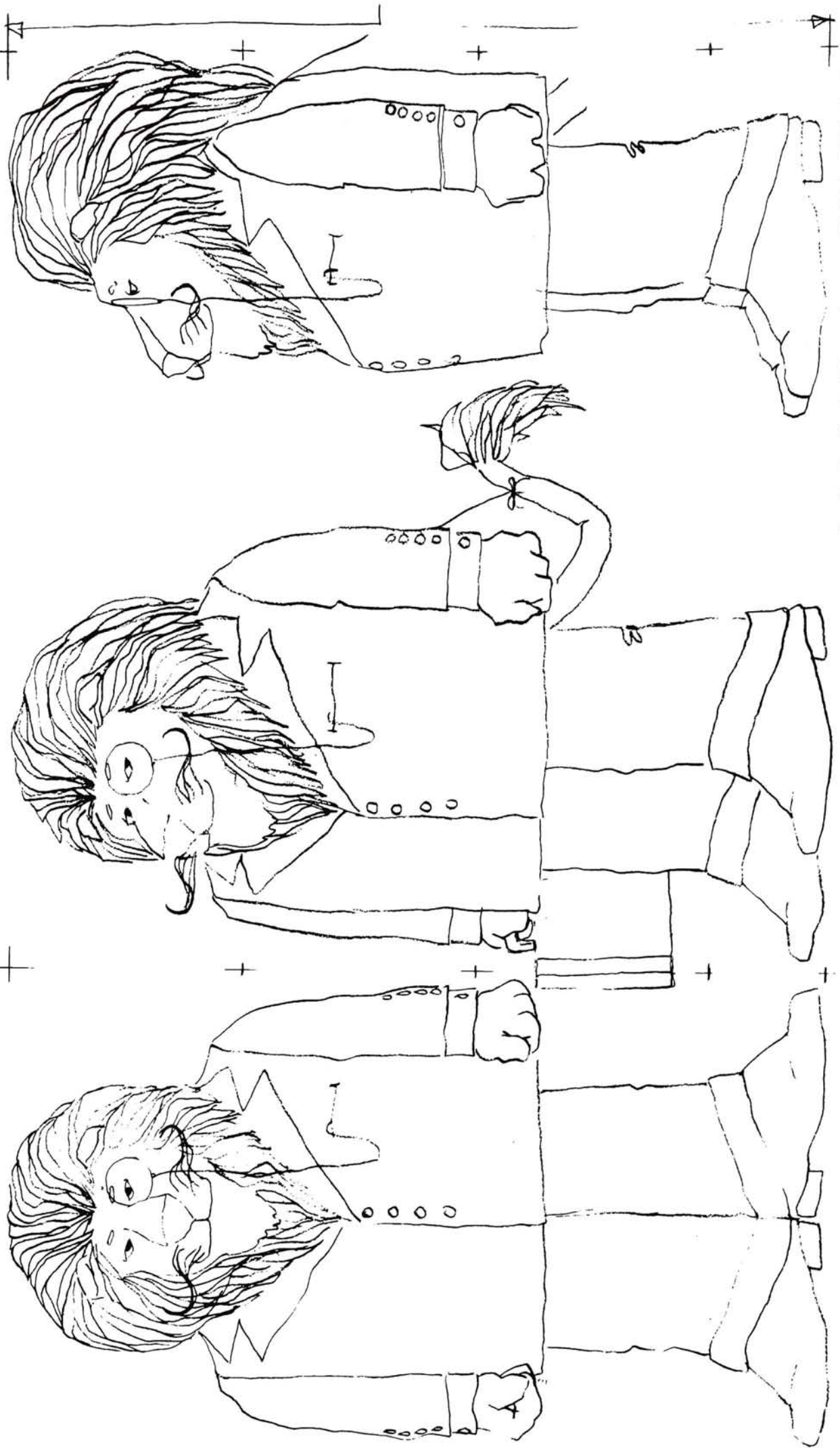


# montreal animating upstairs

by Connie Tadros



Sketches for a Bank of Montreal commercial: Michael Mills Productions

Crowded rooms at the top of long flights of stairs, gay drawings pinned on the walls and bodies bent over light tables, miscellaneous people who come and go and sometimes actually work with a skeleton staff of five. There you have a composite picture of the functioning animation studios in Montreal. These studios – Michael Mills Productions, Boxcar Films, Kohill Productions, Disada and Les Films Quebec Love – share still another characteristic: strong feelings about the National Film Board of Canada.

