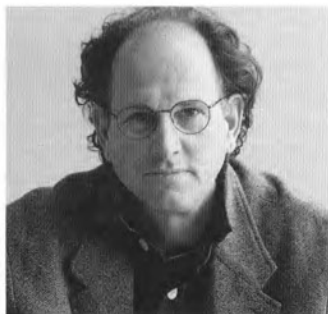


Nelvana at 25

All photos courtesy of Nelvana



Michael Hirsh



Patrick Loubert



Clive Smith

In 1971, when three young men decided to incorporate themselves into a film company called Nelvana, the commercial cinema scene was far different than it is today in Canada. Very few features were being made in this country, much less Toronto, and the occasional independently produced television show created here was rarely broadcast internationally. Michael Hirsh and Patrick Loubert, two York University graduates with a taste for underground filmmaking, and Clive Smith, a rock 'n' rolling expatriate Brit who had worked on the animation for *The Beatles* cartoon show, hardly seemed like a trio destined to crack the global television market. A short life as a studio making educational films and commercials (the story of the vast majority of companies started back then) seemed to be their likely fate. Against the odds, the company has grown from a staff of three to 300. Their polar bear logo is now seen associated with *Eek! The Cat*, *Beetlejuice*, *Babar*, *Little Bear*, *The Adventures of Tintin*, *Nancy Drew* and *The Magic School Bus*,

some of the finest animated and children's live-action shows in the world.

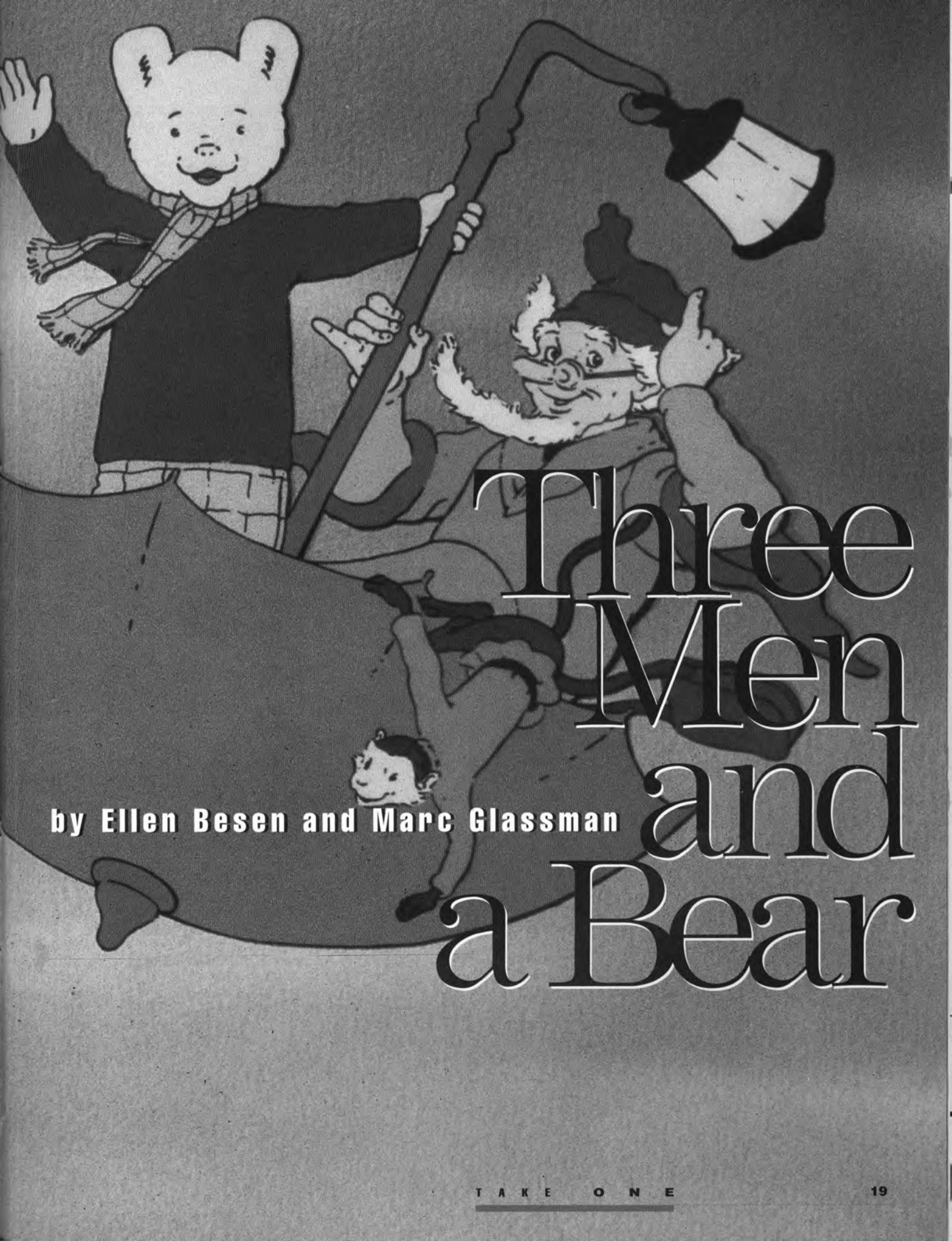
The three first met in the late 1960s, a time well remembered for its funky, rebellious attitudes. Hirsh and Loubert started a small production firm called Laff Arts with a business card portraying a man in a suit on the front; when the card was flipped over onto its back, he had dropped his pants. Hirsh admits now, "Toronto wasn't ready for that kind of humour." The designer of the card was Clive Smith. A few years of scuffling and haphazard collaborations followed until a surprising find gave the trio a fresh start.

