

## Ovide's Gang

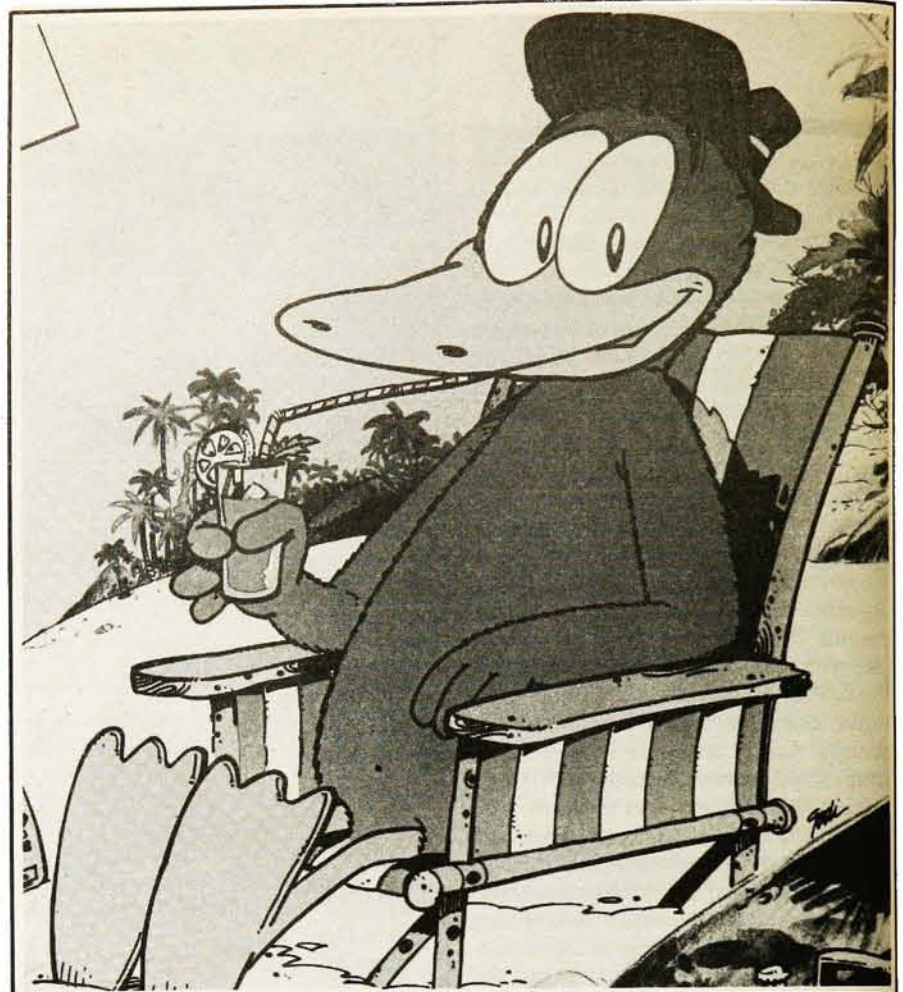
Animated children's series never seem to make any revolutionary departure from employing the two standard character types (i.e., cute innocent protagonist and mischievous villain) with the good triumphing over the nasty. The new animated series **Ovide and the Gang** (*La Bande à Ovide*) involves a very smoothly polished version of this scenario. The main character is Ovide, a duckbilled platypus who uses his wits in each episode to save the island from Si, the python, and his sidekick Bobo, the toucan, who are determined to project their wicked designs on the island. Si always manages to acquire some magical agent or means to a fortune (e.g. a Genie in a lamp or a money-making scheme) that would allow him to rule. Si's attempts are always foiled by Ovide and his gang (a lizard, a two-toed sloth, a kangaroo and others) who outwit Si and deliver the island back to its habitually harmonious state. Surprisingly, in spite of this well-worn and predictable format, there are some unexpected touches which reveals this to be a well-conceived program.

**Ovide and the Gang**, a Quebec-Belgium co-production, is derivative in its style and technique, but it is not merely a cheap copy of Hollywood cartoons. Done in the Disney style, (a technique in which characters are painted on thousands of transparent cels over painted backgrounds), it is of comparatively high quality. Each of the 65 15-minute episodes costs roughly \$125,000, keeping 65 animators at

work for three years. We don't see the cheap animation tricks that are commonplace to Saturday-morning cartoons (endlessly cycled backgrounds passing behind moving characters, lip-sync with only two or three mouth positions, etc.) and no corners are cut to save work at the expense of quality.