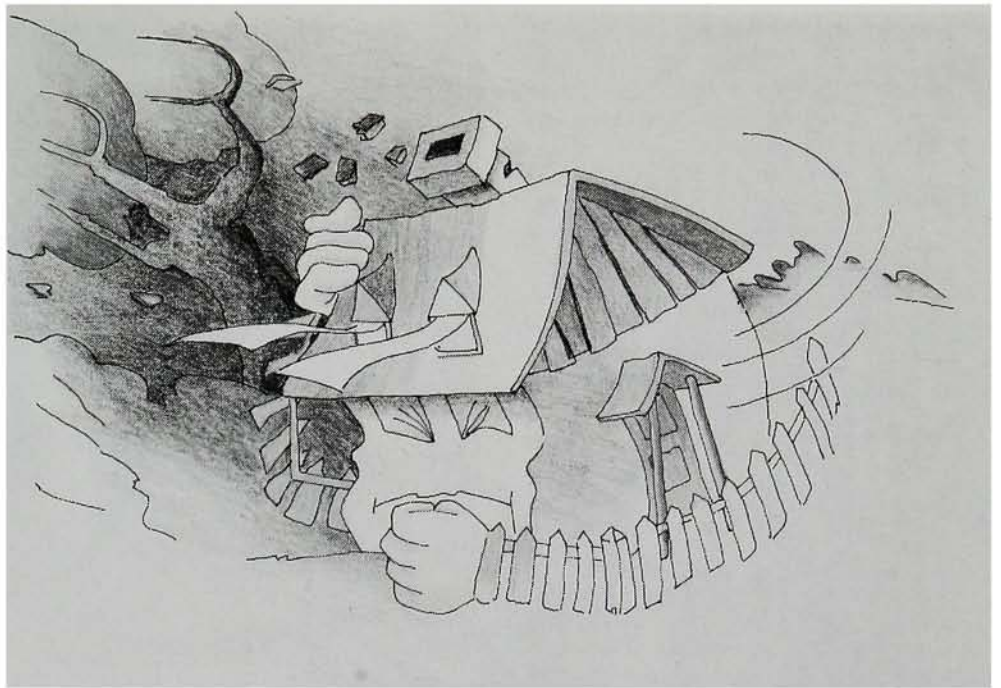
## Michael Mills Productions

Michael Mills Productions, like Boxcar, sprang from the ashes of Potterton Productions.\* After seven years at the NFB, Mills had taken a leave of absence to direct, design and adapt Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*; Potterton held the overall producer's contract with *Reader's Digest*. The success of this TV special, following hard on the heels of his successful NFB short *Evolution*, prompted Mills to open his own studio rather than return to the Film Board.

Being on his own, Mills says, is fantastic. "The Film Board drove me up the wall, to be honest. There's a sense of freedom there but the pace is so damn slow. A lot of ideas took so long to get off the ground; all that red tape..." Nevertheless, his prior training in England and his long association with the NFB have produced an animator who is devoted to experimentation and technology.

About 85% of Mills' work is in animation, the rest being in special-effects commercials using a combination of animation and live action. Currently he is working on packaging a half-hour special for TV, but the bulk of his contracts are for commercials and he is happy with the outlet they give him to work on experimental techniques. Generally, he says, clients want him to become involved in the initial concepts and, perhaps as a result, his commercial work is very satisfying.

What does he like about Montreal? Ironically, it's the presence of the Film Board. "They've got lots of



A house catching cold for a Union Gas commercial: Michael Mills Productions

lovely equipment. While I can't use half of it, I can go up and prod it and poke it and find out how it all works. And I do actually hire it if I can't find similar equipment elsewhere." Just lately, for instance, he rented out the Board's aerial-image camera which was bought when he was at the Board and which, as far as he knows, has to date only been used by him.

