

BY KAREN MAZURKEWICH

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, © NICKELODEON; RIGHT, A.K.A. CARTOON INC.

INSIDERS JOKE THAT CANADIANS ARE THE GYPSY KINGS OF THE ANIMATION WORLD. THERE IS PROBABLY A CANUCK IN EVERY MAJOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIO – RUNNING MGM'S ANIMATION UNIT, DESIGNING CHARACTERS WITHIN DISNEY'S DOORS, INNOVATING AT INDUSTRIAL LIGHT AND MAGIC (ILM), BREAKING NEW GROUND AS FEATURE DIRECTORS, AND REDEFINING TOONS ON THE TUBE. AT INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS AND FILM *TOURNÉES*, CANADIAN ARTISTS STAND OUT. TO SUSPICIOUS FOREIGNERS, IT MUST SEEM AS IF CANADIANS ARE INVOLVED IN AN INTERNATIONAL CARTOON CONSPIRACY.

DESPITE THE ADOLESCENT REFERENCES, THE GRUNT BROTHERS, LIKE ITS PREDECESSOR *REN AND STIMPY*, IS NOT VACUOUS. LIKE THE POPULAR SKETCH COMEDY SHOWS, THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THE INGRAINED STUPIDITY OF THE TUBE BY MAKING SMART COMEDY OUT OF NORTH AMERICA'S DUMBING-DOWN



# THE GREAT CARTOON

Getting to the bottom of this remarkable diaspora requires a probe of our nation's collective psyche. Heritage and geography play a part. Animators jokingly refer to the cold expanse of our great White North and the artistic impulse to personally imprint the empty spaces. The multicultural landscape is another factor. Canadian animators are notorious cross-breeders, and they trace their roots to Sheridan College (in Oakville) and the National Film Board. From the word go, Norman McLaren, a Scotsman hired by

the NFB to form an animation unit, was blind to passports. He recruited the best and the brightest around the world, including Britain's Gerald Potterton, Denmark's Kaj Pindal, the Netherland's Paul Driessen and Zlatko Grgic of Yugoslavia. Now, Canadians have a unique vantage point when viewing other countries, particularly their southern neighbours. "Canadians know Americans better than they know themselves, because they observe them all day through the airwaves," says Steve Williams, chief ani-

mator at ILM. Perched above the 49th parallel, Canadians have learned how to infiltrate and blend into the corporate environments.

A temple of American culture, the Disney Studios are strangely overrun by Canucks like Duncan Marjoribanks, Nik Ranieri and Joe Haidar who headed south for the work and the weather. Just how were they able to slip into this capitalistic monolith? It was a quiet revolution at Disney. "We are the guys upstairs who aren't invited to the party down-

left, JOHN KRICFALUSI's *Ren and Stimpy*; below, DANNY ANTONUCCI's *The Grunt Brothers*





NIK RANIERI's Lumiere (*Beauty and the Beast*), above, and Jafar (*Aladdin*), right

stairs, so we sneak in through the heat ducts. And because we look like them and talk like them, we get away with it," says Haidar. It was a different story at ILM. The raptor roar heard around the world in *Jurassic Park* was the brainchild of Canadians Steve Williams and Eric Armstrong. This team took ILM, and the world, by storm. Feature filmmaking will never be the same thanks to their experimentation.

The Canadian ironic sensibility is also creeping into American programming. After languishing for years in the Saturday morning slots, commercial animation has found a primetime niche on the cable webs, and Canadians are adroitly surfing this new wave of interest. Riding the crest is *The Grunt Brothers*, a creation of Vancouver's Danny Antonucci, and the latest addition to MTV's line-up, which includes *Beavis and Butt-Head*. Antonucci is a successor to John Kricfalusi, a Canadian expatriate who helped resuscitate the medium with his characters, Ren and Stimpy. Like Kricfalusi, Antonucci has no intention of catering to the action heroes or Care Bears pablum that is spoon-fed to kids. The dietary supple-

ments Antonucci and Kricfalusi offer up have little moral fibre. They serve as eye candy to disenfranchised youth impatient with shows that are supposed to be "good for you." Instead, Kricfalusi and Antonucci push the envelope at the specialty channels with burping, farting, petrified body fluids, and other nasties.

