

## Peep and the Village

by Patricia Thompson

It was a year ago when I heard that, for the first time in many, many years, the Ontario Studio of the National Film Board in Toronto was producing two animation projects: **Peep and the Big Wide World** and **Village of Idiots**. The time lag gives you an idea of how long animation can be on location. The two enterprises are as different as chalk and cheese – **Peep**, a series, is nearing completion, while **Village of Idiots** will take much longer and may, indeed, warrant another update in a year's time. So, let's stop all this titillation and get down to the facts...

### THE ANIMATORS

Kaj Pindal came to Canada in 1957 from his native Denmark, after working on animated films there and in Sweden and Germany. He went to the National Film Board in Montreal expecting to stay one year, but remained until 1977 making, among others, **What On Earth**, **King-size**, and **Caninabis (Junkie Dog)**. He then taught in the notable animation course at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, but continued to work on contract with the NFB, turning out a series of about 15 fire prevention vignettes featuring his Old Lady character from **I Know An Old Lady Who Swallowed A Fly**. The Board made **Laughlines**, a 26-minute film about Pindal and his work, in 1979. After leaving Sheridan College in 1984, he worked on a series of around 20 short cartoons for West German TV – "really one-liners on sports themes," says Pindal. His present contract with the NFB is for a series of three 10-minute films, aimed at pre-kindergarten children, with the overall title of **Peep and the Big Wide World**.

Eugene Federenko, animator of **Village**, went to the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, where he met his col-

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# PEEP

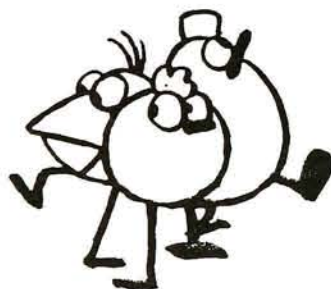
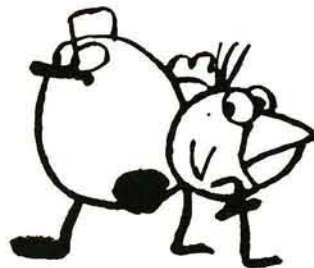
AND THE

# BIG WIDE WORLD



laborator, Rose Newlove. For 10 years they ran the Animated Film Workshop for nine- to 18-year-olds in and around Toronto, assisted by the Ontario Arts Council and the Art Gallery of Ontario. Federenko was a summer student at the National Film Board, Montreal, and this led to **Every Child** (1978/79) which won an Academy Award in 1979. Federenko returned to Toronto in 1980 and the workshops continued until 1984, when they were stopped cold by the advent of home computers. With Newlove, he worked on a series of flip-books about science, a three-year project commissioned by David Suzuki. This was interrupted for seven months by work on **Skyward**, the first animated film in the huge IMAX format, for Japan's World Fair in 1985.

drama, "...you get very involved in the story initially, and have a lot of fun on the finishing – the sound and editing... My relationship to the animators is one of support. Once there is something to see, there is something to get involved with."