Hirsh, Smith and Loubert discovered a cache of comic books made in Canada during WW II. Heroes such as *Johnny Canuck*, *Nelvana of the Northern Lights* and others enjoyed a vogue during the war, supported by the enthusiastic readership of Canada's overseas military force. Nearly 30 years later, the remaining stock of these old comics were, as Clive Smith recalls it, "in a warehouse, sitting there,

rotting away." The three got hold of the books and acquired the rights to them. The CBC helped to finance a documentary on an interesting moment in Canadian popular history; Peter Martin and Associates came on as a publisher of a coffee-table book on *Johnny Canuck*, *Nelvana* and their cohorts; and the National Gallery of Canada agreed to support a two-year travelling tour of the comic book art. These successes helped to establish the trio. As a tip of the hat to the project, they named their new company Nelvana.

Their first studio was housed in a grotty downtown apartment near the intersection of King and Spadina, in Toronto's downtown core. "The walls were grey with slime running down them," recalls Smith. Hirsh remembers that their animation camera stand was a homemade wooden frame mounted over a toilet and "to create zooms, we would pile up phone books under the art work."

For the next five years, the company survived on a mix of



Three Men and a Bear

by Ellen Besen and Marc Glassman



animation service work, documentaries and dramatic live-action films. They made a group of shorts for the CBC, *Small Star Cinema*, that were gentle slice-of-life tales depicting situations from a child's point of view. This series, incorporating animation with actors, led to a similarly styled holiday presentation, *Christmas Two Step*, in 1975. That film is a charming look at a girl who wants to be the lead dancer at a Christmas pageant. But something quite remarkable had happened. Nelvana had discovered a new source of talent: the graduates from the classical animation course at Sheridan College (a community college located just outside of Toronto in Oakville). Smith's new recruits—notably David Thrasher, Robin Budd, Woody Yocum and Mitch Rochon—created a Gepetto-like Grandfather Clock character and allowed him to inhabit a world that was more fully realized than anything previously produced by Nelvana.

Although commercial animation was considered to be a dying art at this time, the positive reactions to *Christmas Two Step's* animated sequences set Nelvana on a bold new course. The company decided to make a fully animated half-hour television special. For Smith, it was the realization of his artistic dreams. For Hirsh, the businessman of the group, it was a "classic capitalist situation." His market research indicated a need for new animated Christmas shows. Thanks to Sheridan College, there was a largely under-utilized "skilled labour force" uniquely available in Toronto. This force would be harnessed by Nelvana to create work with a quality of animation that would have been unthinkable six years earlier.

Now all they needed was an idea. It was then that the dark, creative force of the team, Patrick Loubert, had what Hirsh still calls "a dream," although his partner recalls the event as being real and quite eerie. Loubert was awakened in the middle of the night by "bright lights where no lights should be." Looking through binoculars, from his home on the Toronto islands, he could clearly see rotating light formations and bright colours. Loubert later found out that over 1,000 calls were made to hot-lines describing this possible UFO sighting. Inspired, Loubert came up with the concept of a Christmas story in which the Magi would be spacemen, a timely approach thanks to the eagerly anticipated films *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Outwitting critics who "told me outright that it couldn't be done in Toronto," Smith directed his talented crew of Sheridan recruits through the successful completion of *The Cosmic Christmas* (1976). It turned out to be Nelvana's breakthrough project. A pre-sale to the CBC financed the show but, for the first time, Hirsh cast his net widely. He struck up a relationship with James Kellor of Viacom, who agreed to syndicate *The Cosmic Christmas* in the United States. Broadcast throughout North America, the show garnered critical acclaim and became a huge success.

