

# visiting guest and meeting nemo

by Katherine Gilday

By 1967 Al Guest was a very busy man. The animation studio he had developed in Toronto was at its peak – the third-largest in the world, with a staff of 150 and a half-hour film to be turned out per week. “We were the well-spring,” Guest says. “The most active, aggressive animation company around.” Then a mammoth business venture fell through – and the whole thing came tumbling down. The Guest Group, five companies in all, split up and its creative personnel scattered in all directions. Guest left for Europe vowing never to return to this country and never again, at all cost, to become involved in animation. A year and a half later he was back – in Canada and in animation. This spring he has just sold the first fully Canadian animated series ever produced to the English and French networks of the CBC.

Al Guest has survived for a remarkable 25 years in the animation business in Canada, 20 years as an independent producer – though he ruefully admits to being unsure whether he’s “survived” or been endowed with several lives. We are sitting in a pleasantly dishevelled room, home of his most recent incarnation, Rainbow Animation Ltd. The company is two years old and has only recently moved into new quarters at 45 Charles St. E., cheek-by-jowl with several other small film companies such as Spence-Thomas Productions. Jean Mathieson, Guest’s partner and long-time associate, sits working at a light-table as we talk, periodically injecting her pungent turns of phrase into the conversation.

“I was working just to meet the payroll every week,” Guest recalls of former days. Now he has very definite ideas about how to keep an independent production house alive and healthy. Rainbow maintains only a small core of permanent staff, hiring freelancers for specific projects when the need arises. “We’ve tried to assemble our own repertory group here... for example, our cameraman also does inking, painting, xeroxing.” A conscientious attempt has been made to avoid “the usual caste system of animation studios where the animators are the Brahmins and the painters, the Untouchables”. Al believes the lowest-paid labors requiring the least training are as significant as the more specialized functions, in terms of what finally appears on the screen.

Both partners place special emphasis on the self-sufficiency of their operation. “We don’t have the economic necessity to keep manufacturing. We don’t have a big machine to feed,” Al says. He believes that many Canadian production companies still labor under the delusive assumption that they must hang on to a large permanent staff. “If all our contracts died tomorrow, we’d be able to take time out to work up a pilot and try to sell it. Jean and I could do the whole thing ourselves – write it, shoot it, even do the voices if we had to.”

How the partnership itself functions begins to come clear, as well. Al sees himself as an artist; but, as he says, “I’m of an entrepreneurial nature and that’s the side of me that has always asserted itself.” His satisfaction derives from helping to create and realize a project as an entity and he tends to focus his energies on pre- and post-production. Jean is usually more actively involved in the production stage itself: “She has to watch it move.”

The partnership and the approach seem to be paying off, though past experience certainly hasn’t hurt (productions equivalent in length to more than 50 feature films, Guest claims). The breakthrough came in 1975 with *Ukalik*, a half-hour animated fantasy based on Eskimo art and their first true programming venture. It sold in fourteen countries. Most important of all, Rainbow owns the film.

Their latest project and the one they are most interested in discussing is a series of five-minute animated films for children on oceanography, entitled *Captain Nemo*. It is startling to discover that this is the first animated series ever to be created, financed and produced in Canada. Guest explains that implementation of CRTC Canadian content regulations is such, in the field of animation, as to permit American producers a huge and unfair advantage since it does not call for authentic Canadian production. A film that passes as Canadian content may, for example, be written, designed and financed in the States, with only the drawing and shooting done here. Guest feels strongly that the Canadian content label should be reserved for films 100% produced in Canada, with a significant number of the negatives (from which the major profits are made) owned in this country.

It is the reasoning of a pragmatic man of business, not a fervent nationalist. What he wants is to be permitted to deal with the Americans on an equal basis with access to their markets. He has done much of his work for Americans over the years and is open in his admiration of them, particularly for those entrepreneurial qualities whose lack in the Canadian personality is an old and well-worn song.