*The Grunt Brothers* series is based on an MTV spot designed by Antonucci. The insert features six cancerous characters, each grunting painfully as eyes bulge and veins pop. The scene cuts to an MTV logo plopping into a toilet bowl. Scatological humour reigns on cable. Antonucci has developed his grunting trio into a gelatinous brethren, persecuted throughout the centuries for their odd rituals.

Despite the adolescent references *The Grunt Brothers*, like its predecessor *Ren and Stimpy*, is not vacuous. Like the popular sketch comedy shows, they acknowledge the ingrained stupidity of the tube by making smart comedy out of North America's dumbing-down. The shows are self-aware; they give a knowing wink-wink to the audience, with ironic insertions of music video clips and mock bumpers. They reaffirm the collec-

tive experience of growing up in a tv culture, while at the same time parodying it.

The slick and frenetic pace has captured the schizophrenic mood of today's youth. *Ren and Stimpy*, in particular, mirrors the dialectical dilemma of teens – torn between fascination with the pop culture icons who take an anti-societal stance, and cynicism towards the inevitable commercialism their heroes fall into. The Grunt brothers don't quite reach the pathological proportions of John Kricfalusi's chihuahua, Ren. By comparison, Antonucci's characters are more sedate. The hypertension manifested in straining muscles, engorged arteries and veins, and dilated eyes leads to an implosion in the brothers Grunt, rather than the explosion of rage and frustration that typifies the character of Ren. Whereas the havoc wreaked by the Grunts is almost accidental, Kricfalusi purposefully unleashes his characters on the world.

Antonucci and Kricfalusi both attended Sheridan College at the same time and share an affinity for bursting capillaries. But the similarities end there. Antonucci is a disciple of Marv New-



**"I WAS VERY ANTI-DISNEY STYLE IN MY SCHOOL DAYS; I DIDN'T LIKE THE LOOK OF THE ROUNDED, STREAM-LINED CHARACTERS. AFTER I WORKED IN ANIMATION FOR AWHILE, I REALIZED IT WAS A REALLY SOUND INDUSTRIAL DESIGN THAT WORKED." DUNCAN MARJORIBANKS**

land, a former graduate from Los Angeles who settled in Vancouver in 1973 to set up his company, International Rocketship. Newland, whose first film *Bambi Meets Godzilla* achieved cult status, says his ambition has always been to make personal films. Over the years, his commercial production has underwritten the hard costs of his shorts, as well as other freelancers in his orbit. "I'd rather spend two months making a commercial to make a profit than spend 10 minutes talking to any banker," says Newland. "Explaining what I do in order to get money for it is hell on earth." In the last couple of years, International Rocketship has become known more for its shorts than its commercials, thanks to exposure through the festival circuit. Now commercial clients are requesting "the look" or "the edge" of the shorts, says Newland.

MTV is a case in point. The station hired Antonucci to do some station identification inserts based on his *Lupo the Butcher* character. Lupo, a stereotypical Canadian/Italian butcher who hacks away at a chicken only to have the dissed bird turn on him. It's good-old-blood-and-guts, a one-gag cartoon that's near

and dear to adolescents' hearts. Yet, it's the character design that makes this cartoon so interesting. Lupo is no typical, bulbous-nosed, bug-eyed character. Lupo is fashioned after Max Fleischer cartoons and has the rubber-hosed limbs, zipper mouth, and beady eyes favoured by West Coast animators Newland and Al Sens.

In contrast, Kricfalusi says he wasn't influenced by the Canadian independent scene or the NFB, and learned nothing at Sheridan College in the one and a half years he spent there. "I was supposed to go to Sheridan, but I didn't spend much time there. I was a lousy student. It was a combination of things: I was lazy, I had a bad attitude, and they didn't teach me anything. It was more a course about propaganda – joining the Disney religion – than it was about learning the basic skills of animation." Kricfalusi has made it his personal crusade to rail against the demise of quality animation. He wants to eliminate hack writers and go back to the good old days when shorts were written and rendered by animators, not by committee. He wants to repatriate the inking and painting, which for years has been done factory-style in

the Orient. He believes animators must train by studying the work of the masters, Bob Clampett and Tex Avery in particular.