Mills opened an office in Toronto and has a representative in New York. The motivation was partly defensive, in case Montreal proved lukewarm to an English animator. Now he states that 75% of his work is in French and that he's had to neglect the Toronto office for the time being. Recently he did get some work from a Toronto agency – when it went down to New York to find an animator and saw Mills' show reel. The agency came back north and gave the job to Mills – the great Canadian way, *n'est-ce pas?*

## Boxcar Films

Two young animators who worked along with Mills at Potterton, Julian Szuchopa and Paul Sabella, founded Boxcar Films two years ago. Paul had done some freelance work at the NFB, having been trained in fine arts in Egypt, but Julian just happened along when Potterton was starting out and was trained on the job. Again, it was Potterton's demise that got them into business for themselves.

Their work is basically commercial, with about 10% coming from the educational field – mostly *Sesame Street* contracts straight from New York. They echo Mills' feeling that commercials call for creativity and emphasize that agencies are always

looking for fresh approaches, new effects. Boxcar is in good shape, according to the owners, because they offer more for the money. "We try to give something special, something the client wouldn't get elsewhere." As long as they can continue to produce good, creative work, Szuchopa and Sabella say, they are optimistic.

Still they speak with surprise when they mention that their commercial for H. Salt Fish and Chips of Toronto won a prize at the Canadian TV Commercial Festival. Boxcar is a low-key, low-profile operation. Nevertheless, having tasted glamor once, they've entered a film in Ottawa 76.

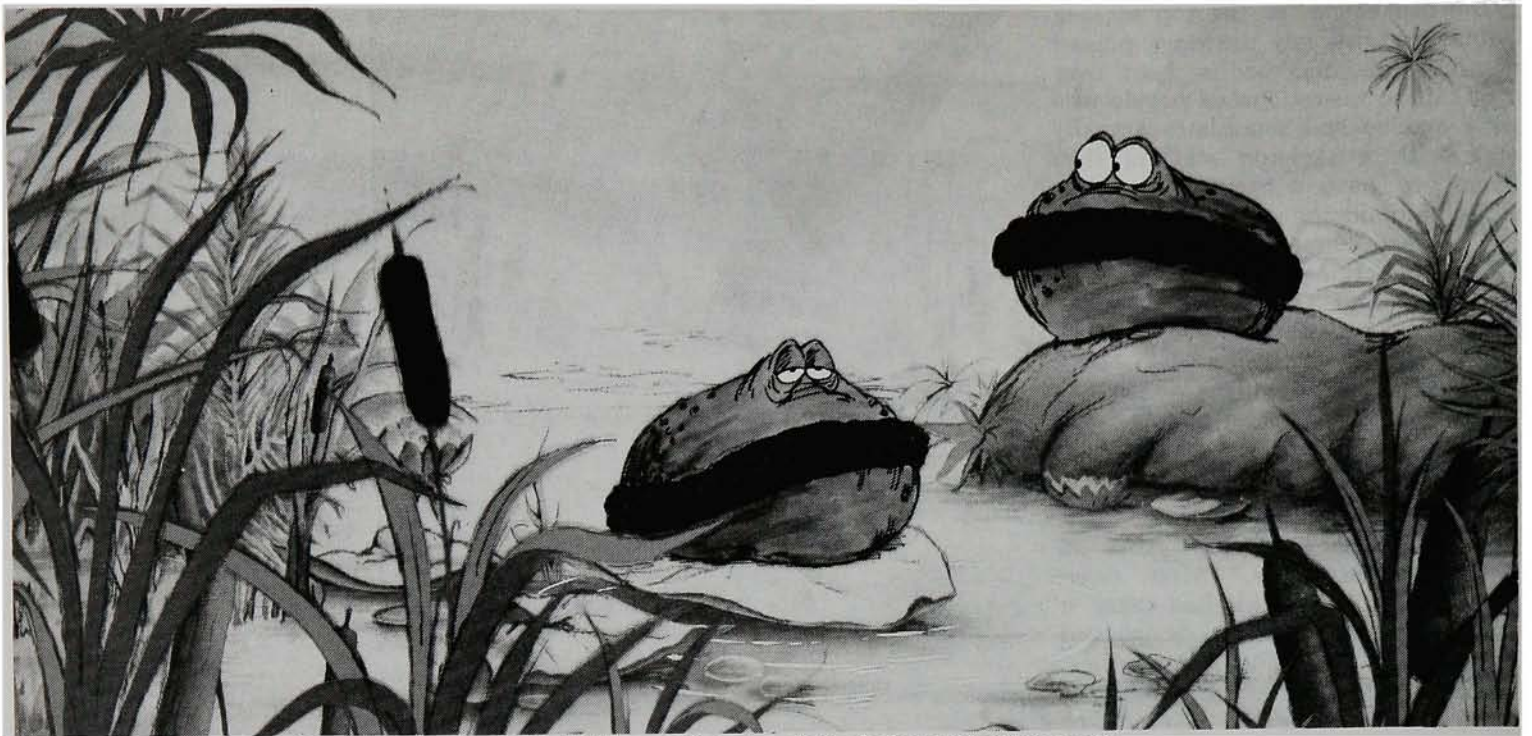
Business has recently started coming in from the Quebec government and Boxcar is now a very busy place. The future doesn't worry them. "Potterton went under because it got too big and it made a few mistakes financially. When you have a company the size of Boxcar, you have control over it." Having just bought an animation camera, Boxcar is still growing.

