

# the animation addiction

by joanne emerson



Animation — above all, it's a question of draftsmanship. Here, instructor Jim McCaulay discusses background layout with student Cathy Parkes

*For the layman, "animation" conjures up the fun and frolics of Bambi, the fear of "R-A-I-D!!!" and Saturday morning cartoons. For the practicing addict, "animation" means infinite patience, exceptional draftsmanship, and a lifelong devotion to the cause.*

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*Sheridan College of Applied Arts and Technology offers a professional-level, three-year, diploma program in animation — one, of only two programs of its kind in North America. In the following article, two Sheridan animation instructors and a graduate give the inside story on what it is to be an animator, the career possibilities that exist for graduates, and some of the rewards and pitfalls of this highly-specialized art.*

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Once animation gets into your blood, you're hooked for life.

Animation, the most dynamic visual medium, is a highly disciplined art that requires great patience, dedication and hard work to master. It encompasses all art forms in some fashion from writing to dancing, music to drawing. Those who get hooked love their jobs and have a commitment to their art which they seldom lose, despite the effort that goes into it.

Dick Friesen is hooked. He has been since he was a kid when he created a vista using a shoe box and blue cellophane. Many years later, at the age of 50, with 25 years of free-lance experience under his belt, he still considers himself a kid in the business.

Friesen looks at two of the great old timers, Cy Young and Ugo D'Orsi, both of whom died in their seventies, and says, "I'm only 50 and have lots of time to become an old timer."

Friesen received his formal training at the Disney Studios in California. From 1973 to 1977 he taught animation full-time at Sheridan College in Oakville. This summer he has returned to Sheridan to teach the new International Summer School of Animation, which has attracted students from as far away as Japan, Turkey and Yugoslavia, as well as those from Canada and the U.S.

"Those who are just starting out in animation don't realize the work involved and just what kind of a person it takes to become a master animator," says Friesen, explaining that it takes seven years to learn how to animate; and even then, the rest of your life is spent learning.

"Some students come to the college with the idea that it's all play and no work. They soon find out it's a lot of work, and success depends on their ability to draw, which is the core of animation. Many students drop out of college as a result. Last year, 100 students enrolled in the fall-spring semester and at the end of the year there were 64."

Sheridan's animation program co-ordinator, Tom Halley, wants to develop a drawing test as a method to screen prospective students.

"To be a good animator you have to be a good draftsman, know what you are drawing and how to do it. If anyone attempts to learn how to animate and draw at the same time, it becomes an impossibility," says Halley.

There are two distinct breeds of animators, according to Friesen: there is the 'cartoon' animator and the 'industrial and educational' animator. "When you tell people you are an animator, they look at you quizzically until you relate it to Mickey Mouse. Many associate the art with animated cartoons," he says.

But animation goes beyond the entertainment and TV fields. Scientists, educators, advertisers and industry use animation as a practical tool for teaching and selling. "Just name a subject and you can find animation," says Friesen.

Over the years Friesen has worked on several industrial

training films. He produced one instructional animation series on the operation of ejection seats for aircraft pilots. But his specialty and real love is fantasy, science fiction films and special effects animation.

Both Halley and Friesen are concerned about the quality and future of animation. There is only a handful of top animators left in the world today and Disney animators are slowly dying off.

"And there are only a few reputable places that offer good animation training. This is why Sheridan's role in animation education is so important," says Friesen. They agree that good animators are also coming out of the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California — an animation school founded by Disney.

Another concern Friesen and Halley share is that the quality of animation is going down because of the Saturday morning cartoons.

They criticize the abstract method of animation in which just the mouth of the character moves. (Abstract animation is gradually replacing full animation, or the kinetic method, in which all parts of the image move.) They consider Disney's Snow White to be one of the all-time great, fully animated productions.

During their years as both teachers of animation and as animators working in industry, Halley and Friesen have made some important observations. Friesen points out that some students expect the equipment to make the film; but that's not where it starts. It all gets back to the drawing. The camera is just a means to an end.