When Nickelodeon's president Gerry Laybourne announced the cable network was looking for animator-driven cartoons, Kricfalusi and his new crew at Spumco were ready. Kricfalusi took his portfolio crammed with ideas and visited Nickelodeon executive Vanessa Coffey in Los Angeles. "She was staying at the Universal Sheridan. It was the middle of summer and the air conditioner was broken. I pitched the stuff to Vanessa and I sweated all over her. Sweat was flying in buckets off my hair. She was shocked, but she loved it." Coffey sent Kricfalusi to meet with New York honchos. In her words: "I can't sweat like you." The Nickelodeon round table, spurred by Laybourne's parting shot after the pitch session – "Buy something from this man" – commissioned Kricfalusi's Spumco to do a pilot based on his characters Ren and Stimpy.

With a single series, Kricfalusi grabbed the chance to reverse what he saw as 30 years of decline in the field and provide a little subversive humour for the bored

masses. "Cartoons today are like spinach ice-cream; they purposely make them taste bad," says Kricfalusi. "We tried to make them taste good, that's all. We put in all kinds of humour. We put in what we thought kids would think is funny, and what we thought was funny. We purposefully tried to piss off moms by putting in things kids would love – boogers. Only our boogers weren't just little green things, we had magnificent renaissance paintings of boogers, beautifully rendered with special effects shininess. They could talk and sing. We went to town on boogers...we expected moms to go nuts and they didn't. We were mad that parents liked our show."

Of course, Kricfalusi didn't really expect to piss off the entire 18-plus demographic. Like the old masters, his cartoons are laced with so-called adult humour. Most of the humour is traditional satire à la *Saturday Night Live* or Canada's *SCTV*. Each episode parodies

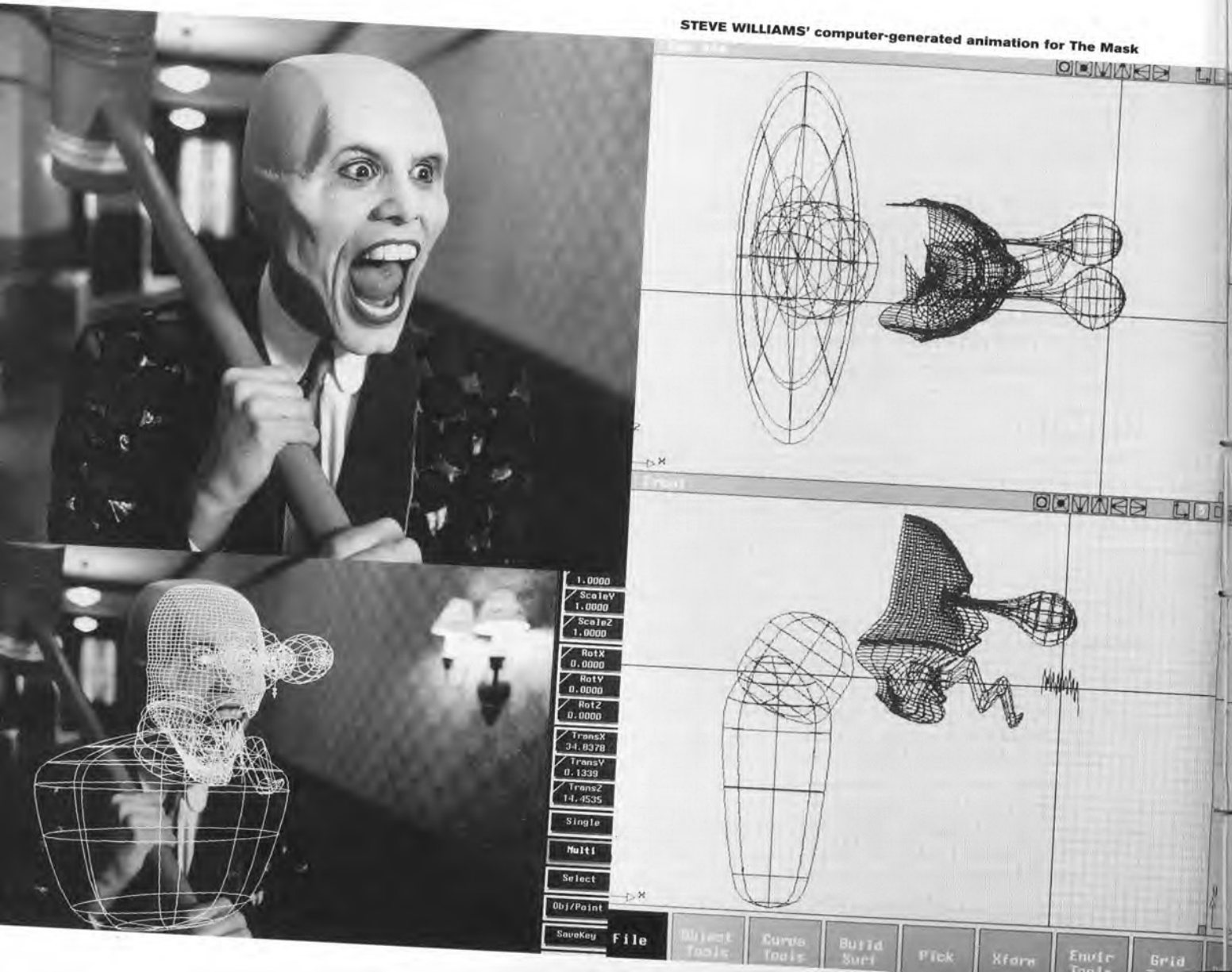
tv shows, and the commercial breaks and bumpers take direct aim at Saturday morning cartoon pap. One of Kricfalusi's hilarious bumpers, *My Little Brother* (read *My Little Pony*), is a toy that girls can blame when they get into trouble.