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The fearless Captain Nemo and his ship

**Captain Nemo**, then, was conceived as very much a commercial product. "What we saw Saturday mornings was so awful..." Al says. "It had no substance that we could determine and it didn't even look that good. We thought we could do better." Their experience with a children's TV workshop in New York which was utilizing super-hero comic characters for educational purposes helped to mold the series concept. Capt. Nemo is a rock-jawed musclem, a sort of ecological hero who hands out tidbits of scientifically accurate information about ocean life (a panel of five international oceanographers checks the script) within an action/adventure format.

I ask Al whether his products reflect anything distinctively Canadian in our culture. He replies somewhat pessimistically that we're all pretty much Americanized anyway. The issue, however, turns out not to be that simple for him. It seems that while the CBC has been very enthusiastic about the series and given it all-out support the producers are experiencing some difficulties selling it in the US. Not enough violence to suit American distributors.

Jean grows incensed on the subject of distributors, whom she sees for the most part as parasites, interested only in large profits and in seeing what has worked before repeated *ad nauseam*. "Their objectives have absolutely nothing to do with the public welfare - they have no morals." She

recalls one of the men in Hollywood who turned thumbs down on the series because of its lack of violence: "He came out of an office all pink and gold, like Lana Turner's bedroom - a horrible crummy fat man with a cigar, the whole bit - and *this* is the guy who's going to decide what my kids are going to watch on TV!"

Al and Jean have received a more favorable response from the various station groups in New York, and will peddle it themselves, station by station, if necessary.

I watch the series pilot and am struck by the amalgam of influences, the compromise of styles and attitudes it represents. It *looks* like all the American children's shows - as it is designed to do in order to attract an audience. A booming voice over the titles announces the death-defying adventures to come. But the story itself is a surprise. The nuclear submarine in which Capt. Nemo and his young sidekicks Chris and Robby (girl and boy) are travelling is adopted by a young blue whale as its mother. The action centres on finding the real mother before the baby, in its enthusiastic affection, does fatal damage to the craft. Along the way, pertinent details about the species, including the crucial fact that it is endangered, are supplied by our underwater hero. A shark appears - and so do the big guns of the sub. But instead of blasting the creature, Capt. Nemo tries to lay low in the hope they will not be seen. The message that comes across is this: they are prepared to shoot if they absolutely have to, but they'd rather not have to. The shark is eventually disposed of by the mother whale, not in a violent, blood-and-guts battle, but through the brief single impact of her ponderous bulk. The sub, meanwhile, hurries away.

The episode is apparently typical of the rest of the series in the stance it assumes towards the natural world. Though the pace has been quickened in later programs, the producers have stood fast in their refusal to incorporate unnecessary violence into the series. In addition, many of the worst excesses of Disney-style wildlife depiction have been avoided. The ocean's inhabitants are relatively unanthropomorphized, and the natural situation generally left to resolve itself. Instead of an assertive human presence, the protagonists' activity is purposely kept as unobtrusive as possible, extending only to credible involvement with the ocean world, such as setting a stranded whale free. And even then, as Jean points out, "It doesn't come back and warble thank-you in a Nelson Eddy voice." Such an approach, Al admits, holds something distinctively Canadian about it, something reminiscent of our strong documentary tradition and of our accustomed role as "observers".

The series seems to have won the approval of the ecology-minded Greenpeace Foundation who have taken the pilot back to Ottawa to show to schoolchildren. Rainbow is donating drawings for the organization's fund-raising auction next month.

At the moment 52 programs are planned, with the possibility of a further 13. Three are finished. Animation is an extremely time-consuming business - each five-minute segment takes about seven weeks to pass through the assembly-line talents of 12 people. A wide variety of ocean-related topics will be covered - pollution, archaeology, mining, farming, in addition to the ongoing interest in marine life. The series will be shown on the CBC as part of a children's program, *Peanuts and Popcorn*, Saturdays 10:30 to 12:00, modelled along the lines of an old-fashioned Saturday matinee (cartoon, serial, feature) and starting in October.

Al Guest doesn't see himself in any vanguard as far as the animation medium goes. Although he can talk intelligently about the latitude it offers for handling abstractions or the challenges inherent in animated features, he sees Rainbow geared mainly towards the television market. "We're primarily entertainers," he says, "trying to keep our own principles in mind." □