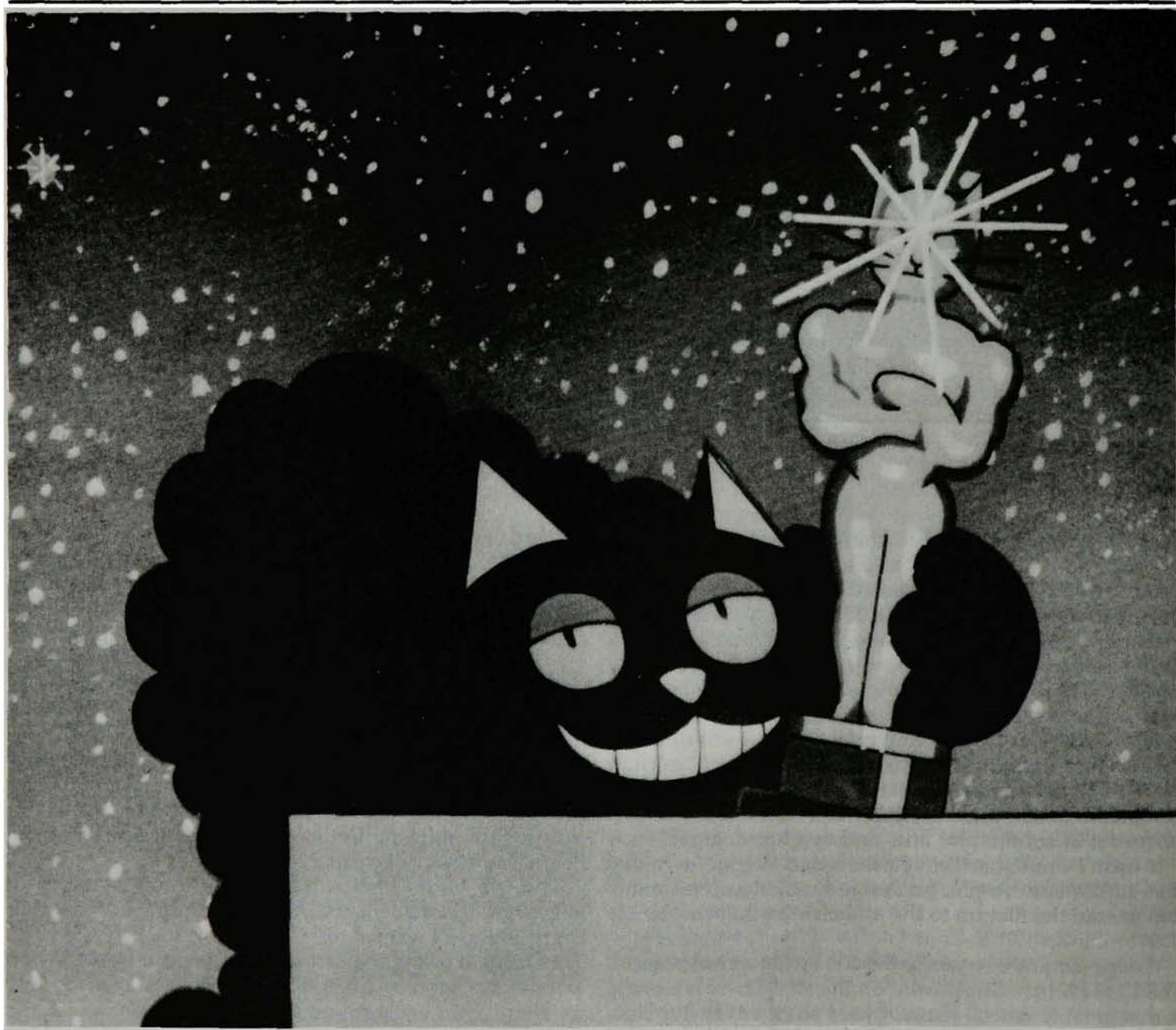

larger than life

by gita rotenberg

With her new, animated, non-violent film series for children, producer Louise Ranger has made a refreshing breakaway — and turned a fantasy into reality.



"Melanie" — a very contented cat indeed!

After twelve years of producing short films, feature films, and commercials, Louise Ranger had every reason to believe that she was "on top" of film production. Her years of experience in mechanics of production, the necessary budgeting, and the sales of the films had, no doubt, prepared her for most of the contingencies of the film industry. Or so she thought — until she began to produce her first major animated film, **Les voyages de Tortillard**, or **The Secret Railroad**, a series of thirteen half-hour films. Suddenly, the ground rules changed. Years of experience in the production of live action films had not prepared her for this new departure.