Two shows transcend the satirical material by injecting genuine pathos into the storylines. "Son of Stimpy," originally called "Stimpy's First Fart," opens with Stimpy wandering the streets insisting "He's real, he's real." The object of his passionate search and rescue is Stinky the Fart, a little gaseous emission that slipped out of Stimpy's behind one day and escaped. What makes this episode so brilliant is the fact that Stimpy's search is actually an existential search of self. The fart is Stimpy's alter-ego.

In "Stimpy's Invention," Stimpy (described by Kricfalusi as an idiot-savant) invents the Happy Helmet, which he forces Ren to wear. The helmet is essen-

tially a diabolical thought control device, which forces Ren to behave in a blissfully vacant manner. Ren no longer bursts into fits when mishaps occur, he just tunelessly sings "Happy, Happy, Joy, Joy." Meanwhile, his convulsing body reflects how tortuous it is to suppress all his anger and frustration. The Happy Helmet is the cartoon version of soma, the drug in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which keeps the masses too complaisant to rebel.

Although he wouldn't like the analogy, Kricfalusi's more complex cartoons read as postmodern fables not unlike some of the work by National Film Board animators such as Richard Condie, who animated *The Big Snit*, a parable of nuclear holocaust. In his latest, yet-to-be-released film, *Playroom*, Condie paints the illusion that man is master of his own fate even if it means succumbing to temptation and ruining his ordered life. However, this notion of



existentialism is shattered when Condie reveals a different universal truth.

Kricfalusi and Condie are *sympatico* in content, if not design. Stylistically, Condie's work bears more resemblance to the work of NFB staff animators Wolf Koenig, Don Arioli and Paul Driessen, than to the U.S. heavyweights like Clampett and Avery. Kricfalusi dismisses NFB animation – with the possible exception of Winnipeg animator Brad Caslor, who also took his cues from Clampett and Avery – primarily because the Board has never striven for the populist appeal of Disney or the Warner Brother's cartoons. That was left to the private sector, and the Canadian commercial landscape is pock-marked with those who made and lost it all – Al Guest Studio (*Rocket Robin Hood*), Potterton Studios, Crawley's, Atkinson, Hinton, Cinera et al. The survivors like Nelvana, pushed into near bankruptcy with the production of their feature *Rock*

*and Rule*, were forced to accept the ball and chain lifestyle of producing Saturday morning cartoons for children, the most appalling of which is *The Care Bears*.

For Kricfalusi and others who waited out the 80s, there is hope that the pendulum is swinging back and audiences will demand more adult cartoons with higher production values. Asked why *Ren and Stimpy* is so popular, Kricfalusi says: "Asking why *Ren and Stimpy* is so popular is like asking why fucking is popular. It's fun to do. It's as if for 40 years you taped everyone's groin shut and no one could have sex. Then, all of a sudden, you take the tape off, and everyone's all crusty and smelly, but they start fucking again and say, 'Wow, isn't this fun.'"