In addition to the technical virtuosity, imagination has been put into this production in terms of creating unique characters. If we can overlook some fairly obvious stereotyping (the villain in this cartoon is, of all things, a snake) or, if we ignore the fact that there are only two female characters out of 13 regulars, the series has a few interesting creations. The central character is a duckbilled platypus, which is a cross between a mammal and a bird. He is a kind of connective figure between the mammals in the gang (kangaroos, sloths, and koalas) and the three prominent bird characters which facilitates the variety in the look of the characters (they're not all smurfs). To push this inclination towards autonomous characters further, the creators came up with a character that is a wood worm who looks very much like a stick. Woody is one of the most lively characters in the series, which is saying a lot for a character without arms and legs, or any other anthropomorphising features from his mouth down. Another imaginative touch in character conception appears with the trio Ko, A and La. Each of these three wise koala bears embody one sense of the "hear no evil, see no evil, and say no evil" triad. Each has one sense masked off (Ko has earmuffs, A wears dark glasses and La covers its mouth) and when they speak it is as one: they each say a few words to complete a single sentence or phrase. They never say anything complete as individuals, but rather rely on one another to finish a thought.

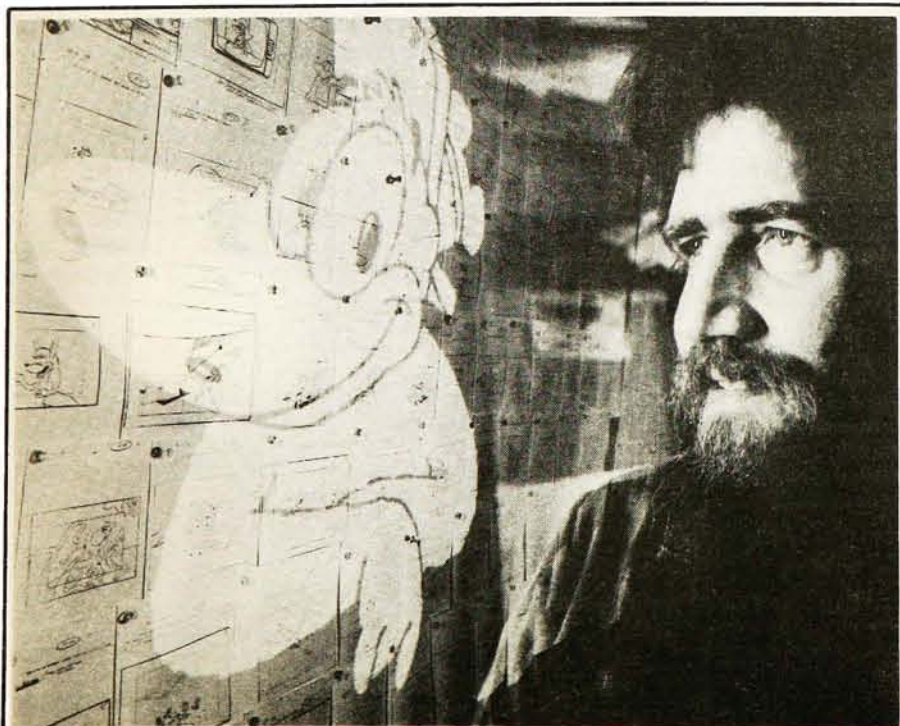
One important aspect of this produc-



• Ovide



• Ovide and the Gang



• Director Jean Sarault *Ovide*-ly inspired

tion reflected in the characterization is that this series was not made for an exclusively North American audience. It is a joint production between Kid Cartoons in Brussels and Ciné-Groupe in Montreal. CBC will be showing the French and English versions, and France, Belgium and the BBC have already bought the rights to the production. A deal with the United States is now in the works. Since the producers have plans to sell it worldwide, a great deal of thought has gone into making the scripts and characters (in psychology and expression) as universal as possible. The English version is North American and there are two voice-overs in French, one for Europe and one for Canada, since 45 percent of this production originates

from Quebec.

This is the first production of its kind to come out of Quebec, but it won't be the last. Ciné-Groupe has three other animated productions in the works called **Bino Fabule**, **The Little Flying Bears** and **Lucky Luke**.

In these productions we're not likely to see any radical divergence from the formula embracing flat predictable plots and stereotypes that make televised cartoon series financially viable. We can only hope that on the vast and homogenous plane of televised commercial animation, these new series will give us more of the relief that we see in **Ovide and the Gang**.

Louise Johnson •