"I did not know how long it takes to make a second's work of animated film, how many drawings were necessary. I didn't know how much camera time it would take to shoot, nor the fact that if you had more drawings, the paint and trace department had to take longer. And where one goes over-budget in animation is in salaries. In our first series of **Les voyages** we ran six months longer than we had planned. In our current second series, we are finishing right on time. Obviously, we learned a lot!"

Ranger explains: "One of the main problems in animated films is finding an animator who can produce as fast as the schedule requires. It took us a year to find one who could produce five minutes of film within three weeks. He didn't miss, and managed to keep up this pace for a year and a half. Until we found him, we had animators who ran into four or five weeks for the same five minutes of film."

Louise Ranger's director and creator of animation is Peter Sanders, who supervised the design of the characters, the lay-out, the set, and the number of drawings per second; three animators work under him. Sanders previously directed **The Selfish Giant** and **The Little Mermaid**. The film series' designer is Danielle Marleau who earlier designed **Contes et légendes du Québec**.

The second series of **Les voyages** was somewhat easier for Ranger because she used the same animators. Sanders, already knew their speed at drawing and could more accurately plan the production schedule. Furthermore, there were three main characters. In fact, it turned out that two out of every five minutes of the second series' drawings were repeats.

Aside from budgeting concerns, what are the outstanding differences between a live action and an animated film? This question requires more thought. Ranger thinks aloud:

"In animation there is more administration than in live action. Coordination is of supreme importance. And the usual time spent with actors is greatly reduced with animation, obviously. The entire series required only 26 hours of work with actors, when we needed them for their voices on the sound track. But there is no real involvement with actors. Animation is quieter work.

"Coordination is all important: A delay in animation creates a delay in paint and trace, in camera work, in editing, and in sound track. You have to catch the delay

Gita Rotenberg is a native New Yorker whose writings have appeared in various American publications. Presently she is a free-lance writer living in Montreal.



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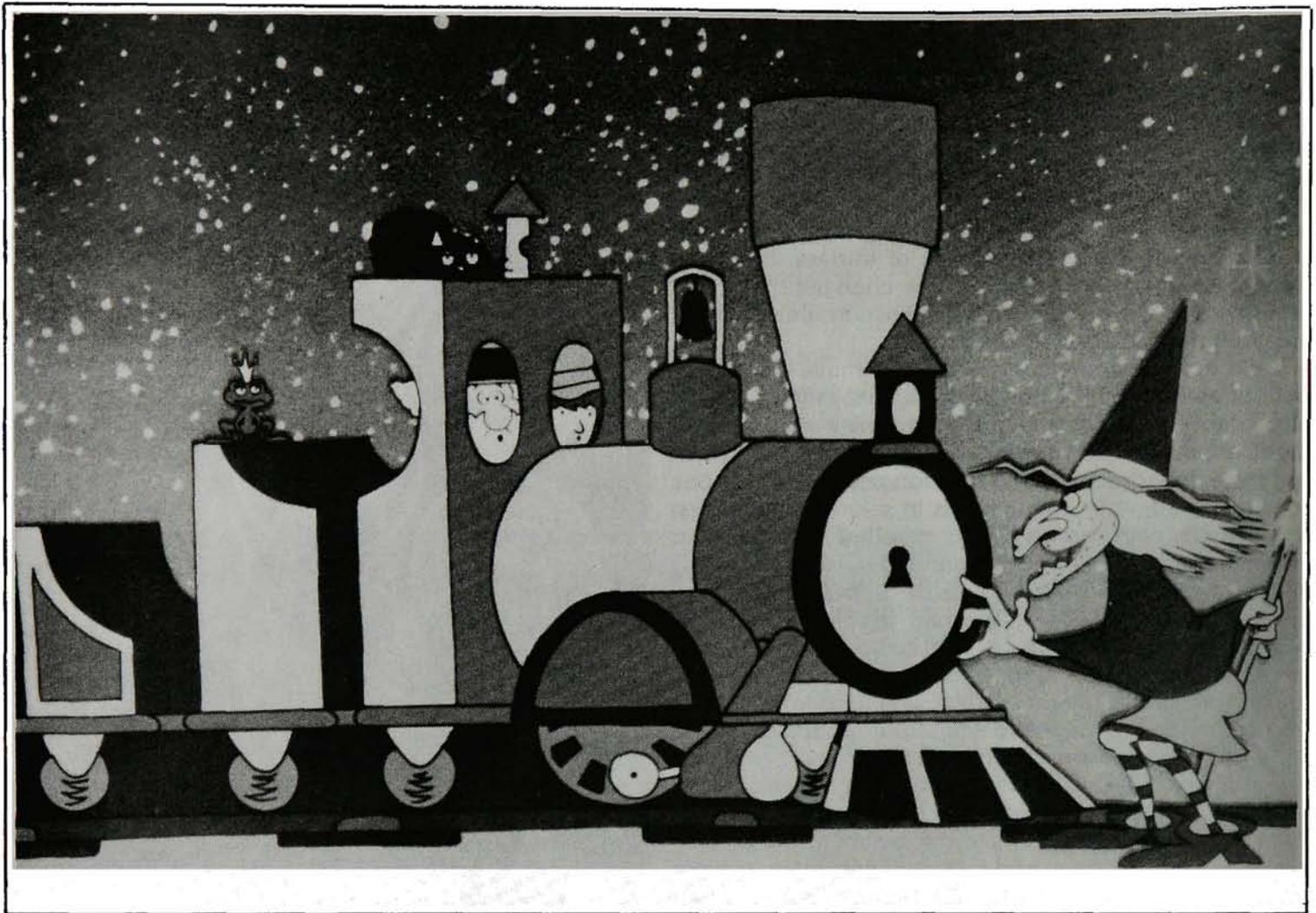
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Les voyages de Tortillard (The Secret Railroad) is breaking new ground in the field of animated films for children