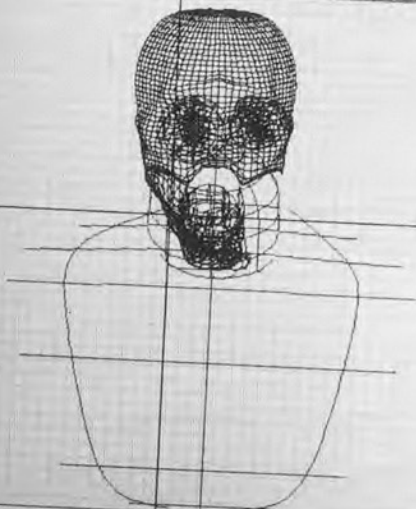
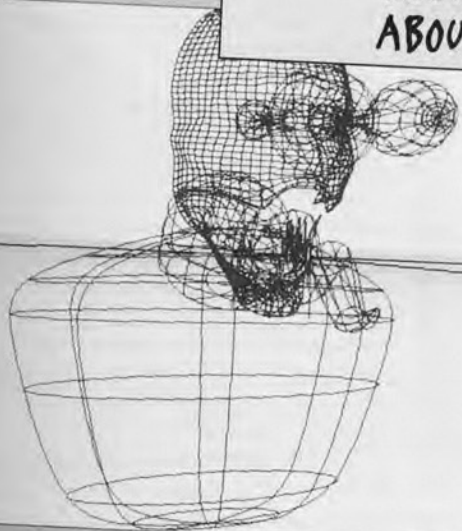
But for every two steps forward, there is always a step back. Nickelodeon, incensed by content battles, dumped Kricfalusi half-way through the second season. Since Kricfalusi's untimely push

out the door, the new producer has fallen way behind schedule and ratings are down.

Having lost *Ren and Stimpy*, Kricfalusi is back on the war path. He has cut a deal with Marvel comics for his new characters Jimmy the Hapless Boy, his uncle George Liquor, and girlfriend Sody-Pop, and is producing a pilot for television. His new strategy is to keep all rights and control all aspects of the marketing. In addition to the comics, Kricfalusi is marketing a paint-by-numbers set of Jimmy and the gang complete with a mask of Jimmy's exploding head which kids can cut out and wear, plus a free box of Sugar Corn Waste, an essential waste product for all kids. He is also marketing Spumco tv cartoon paints, an inking set for all those little wannabe cartoonists who can be "admired and then fired," just like their hero John Kricfalusi.

Despite interest in his new projects,

**"FOR ANYBODY TO SAY THAT A COMPUTER-GENERATED HUMAN WILL NOT HAPPEN, THEY DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT. IT WILL HAPPEN." STEVE WILLIAMS**



- Info
- Display
- CtrlSelect
- CtrlEdit
- CtrlCopy
- Path
- Effects
- Shape
- Lattice
- Keyframe
- Reset
- Constraint



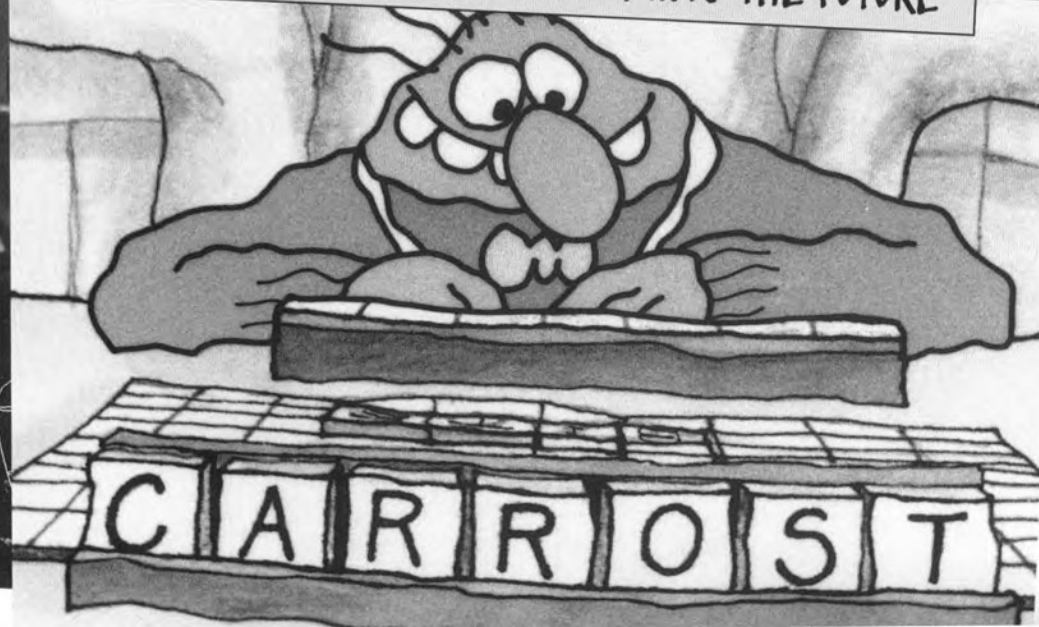
left, STEVE WILLIAMS' Tyrannosaurus Rex (Jurassic Park); below, RICHARD CONDIE's The Big Smit