On the subject of equipment Friesen notes that computerization has hit the animation industry. He sees it developing in two phases. The first is computer-control camera in which the computer assists production methods. It acts as a tool to the artist. The second phase, which is fast coming, is computer animation used to assist the animator. The animator draws into it and the computer does the drudgery.

Friesen urges animators to protect themselves and their work: "Make sure you get credit for your work." His philosophy on this subject used to be 'Don't praise me, pay me.' But he said this adage doesn't apply for him today. "A credit on yesterday's film could mean tomorrow's job. It's not an ego thing, it's simply good business practice. You're a professional, you should get credit."

In addition to patience, tenacity, and drawing ability, animators have to love their work, be prepared to work long hours and travel. "And even then, there is no promise of regular employment after graduation," remarks Halley. However, things are getting better now, as more students are finding jobs in the Toronto area rather than looking for employment overseas and in the U.S. Next to Los Angeles and New York, Toronto is now rated the third largest animation centre in North America.

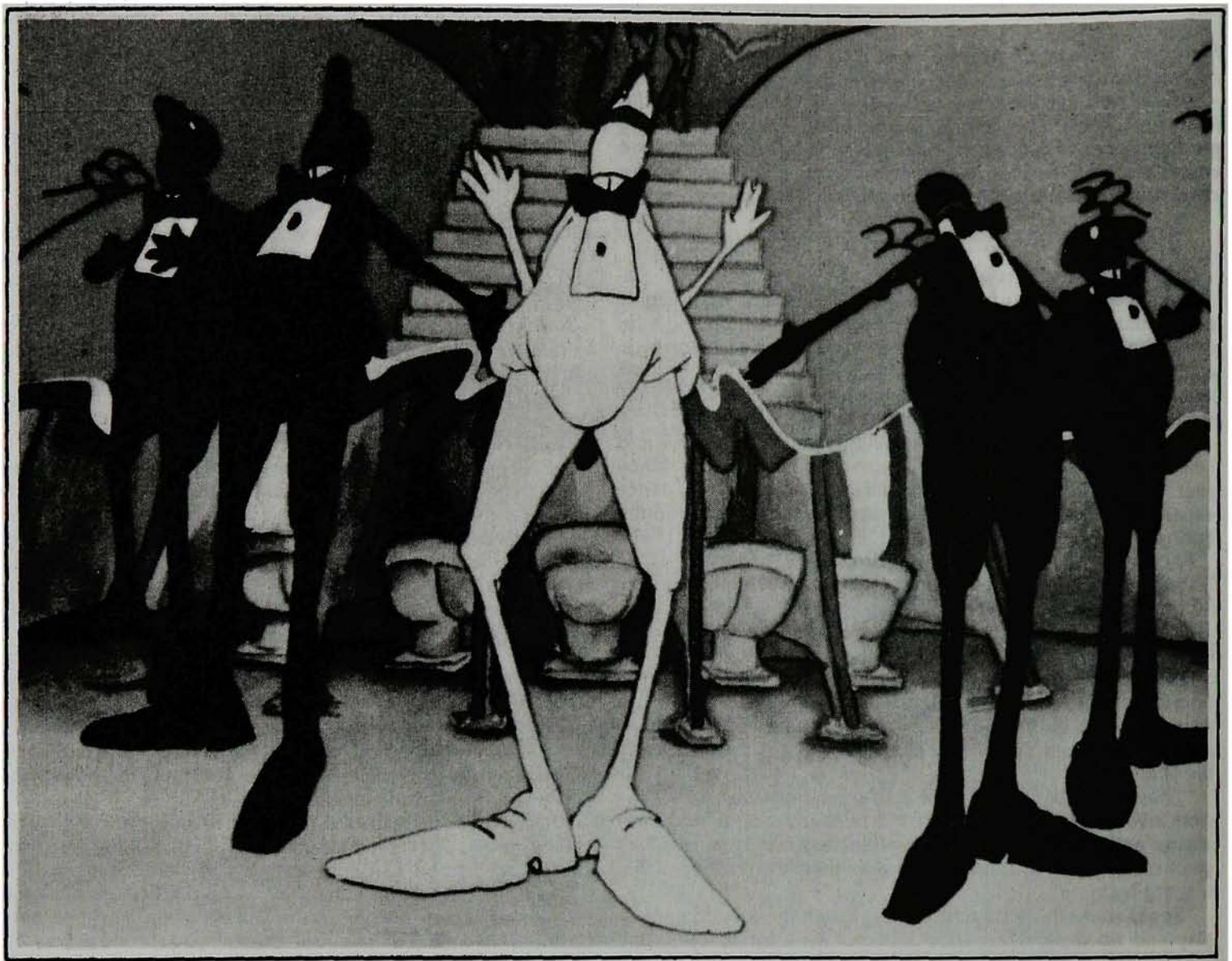
"At one time the top names in animation were leaving Canada and going to other parts of the world to work," Halley comments. "Today that is changing. There are more jobs available than there are top graduates. Those graduates who left for Europe and the U.S. are now returning to this area and forming their own companies, free-lancing, or working for film studios. Some are even teaching."