## Kohill Productions

In the west end of Montreal, Kohill Productions has been operating for about two years. Koos Hillenaar founded the company after six years of freelance work, and now counts the CBC (*Sesame Street*) and ad agencies as his principal clients. Having been trained in Holland, and having worked in Germany and Sweden, Hillenaar specializes in 3-D or puppet animation, a genre less popular in Canada than in Europe.

Over the years, his clientele has changed from being almost entirely educational to being commercial, a change which he is not sure he likes.

\* *Potterton Productions Inc.* was founded in 1968 and went bankrupt in 1974. It had 20 permanent employees and hired freelancers – sometimes over 100 at a time – when work demanded. Besides producing five feature-length animated films, Potterton also produced three live-action features (*Fleur bleue*, *The Rainbow Boys* and *Child Under a Leaf*). It is generally thought that these last features, coupled with an exaggerated overhead, were responsible for the downfall of the company. Gerald Potterton is currently working – in California. Ed.



Unhappy hamburgers in a Boxcar production (H. Salt Fish and Chips) made for designer Dino Kotopoulos

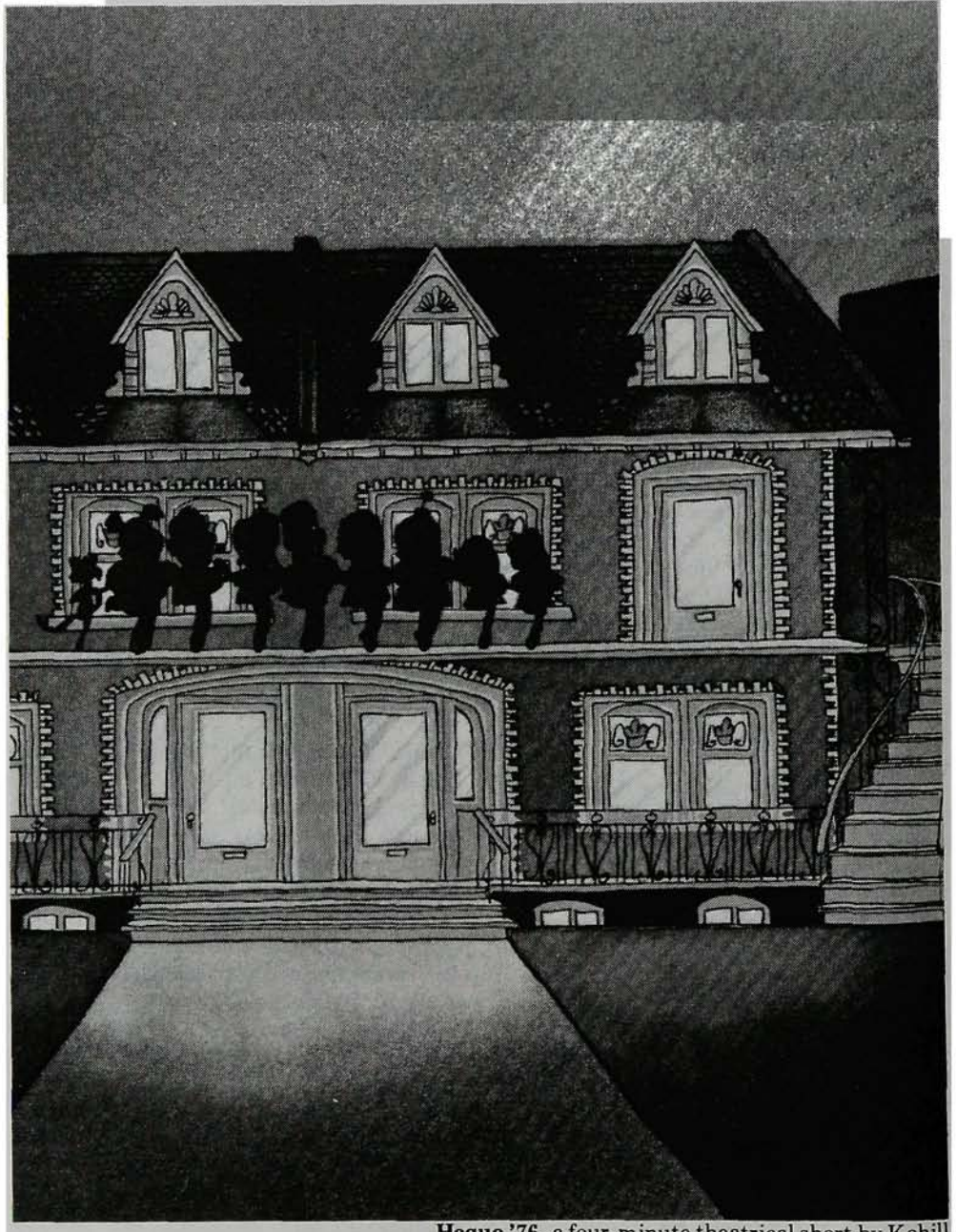
"I prefer working in educational films because there's a lot more freedom, freedom to be creative. Commercials have just one thing in mind: to sell the product. Plus the advertising agencies themselves get involved in the creative part. In educational work, we do 75% of the creative work ourselves."