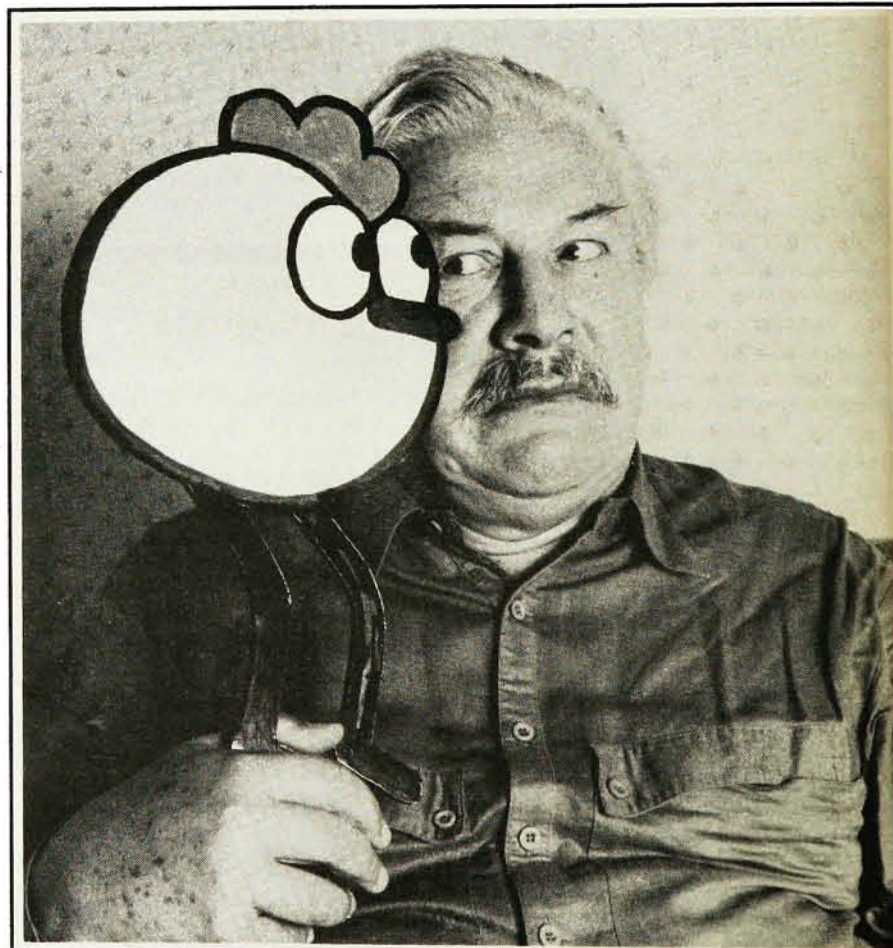
### THE PRODUCER

Michael Scott has been with the National Film Board since 1966, starting as a summer student in Montreal and then spending 11 years there. He returned to Winnipeg, the city of his birth, and stayed in the Board's office for nine more years, moving to Toronto and the Ontario Studio in 1985. Scott has directed and/or produced more than 50 documentary, dramatic and animated films, and has had his fair share of glory. A short documentary, **Whistling Smith** (1975), received an Academy Award nomination as did Richard Condie's animated film **The Big Snit** in 1985. It was during his Winnipeg period, when teamed up with longtime school friend Richard Condie, that he developed a keen interest in animators. He says it's very much like working on

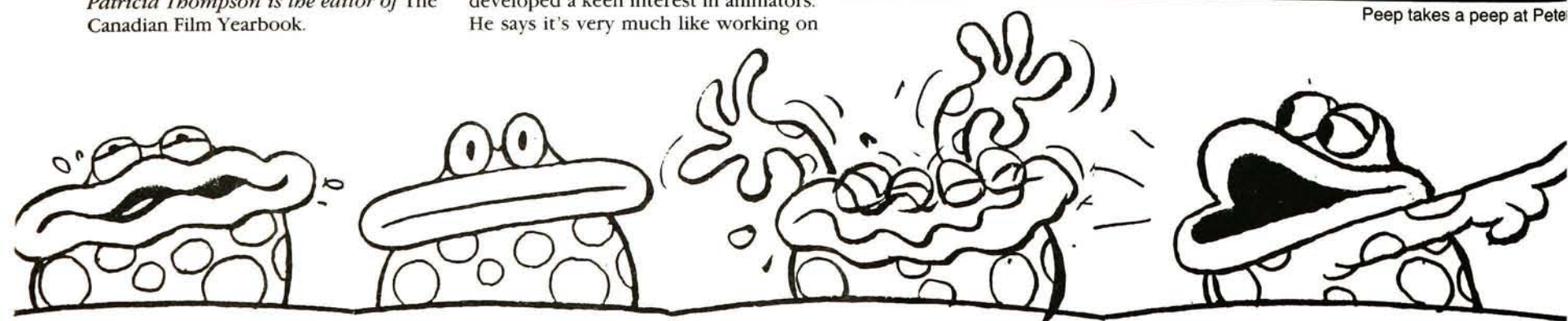
### PEEP AND THE BIG WIDE WORLD

Kaj Pindal works on **Peep and the Big Wide World** in a slightly seedy building in downtown Toronto that houses the NFB Ontario Studio. The office is stark, strictly functional, and full of bright natural light. Drawings litter the tables, spilling onto the floor, and the animation camera and stand go almost unnoticed. Pindal's assistant, Craig Welch (a graduate of Sheridan College), is sometimes next door in 'The Tomb', the dark, black-hole editing room where, among other chores, he sorts soundtracks.