Over the next four years, Nelvana created five other 30-minute holiday specials, notably *The Devil and Daniel Mouse*, *Intergalactic Thanksgiving* and *Romie-0 and Julie-8*. Well designed and crafted, these shorts presented amusing, sentimental stories that touched on contemporary ethical and social themes. The best of the group, *Intergalactic Thanksgiving* (1978), is a wacky shaggy dog tale in which corn pone earthling farmers transform an Alice-in-Wonderland society of joking green-skinned aliens into responsible ecologically oriented crop growers. During this time, Smith was able to swell the ranks of his Sheridan graduates to include such now well-known animation heavyweights as Chuck Gammage, Charlie Bonifacio, Frank Nissan, Bill Spears and Lenora Hume. Nelvana's half-hours consistently garnered fine audience ratings while winning international recognition for the company. One fan of their efforts, George Lucas, commissioned them to create a 10-minute animated piece for his 1978 *Star Wars* television special.

Hoping to build on their string of successes, Nelvana embarked on an ambitious new project, a fully animated feature film. Intended for the young adult market, *Rock & Rule* (1983) was designed as a futurist film noir, in the style of *Blade Runner* and the *Heavy Metal* comic books. The complex story tells of Mok, a retired rock star of the future who lures female vocalist Angel away from her lover, Omar, and their rock band, in order to use her voice to contact creatures in another dimension. Although the film meanders for much of its 75 minutes, there are fine visuals throughout and a handful of extraordinary scenes. Probably its peak is reached in a "Mok video" where the dissipated rock singer, clearly inspired by Mick Jagger, gets to strut his stuff one more time for the consumption of his media-crazed acolytes.

Despite the soundtrack contributions of Iggy Pop, Deborah Harry, Lou Reed and Cheap Trick, *Rock & Rule* failed to catch on with its intended audience. Constant rewriting while in production had added years to the film's completion date during which time Deborah Harry had parted from Blondie and was no longer a superstar. Worse, the limited resources of the studio had been committed to the film, so failure placed Nelvana in a precarious financial position. Although Hirsh considers *Rock & Rule* "an artistic success" and it has gone on to achieve a reputation as a cult classic, the trio was forced to make some difficult decisions in order to continue to keep the company afloat.

Hirsh refers to the period from 1983 to 1986 as Nelvana's "dark years." In order to keep the studio going and work their way out of debt, they took on service jobs for television, handling such projects as *Inspector Gadget* and *Mr. Microchip*. They became a pre- and post-production house which farmed out its animation to the Far East. Overnight, Nelvana went from producing a half hour of full animation per year to producing 100 hours of limited animation per year. During the adjustment phase, Nelvana's high quality animation team dispersed to jobs throughout the world; in recent years, however, some of these alumni have returned home.

One of the service jobs taken on by Nelvana paid immediate dividends: *The Care Bears*. "Everybody loves them," admits an amused Hirsh. Nelvana eventually acquired the rights to these

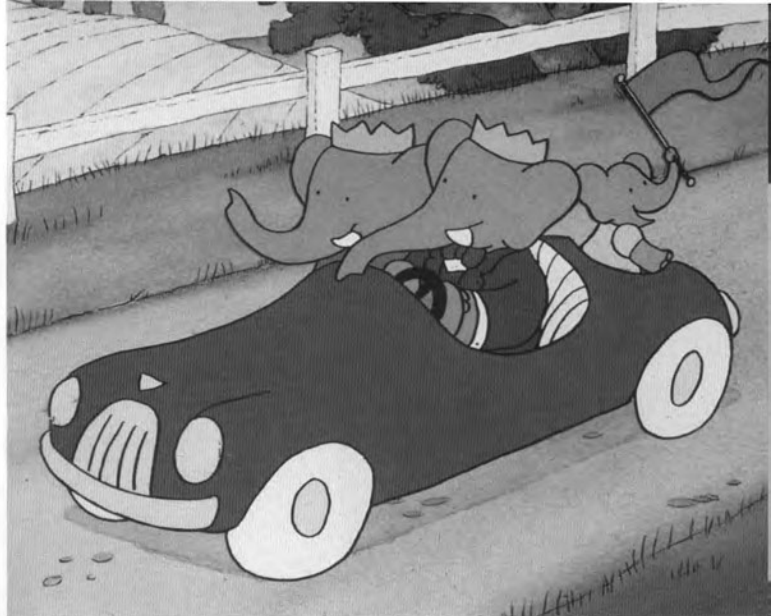
furry creatures transforming them into another animal—a cash cow. Sixty-five half hours and three features later, the company was back on its feet again. Ironically, *The Care Bears Movie* (1985), brought in on budget and produced in under eight months, did everything at the box office that *Rock & Rule* did not. Until the release of Don Bluth's *An American Tail*, *The Care Bears Movie* was the highest grossing non-Disney animated feature of all time.