Halley cautions those people wanting to go into business for themselves. He suggests that they experience the work force first. "Find a good established company such as Hanna-Barbera and learn the production technique, then you have a better chance of making it on your own."

Friesen tells his students at the beginning of the semester that their chances are 50/50 they are going to fail. And when they leave Sheridan their chances are 50/50 that they will get a job. "Not all of them are going to hit the glory trail," he says. Even so, according to Halley, about 75 per cent of Sheridan graduates get jobs related to the training. They can be found in most animation studios in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, and several have

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Standing up to be counted... from the award-winning, student-made, animated film, *Da Da Da*

opened their own studios. A couple are working for Dick Williams Studios in England; another is working for UPA in London; one is employed at a studio in Paris, France; six are free-lancing in California; one student has gone to an optical house to learn optical printing; another is a projectionist; two graduates are working for Chuck Jones Films; many are free-lancing in Toronto; and there are 50 Sheridan graduates working at Nelvana (Animated Commercials) in Toronto, which represents half of the company's work force.

Friesen recalls in 1976 when 30 Sheridan graduates packed up and headed south of the border to Los Angeles to find work. "They were just like cream, they went right to the top!"

One of those students, the leader of the group, was Al Gaivoto, 28, who is now back in Toronto running an animation company (Canimage) with partners Colin Baker and Roger Chiasson. Gaivoto claims that, "More talented young people are needed in the animation industry. There is definitely a lack of young talent in L.A. He echoes the advice given by Halley and Friesen, that you have to make drawing your life and you have to love your work. After a long day at Canimage, he goes home and draws for relaxation. "I have to draw. If you can draw you've got it made. Many people can see the object, but can't draw it."

Gaivoto fears there are too many semi-average animators coming out of the schools today.

He also urges students going into animation to first think about their future employer. "Think about the job you want at the end of school and then aim in that direction whether it be commercials, NFB, free-lancer or whatever. Set your sights in the early stage, then make yourself useful."

For now, Gaivoto's sights are pretty well set. He says that animation is his future, and for the time being he wants to concentrate on Saturday morning cartoons. Mainly, he wants to improve them. He feels that the writing and animation are so bad, the programs insult the kids who watch them. Comparing the kinetic (or full animation) to the limited or abstract form of animation, Gaivoto considers that each has its own usefulness. Overanimation, in which the image never stops moving, is just as bad as underanimation. There are advantages to both methods. Disney, he says, managed to master the technique of using just the right amount of animation.

In summary, Friesen emphasizes that animation is an international business. "If you are qualified you can get work wherever you feel like it. You just have to be competent." That is the key. ■