Hillenaar speaks about the enormous market in the US for educational films (where most of his work comes from) and states that Canada has neither the money nor the market to support large, specialized products. He has done a film on reading for the deaf. "In Canada, there are only three or four big institutions which could buy a program like that. Here, there just isn't the market."

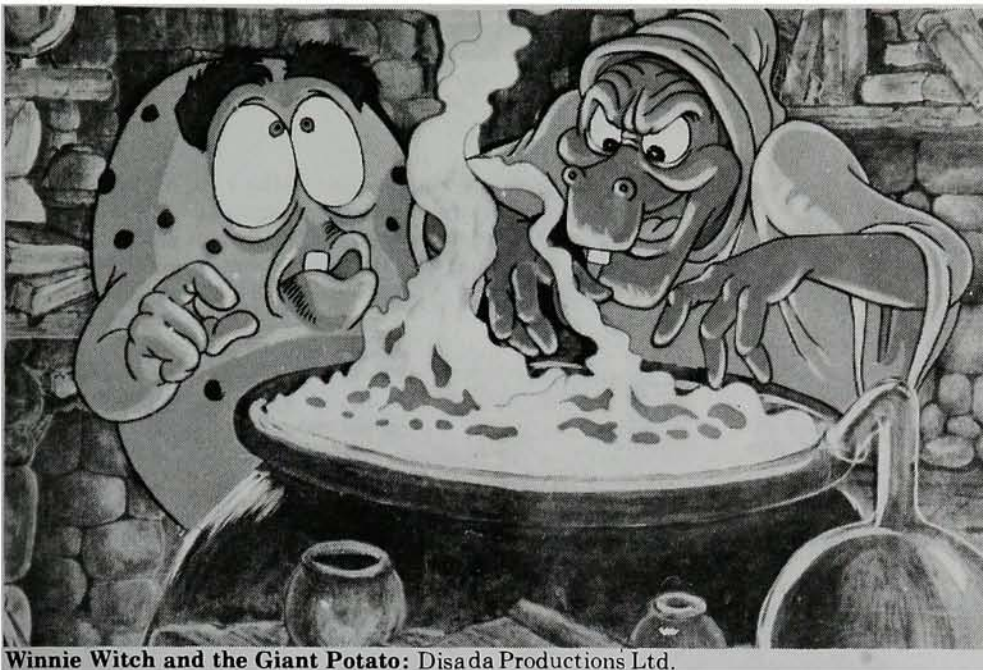
The demand for animated films follows the demand for film in general, and has its own ups and downs besides. "There seem to be periods of three or four years when animation gets more popular," Hillenaar points out. "Everyone wants to insert some animation into his product, whether it be commercial or documentary. And then there are years when it goes down, when it's not as fashionable to use it." Hillenaar feels that the demand has diminished recently and looks forward to the day when animation will again be greeted with greater enthusiasm.