The financial returns from the *Care Bears* could have marked the end of Nelvana's artistic aspirations. Many individuals and companies have started out with idealistic principles only to find themselves almost ruined when confronted with adversity in the marketplace. The majority then lower their goals, settling for a make-do form of success. It is a mark of the fortitude of Smith, Loubert and Hirsh that they didn't abandon their commitment to excellence. With the trio's feet now planted firmly in their own vast, converted warehouse studio space, they decided to become producers of high quality children's programs.

The first acquisition for the newly invigorated company was the non-literary rights for *Babar the Elephant*. This was a very different property from anything Nelvana had handled before. The books about *Babar*, *King of the Elephants*, his family and domain, Celesteville, written by the de Brunhoff family, are classics of children's literature. *Babar* is a creature beloved not only by the kids who constitute the show's main audience, but by their parents as well. Viewers were unlikely to be critical of the voice casting of *Inspector Gadget*, but if *Babar* hadn't met his fans' expectations in voice, movement and story line, Nelvana would certainly have heard about it.

The company rose to the challenge remarkably well, quickly discovering how much room it had to manoeuvre in order to adapt *Babar* for animation without losing its essential charm. Nelvana learned how to work with authors, reassuring them that the integrity of their characters would remain unchanged while educating them in the process required to recreate a literary figure in another medium.

Nelvana produced 65 *Babar* television shows and a feature film. It won ACE Awards (American cable awards) for both the film and the shows and garnered a slew of Geminis for the television programs. A big international success, *Babar* inspired Hirsh, Loubert and Smith to acquire the TV rights to *Tintin*, *Rupert* and *Little Bear*. This classic line "marks a return to the original spirit of Nelvana," according to Hirsh. Each series is remarkably faithful to the original visions of their authors. *The Adventures of Tintin* meticulously reproduces the graphic look and storytelling prowess of Hergé; *Rupert* is still amusingly goofy and heroic while *Little Bear* reproduces the delicate air of fantasy which made the Minarik and Sendak books so remarkable. Paralleling its classic line, Nelvana has produced a wide variety of contemporary animated programs. Shows like *Beetlejuice* and *Eek! The Cat* demonstrate that the



On opposite page, Minarik and Sendak's *Little Bear*. Above, de Brunhoff's *Babar the Elephant*. Below, *Blazing Dragons*. Against the odds, Nelvana has grown from a staff of three to 300 and is Canada's most successful animation studio.





Nelvana has become synonymous with producing high quality children's programs.

Top left, *The Devil and Daniel Mouse*; Middle, *The Cosmic Christmas*; Below, *Stickin' Around*.

Above, the original Nelvana of the Northern Lights, recently issued on a postage stamp by Canada Post.

Opposite page: Top, *The Neverending Story*; Bottom, *Eek! The Cat*.

company can produce wildly funny cartoon series as well as more sedate family-oriented programs. They also indicate that Nelvana can work with talents and companies as diverse as Tim Burton (*Beetlejuice*), Savage Steve Holland (*Eek! The Cat*), Henson Productions (*Dog City*) and Scholastic Publications (*The Magic School Bus*).

One of Nelvana's strengths, "and unique aspects is that we do not have a house style," states Hirsh. Unlike Disney, which puts its mark on every property it touches, Nelvana takes pride in its ability to adapt the creative visions of others to the screen. What is also apparent in this great mass of productions is how much the company's writing has matured. Peter Sauder, who heads that department, first began working on scripts during the *Rock & Rule* era. He obviously has learned the hard lessons well. Nelvana's writers always seem to be able to develop a style which is appropriate to their subjects.

LITTLE BEAR? Big Hit!