right at the beginning. Once you are a month behind schedule, it is too late — everything becomes disorganized. With the first series, we did not know where to anticipate delays. In live action, I knew how to minimize the effects of a delay, by working on other aspects of the production. I worked in make-up, accessories, and costumes, and could use the time constructively. But when an animator was delayed, I was at a loss to find a solution. Unlike the director who is too involved artistically in what he is doing, it is the producer who has the time and distance who must find solutions to delays.”

Overall, Louise Ranger found more stress in the production of live action films. Part of the increased stress comes from the fact that there is a crew of 30 to 40 to contend with, and problems of delivery cannot be anticipated as well as with animation.

Not that animation does not have its stresses: for Ranger, the biggest was financing.

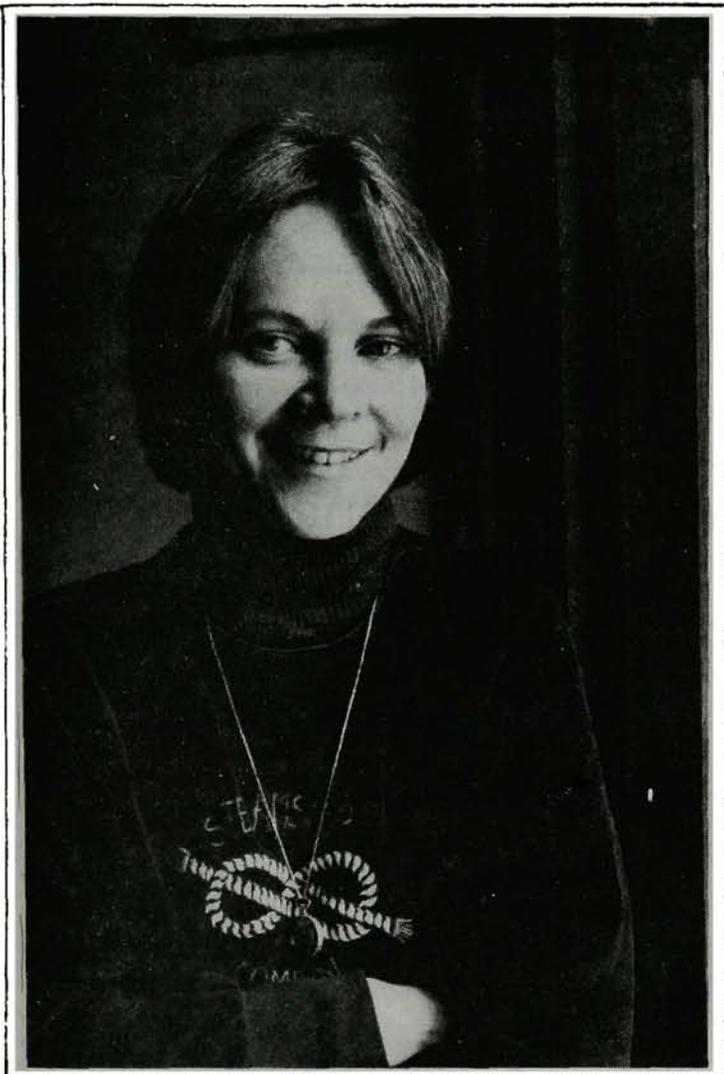
“In the first series of **Les voyages de Tortillard** I relied on the artistic crew for the budget, which was my mistake. In the second series, there was much less stress because I knew what I was talking about. Administering is knowing what you are doing!”