## Disada

Both Disada and Les Films Quebec Love stemmed from amateur groups pooling their resources to make their own films and later converting themselves into bonafide businesses.



Hequo '76, a four-minute theatrical short by Kohill



Winnie Witch and the Giant Potato: Disada Productions Ltd.

Peter Adamakos, the president of Disada, had been making animated films since elementary school. Disada was a grouping of enthusiasts which functioned for five years before becoming professional in 1970. During the initial period, material and equipment was bought through subscriptions paid by the users, and many projects were realized by the collective efforts of the members. Like the other Montreal companies, 80% of the work Disada does today comes from the sponsored field; about 55% are commercials, the rest are educational films. The remaining 20% are films which Disada makes for itself. Adamakos remarks that all the educational films made by his company come from the States. "I don't think we've ever done a Canadian educational. That's because of the Film Board's being here."

One can almost see Adamakos changing hats, picking up the "president-of-the-Society-of-Filmmakers" cap which he wore last year, as he talks about the NFB. "The main stumbling block to animation in Canada is the National Film Board. And as long as the NFB continues to have a monopoly in live action or in animation, we're never going to have a film industry, much less an animation industry. I know most people believe it and are afraid to say it but I'd rather be right than popular." Adamakos does mention that the rising costs of live-action films are making animated films more competitive. He hopes that pay TV will also help the animation industry.

The future is promising. "As our audience gets more sophisticated and our concepts of film more abstract and philosophical, we are going to need films to illustrate things like

housing shortages and what-not. These complex subjects can only be shown in an entertaining way through animation," he comments. "There is still something about a moving drawing that attracts people to watch. If **Barry Lyndon** had been animated, no one would have complained."

### Les Films Quebec Love

The young, enthusiastic animators who constitute Les Films Quebec Love are a product both of the revolution in Quebec's educational system which created the Université de Québec, and of the federal government's subsidy programs called Local Initiatives and Opportunities for Youth. Fresh from the university film program, they set themselves up as a cooperative and managed to make their own films using grant money. Today, understanding that grants don't go on forever (they did receive 7 LIP grants) and having exhausted the Canada Council too, they have reorganized to "go professional".

With Nicole Robert as president, Quebec Love has created its own hierarchy and is going after commercial contracts. So far, work has come in from the Olympic Organizing Committee, from agencies, and from other producers who want animated credits for their films. Quebec Love has a special relationship with Québécois artists; it took its name from a song by Charlebois which it animated and now Beau Dommage, a musical group, has just written a song expressly for them. Robert hopes that her company will be able to work within the artists' domain, specializing in films which stem from live shows.

In working with shorts, Robert believes that animated films communicate more quickly to the spectator. They tend to be funny, attractive films. As for features, the public wants films which reflect everyday reality. She wonders if bits of animation couldn't be inserted in live-action features. "Animation is fun," Robert says, "it's the candy. But it can hardly take the place of the whole meal."

Not only are all of these companies located physically upstairs (with the exception of Kohill), all of them but Disada sprang up two years ago. Potterton's disappearance helped, and perhaps so did the NFB's decision not to enlarge its permanent staff. Certainly, it is not possible to animate in Montreal without being aware of the Film Board. The independent studios hire NFB-trained freelancers to help them complete projects, and are thankful for the help which the NFB staffers are always ready to give. Nevertheless, the pace and the wealth of the NFB combine to create resentment. One can't help but wonder what the profile of animation in Montreal would be, were the NFB to clearly define its role and leave to the private sector as much work as this sector could bear. □



Stepping out for Les Films Quebec Love