Some of the trickiest projects to get just right are international co-productions. Nelvana first moved into this area with *Babar the Movie* (1989), which was co-produced by Ellipse, a subsidiary of Canal Plus, an established cable channel in France. With *The Neverending Story*, a television series launched in 1995, the process became more complicated. Ellipse, Germany's CineVox and Nelvana all produced the show, after long discussions on such issues as character and background design. Un-

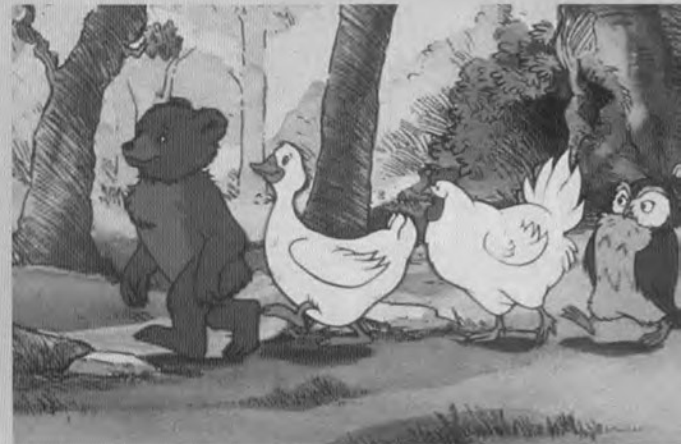
perturbed by this more complex process of putting together a project, Nelvana has embarked on a new venture with Sweden's Svensk Filmindustri and Germany's Beta to produce a feature film and television series based on the adventures of *Pippi Longstocking*.

The adaptation of Astrid Lindgren's books about the mischievous redhead marks a return to feature film directing for Clive Smith. During the past decade, Smith has been overseeing Bear Spots, the research and development division of Nelvana. There he produced commercials, bumpers and public service spots like the award-winning *Road Warrior*, which features spectacular frame-by-frame pencil crayon rendering created by Ferenc Rofusz. The brilliant OMNIMAX-formatted *Journey to the Planets*, which effectively turned South Korea's Expo '94 theatre into the inside of a spaceship was another Smith-inspired Bear Spots project. Now, he is eager to direct *Pippi Longstocking* because features "are really the cream of the crop. It gives you an opportunity to exploit the process of animation and put up on the screen some really remarkable stories and visuals."

Twenty-five years is a long time in anyone's life. One of the most interesting aspects of Nelvana's bumpy ride to success has been the consistent partnership of the three principals. Not only has the company survived but Michael Hirsh, Patrick Loubert and Clive Smith are still there, making Nelvana grow as an internationally respected animation and live-action studio. How have they done it? Michael Hirsh ascribes it to "mutual trust." For Clive Smith "one of the essential factors is that we are quite different people and maintain different functions in the company. When I look around and see other partnerships and how they have deteriorated, I look at us and think that it's quite remarkable." He pauses, smiles and shrugs.

"But then the Rolling Stones are still together. I think it's just the right chemistry." ■

An important member of Nelvana's classic line of animated shows is *Little Bear*. This adaptation of Else Holmelund Minarik's books is remarkably faithful to the spirit of her prose and to the design sense of Maurice Sendak, who illustrated the works. Currently in wide release in over 100 territories including Germany, the U.K. and France, this hit program is broadcast on Nickelodeon's Nick Jr. in the United States and the CBC in Canada.



Minarik, a schoolteacher, deliberately crafted her writing to reflect a child's point of view. *Little Bear's* relationships with his family, best friend Emily and animal pals have a special whimsical feeling that continues to delight readers. Airy and sentimental, Minarik's vocabulary found its perfect correlation in the delicate illustrative style of Sendak. The acclaimed Caldecott Award-winning writer and illustrator of *Where The Wild Things Are*, Sendak recalls that "as a young man, illustrating the *Little Bear* books provided me with the rare opportunity of imbuing Else Holmelund Minarik's emotionally wrought characters with very personal aspects of my own childhood."



While Nelvana's writing staff has done a fine job in maintaining Minarik's distinctive characters and plots, their animation team has worked wonders to reproduce Sendak's crosshatching style and subtle colour palette. *Little Bear* is coloured and

composited on Nelvana's in-house computer using Cambridge Animated Systems' Animo software. The system offers a much wider colour range and more choice in rendering styles. "You can see right away what you're getting and run it 50 times to finesse it before it is printed," remarks Hasmi Giakoumis, the original producer of the show. ■