Kricfalusi dismisses any suggestions that animation is on the comeback trail. "There isn't a renaissance – that denotes quality, a flowering of culture and skill and excellence – and that's not happening," says Kricfalusi. "Maybe, we're in a pre-renaissance. I'm praying we are. First we have to blow up the Disney Studios, get all the animators out of there and detox them. Then we have to kill Saturday morning and come up with a new word for cartoon. They denote children's entertainment and that's a horrible handicap. My goal is to get the hell out of tv, it doesn't deserve animation. Let's put it on the big screen where it deserves to be. That's the one thing Disney is doing right."

Although admired, Kricfalusi's evangelical mission has not been embraced by other Canadian expatriates. For many, classical animation is alive and well at Disney. "John has always had conviction of his genius," says Duncan Marjoribanks, Disney's supervising animator for Sebastian, the crab in *The Little Mermaid*, and Abu, the monkey in *Aladdin*. Kricfalusi considers working for Disney a sell-out. Marjoribanks' approach is more pragmatic. He views animation as more of a trade than an art form. "The thing that makes animation a business is that it's a collaborative medium," says Marjoribanks, unapologetically. "This suits my own personality; the whole becoming greater than the sum of its parts."

Nevertheless, Marjoribanks is impressed with the boundaries Kricfalusi is pushing. "You can't fully appreciate John's work unless you've done Saturday morning and you know what you are up against." Marjoribanks should know. He's been there. Another almost-graduate of Sheridan College (class of '76) Marjoribanks moved to the U.S. to work on Hanna-Barbera's *Captain Caveman* in order to survive in the business. Sheridan was pumping out animators in a Canadian market unable to absorb them all. At that time, Nelvana and Atkinson Studios in Ottawa were producing quality half-hour specials, and several commercial operations were going strong,

WHILE CLASSICAL ANIMATORS ARE STRIVING TO RETURN TO THE STANDARDS SET BY THE MASTERS IN THE 1940S, COMPUTER ANIMATORS ARE TAKING THE MEDIUM INTO THE FUTURE



but it wasn't enough.

Five years after moving to Los Angeles, Marjoribanks was offered a job at Disney. He snapped it up. "I was very anti-Disney in my school days. I didn't like the look of the rounded, streamlined characters. After I worked in animation for awhile, I realized it was a really sound industrial design that worked," he says. "People put this place down because we do somewhat formulaic films," says fellow Disneyite Joe Haidar. "I agree, but within our own formulas we do push a lot of boundaries. There's room (in this industry) for all kinds of different styles."

A group of Canadian Disney animators discussing their roots disagree over the role citizenship plays in their art, except to say Canadians are definitely more passive-aggressive than Americans and simply try harder. Like the cartoon drawn by Tom Sito (an American who worked for Nelvana) implies, Canadians never take anything for granted (*see the editorial page of this issue*).

Nik Ranieri, who graduated from Sheridan and spent several years working in Canada, believes his northern training has influenced his style somewhat. He has even introduced audiences worldwide to Canadian political figures. Lumiere, the anthropomorphized candlestick in *Beauty and the Beast* which Ranieri animated, looks an awful lot like the cartoon of former Canadian finance minister Marc Lalonde in his student film, *Common Problems*. "There is a similarity in style," referring to the thick eyelids, thin face and small mouth, "but I don't think about it when I am drawing," he says. Ranieri believes he was influenced by the people he worked with at the Atkinson Studios doing the *Babar* special, Pascal Blais in Montreal, and Greg Duffell's Lightbox Productions. Without a doubt, Canadian mentor Richard Williams (*Who Framed Roger Rabbit*) influenced him heavily.