Since this series of three 10-minute films is for the three-to-five tiny tots group, the drawings are engagingly clean and simple (see them frolic around these pages...), and the storyboard doesn't have too many words. The characters of Peep the chicken, Chirp the robin, and Quack the duck, come from the short, **The Peep Show**, Pindal made at the NFB in 1962. At the end of that film, the threesome was left on an island, about to try and get acquainted with the world. Now, after a quarter-century, they begin their travels



Peep takes a peep at Pete





in *Peep and the Big Wide World*, meeting a cat (not to be trusted, it is said), a ladybug, a turtle, and a frog who speaks out of both sides of his mouth.

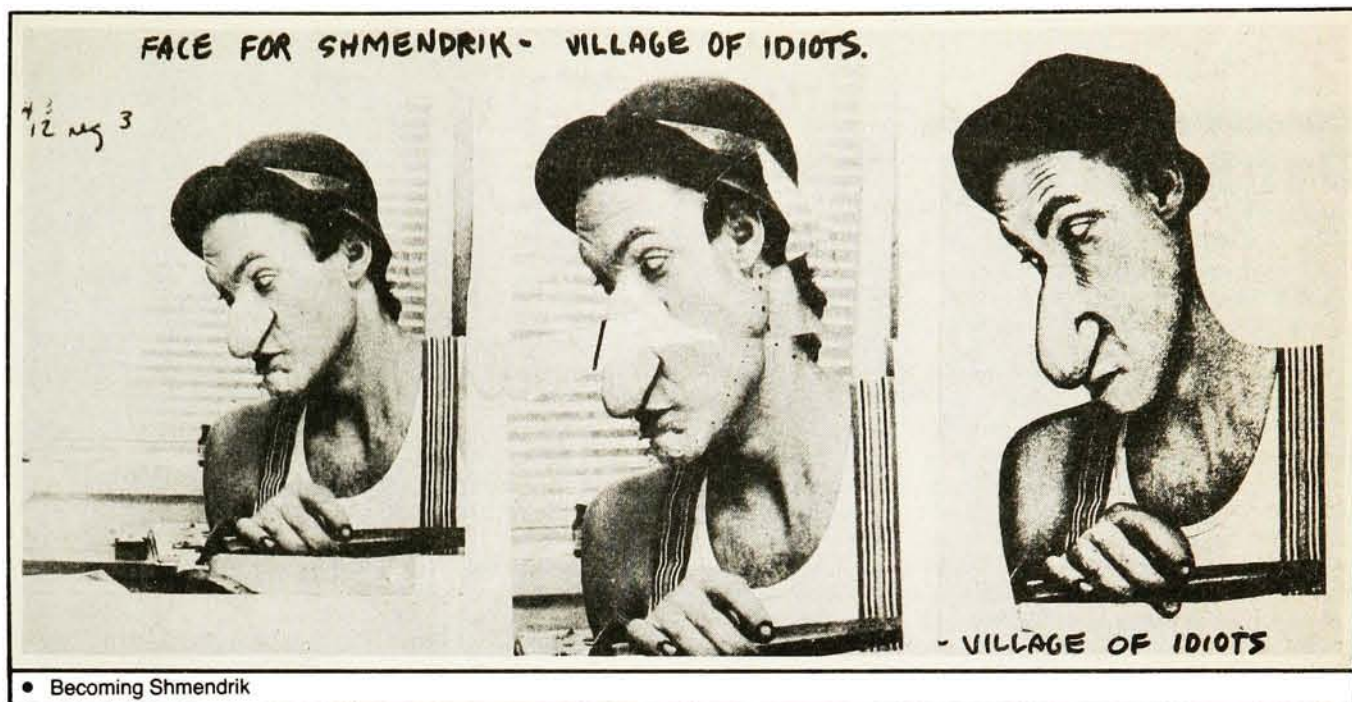
I went to a test run back in March in Jenny's room at the Clinton Street Day Care Centre in Toronto. Arlene Moscovich, who worked on the script and is now educational consultant on the series, gathered up a group ranging from 2 1/2 to 4 years. She showed them drawings of Peep, Quack and Chirp, and also Tom (the pussycat "who lives in the second movie"), Nellie (the country dog) and Frog, who are in the third film. A video came next and the children got into the spirit of things right away, cheerfully imitating the noises - "peep, peep!", "quack, Peep!", "chirp, chirp!" They started talking during the voice-over bits, but soon perked up and vastly enjoyed repeating "b-i-i-g wide world" at the end. Arlene knows 11 minutes is too long - tinies start wriggling and writhing before that - but as a test it's O.K.