Les voyages de Tortillard is only the second children’s film that Louise Ranger has produced. While working with Onyx Films Inc., she produced 5 five-minute children’s

films for the Pavillon du Québec at Man and His World. What is the biggest difference between the content of “children’s” films and that of “general” films? What is suitable for children’s films?

Ranger believes that one should “leave to the child the possibility of discovering things. One has to include all sorts of little details for the child to pick up, even the spider in the background who is busy spinning its web. You must make the child interested in what is happening, and you can best do this by appealing to his or her sense of adventure.”

She feels that there are two other elements which make a children’s film successful. She sees great value in fantasy for children, if only because at no other time in a person’s life is the imagination allowed to develop in the same way. For Ranger, fantasy is more than just good entertainment: Rather, it allows the child to be in touch with his or her fears without being overwhelmed by them. The film’s hero, i.e. the viewer, has control over that which terrifies him or her, and this brings no small measure of comfort to the young viewer. As a mother who has watched “too many” bad films together with her young son, she focuses on a second aspect of children’s films: the production can present a tale to a child, but the lessons to be drawn from it must be conclusions arrived at by the child. There is no room for preaching to the child with a moralistic tone.



Producer Louise Ranger is out to prove that it's imagination, not violence that turns kids on

Even more impressive than her tackling a new form of film is Louise Ranger's decision to produce first-rate *non-violent* children's films. She and her crew have produced an exquisite series of richly imaginative children's cinema. While so many producers decry the wanton violence and cruelty in what passes for children's fare, Louise Ranger is actually doing something to rectify the situation. Her two series revolve around a little boy, Simon, who undertakes all sorts of fantasy-filled journeys in his little train. The plot and drawings of the series are so ingenious that each age group can derive a different meaning and pleasure from the films. From experience Ranger has found that the visual first catches the child, but that on subsequent viewings, the dialogue becomes more of a focal point. Adults will chuckle at the film's parody of "grown-up" talk, at its poking fun at the clichés we too often resort to when addressing children. At one point in the film, a bird (who is atypically trying to sleep in!) scolds an adult figure with the classic line "Some of us are trying to sleep." Within the context of a child's fantasy, the line works, and we giggle at ourselves.

For better or worse, the crucial test for any producer lies in the film's sales. How is **Les voyages de Tortillard**

far? Louise Ranger happily reports that the first series has been sold all over Canada. Its reception in France, Switzerland, Belgium, Hong Kong, and Australia is most encouraging: The United States market poses a bit of a problem. Below the border there is a tendency to buy that which has been bought before, and so films featuring superheroes and violence have the advantage. Although her non-violent series has been called "way out," "very new," and "too progressive," there are some (including those associated with Sesame Street) who feel that in a couple of years the films will be exactly what the market will want.

One amusing response to **Les voyages**: in Germany, the film industry felt that the film series was too American, at the same time that the Americans were criticizing it for being too European! They could be talking about Canada...!

Louise Ranger: Filmography (Feature Films)

1968

La situation du Théâtre au Québec (production manager)

Red (production manager)

1969

Les mâles (production manager)

1971

Les smattes (production manager)

La conquête (production manager)

1973

Les corps célestes (production manager)

Bingo (executive producer)

1974

Gina (production manager)

Les beaux dimanches (production manager)

Les vautours (producer)

1975

Québec fête (producer)

The Far Shore (production manager)

L'absence (production manager)

1976

L'eau chaude l'eau frette (executive producer completion)

1977

Les voyages de Tortillard (producer)

Louise Ranger's other work includes 12 short films and approximately 250 commercials. In 1977 she was vice-president of L'Association des producteurs de films du Québec.