While Canadians at Disney are happy plying their trade in a supportive environment, they are beginning to flex their creative muscles both inside and outside the mother corp. Joe Haidar, one of the animators who worked on Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, the Genie in *Aladdin*, and Captain John Smith in Disney's next film *Pocahontas*, is trying to break through Disney's ceiling. Three years ago, Haidar took up a standing offer from the head honchos to make a pitch. At the time, the Disney execs, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Michael Eisner, and Roy Disney Jr., would hear ideas from

any animator who had the guts to try. The animators called the sessions "The Gong Show." Luckily for Haidar, the gong did not sound and the execs liked his twist for a feature based on Hercules so much they assigned directors to it. *Hercules* is now in pre-production, tentatively scheduled for release in 1996, and Haidar says the whole exercise has given him confidence. As a result, he is developing projects outside Disney.

While classical animators are striving to return to the standards set by the masters in the 1940s, computer animators are taking the medium into the future. Canadian dominance of computer graphics is due to three factors: software, software, and software. To be precise, Alias, Softimage and Side Effects, three computer software packages developed in Canada.

Steve Williams, another Sheridan almost-grad, got a head start in the industry, by working for two years at Alias. In 1988, Williams left for ILM. The success of *Tron* in the early '80s, followed by *The Abyss*, had producers upping the ante in the special effects arena. James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* was a milestone in the very technical tailored film, but Williams, one of the special effects animators on the shape-changing villain, was not satisfied with supplying just the icing. He wanted to make the cake. He got his chance on *Jurassic Park*. When the movie's producers originally approached ILM, all they wanted was a scene that featured a stampeding herd. The rest of the dinosaurs were to be done in stop-motion, the traditional way of animating monsters using models. "I wanted to do the Tyrannosaurus Rex," says Williams. So on his own time, Williams played graphically with leg bones of the T-Rex. The producers were so impressed, they advanced ILM money for Williams to build the skin. Director Stephen Spielberg stopped research on the stop-motion models and focussed on the computer team.

When Williams joined ILM there were six people on staff, now there are 450. "We are going from a special effects shop to a birthing centre," says Williams. *Jurassic Park* proved computers could make realistic prehistoric beasts. *The Mask* showed that machines could go head to head with classical animators by creating wacky Tex Avery effects. The problem is Williams may have helped to build another Frankenstein monster. Rather than using the technology to create new char-

acters, producers are licking their lips over the possibilities of exploiting the classics. Amblin is making noises about doing Bugs Bunny. "They should be executed for that. They are bastardizing this piece of art. [The software] was not intended to be [developed] so greasy producers could come in here and slime it, just using it to generate capital and marketing campaigns," says Williams.

Another trend will be to make synthetic characters. In the future, a director will not have to hire actors, he will just direct the animator to build a Jack Nicholson in one scene or a Michele Pfeiffer in another. "It's a brave new world where the Indiana Jones-like characters will only exist in a digital world. You don't have to pay an actor. There will be no drug addictions or delays. Actors will be on the set every day," says Williams. He doesn't object to this method of cloning: "It seems to be where the human race is going anyhow. For anybody to say that a computer-generated human will not happen, they don't know what the hell they are talking about. It will happen."

Needless to say, the demand at ILM has increased dramatically. Williams was forced to recruit more staff, and where else to look for new candidates but up North. However, Williams is pushing for animators over techies. "We need people who understand sculpting. Although one needs certain dexterity to push the buttons, we need animators who understand timing and motion. After all, the computer is just a pencil. And just because you can run a computer does not necessarily mean you are going to be a good computer animator."

Even though Williams has been adamant about hiring animators, that may change too. ILM is currently testing a motion capture system which records the movement of a person or animal and breaks it into co-ordinates for the computer. No imagination necessary. As the technology is heading into a realm of virtual interactivity, will animators become redundant? "It's hard to say," says Williams. "We are an animation company right now, but what we will be in five years, who knows?"

The irony of this is that the Canadian gypsy kings who have nurtured this craft for decades and shared their skills both at home and abroad may bring about their own extinction ●

*Karen Mazurkewich is writing a book and co-producing a film about Canadian animators called CARTOON CONSPIRACY.*