The choice of a voice for the narration was thoroughly chewed over and finally, in May, Pindal met Peter Ustinov in a studio in Switzerland to record. When Ustinov was in Toronto in September he posed for some giggly publicity shots, and when Pindal asked if he'd do more, Ustinov was enthusiastic, so maybe the series will be extended.

The animation of this series has progressed rapidly, due to some successful experimentation with the computer. Pindal has drawn all the characters and situations in black outline, "Like a stained glass window without any colour," he says. They are shot straight onto a digital disk, each drawing is put onto the computer screen, Pindal selects from a vast palette of colours and a technician follows the colouring instructions. This really speeds up a time-consuming process without, Pindal avows, detracting from the essential human creative effort always associated with animation, and so the series looks like it will be ready early in the new year.

## VILLAGE OF IDIOTS

It all started when producer Michael Scott telephoned Eugene Federenko and asked him to lunch saying, "I'm interested in animators, let's talk." Federenko



• Becoming Shmendrik

had a crazy story in mind and came back to him with a storyboard. *Village of Idiots* utilizes the Russian concept of multi-plane image, in the mode of *Tale of Tales* by Yuri Norstein (which was greatly admired when shown in the early '80s at the International Animation Festival in Ottawa).

Scott and I arrived at Rose Newlove's apartment/studio over a store in the west end of Toronto, and Eugene Federenko stood at the top of a steep flight of stairs. I walked up, through the open door to the start of a long hallway, and what a wonderful sight greeted me! One wall was completely covered with the whole storyboard of *Village of Idiots* - about 200 exquisitely executed small pencil drawings, all illuminated by photofloods.

The story is based on a play of the same name by John Lazarus (who is collaborating with Federenko) which, in turn, comes from folk tales of the Polish-Jewish ghettos of the '20s, and tells of one Shmendrik living in the village of Chelm. Life there isn't good enough for him, so he starts out to walk to Warsaw to see the big city. It gets dark, the moon with her white veil, rises, and he decides to sleep by the wayside, taking off his boots and pointing them in the direction he is travelling. A thief comes and picks up his boots but, not being interested, decides to put them back, turned around. In the morning, Shmendrik decides that it was all a dream, puts on his boots...and trudges forward. Imagine his surprise upon reaching a village

exactly like Chelm, with similar cows, familiar people telling similar stories, and a woman who is the spitting image of his wife!

Federenko and Newlove collaborated on the storyboard. Federenko worked on the original drawings for two to three months adding that, when all goes well, "...I go through a whole pencil a day!" Then they started to look for a solution to the problem of presenting Shmendrik - "which requires a subtlety which some techniques do not allow," stated Federenko. Cut-outs of the characters were considered, and then they tried masks for live actors. Federenko showed me a mask from his own face by Newlove, and said, "When I put my head down on the kitchen table for Rose to apply the rubber latex to my face, I told her she was the only one I would trust to do this - and then my eyelashes got caught in the latex!"

The next treat was in Rose's studio at the end of the hallway. Here, they have built a multi-plane stand about eight feet high, with four levels of glass plates supported by an iron bar frame, and surrounded by lights. I climbed up the ladder for a short but fascinating demonstration of the technique.

A few weeks ago, a lively Federenko outlined the latest developments. Putting a photograph with the drawings does not work, because a real actor is not enough of a *character*. Newlove experimented with Federenko's face, and he explains: "Now we have 'pieces' to fit on my face, and I'm photographed with this

partial mask. Then Rose 'collages' the photographs until my face looks like a drawing!" They have also tried making a model of the road Shmendrik travels. "The road becomes real, but he leaves an artwork village," Federenko continues, "Shmendrik is not *quite* artwork himself, but in the real world he finds an artwork village. This is a perfect technique for the story."

Eugene Federenko and Rose Newlove, two meticulous craftspeople sustained and encouraged by a much-maligned public institution, continue to pursue their own unique form of artwork. They are completely absorbed in a creative artistic experiment, surrounded by a world obsessed with automation, do-it-quick, and cheap. It will be a year or more before the finished film bursts upon us.

Here are two animators coming from different age groups, with stories directed to widely separated audiences, and in utterly dissimilar styles and techniques. But both exert a fascination that is sometimes difficult to explain to those who appreciate film, and to filmmakers accustomed to working with 'real' people. The rigors of producing films where each image is drawn and the atmosphere fabricated, demand discipline, enormous patience, and sense of humour - and Pindal and Federenko share these traits in abundance. It's good to see the much-maligned NFB encouraging and supporting this fabulous art form - Norman McLaren must be smiling somewhere.

