



Peep and the Multimedia World

PEEP
AND THE
BIG WIDE WORLD



PEEP
AND THE
BIG WIDE WORLD



PEEP
AND THE
BIG WIDE WORLD



PEEP
AND THE
BIG WIDE WORLD



An interview with Kaj Pindal

By Marc Glassman

All images courtesy of Kaj Pindal



Kaj Pindal is one of those fortunate people who find their calling in life at an early age. His broad generous face, highlighted by a prominent nose and a wide mouth set off by laugh-lined cheeks, announce the features of a born animator. While still a high school student during the Second World War, Pindal worked on the first major Danish animated film before having to flee his native Copenhagen weeks before graduation as the Nazis had taken exception to the anti-Hitler cartoons he had contributed to an underground newspaper. After the war, and a belated high school graduation, Pindal embarked on a career that has taken him to Sweden, Germany, England, the United States and, of course, Canada.

Though he has done brilliant commercial work for Richard Williams and contributed to the cult classic *Twice Upon a Time*, Pindal's reputation rests with the films he either directed or animated while at the National Film Board, most notably *The Peep Show*, *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* and *What On Earth!* A natural cartoonist and artist, Pindal has the skill to make anything come alive—from cars to cows to old ladies to young chicks.

Pindal is a tinkerer who loves all things mechanical, particularly trains. It is fitting that his barnyard creations, Peep, Chirp and Quack have been adapted to a variety of formats ranging from black-and-white film to CD-ROMs. This interview with Pindal concentrates on the evolution of *The Peep Show* through differing technologies. It was conducted in March 1997, at the NFB's Toronto office.



Kaj Pindal

MG: *Kaj, you created a group of barnyard characters led by a young chick called Peep for an NFB film in the early 1960s. Although you have worked on numerous projects over the years, you have consistently returned to these simple, timeless creations. What are the roots of Peep and why have you continued to be interested in those baby animals for so many years?*

KP: I come from a time when there was no television, but there was the anticipation of television. I grew up in Denmark and was very much taken by the cartoons in newspapers—the comic strips and the politically satirical cartoons. As a young animator and cartoonist, I imagined that when television came it would be used as an electronic press. All the cartoon work from the papers would move right in and figure prominently in television. Television, I thought, was going to open up this wonderful world. But when television came, two things went wrong. First of all, with the sort of budgets they had for programs, there was no way to accommodate animation, and secondly, all the stations decided to be neutral politically. See, newspapers are wonderful because they put a political spin on something. In television, you couldn't do that. There seemed to be no place for a drawing man with a point of view. I have always been interested in doing things for children. I thought, well, animation for television is not going to be like *Snow White* but maybe there is room for something simpler, maybe there is another way of accommodating drawing and animation for television. Instead of looking at it as watered down Disney, it

could be looked upon as an embellished comic strip. I once had a tiny little motor scooter and I was very proud of it because I was cyclist, and to me a motor on a cycle was a wonder. But someone already used to motorcycles would have thought of it as a terrible compromise, a comedown. There is room for that middle thing.

So your little motor scooter is not a full animated film but it is not a comic strip either.

With *Peep*, that idea has served me very well. There is a pocket for that. In 1961, working at the Film Board close to Norman McLaren, the whole atmosphere was to not look like Disney, but to try to reinvent animation. They had calculators in the office, and adding-machine paper in them. It was a lot bigger than 35mm film. I thought, why not put the paper on its side, then you would have a frame like a film reel or a comic strip. I started fiddling with adding-machine rolls, drawing simple creatures, ducks and chickens, in black and white.

Why draw birds?

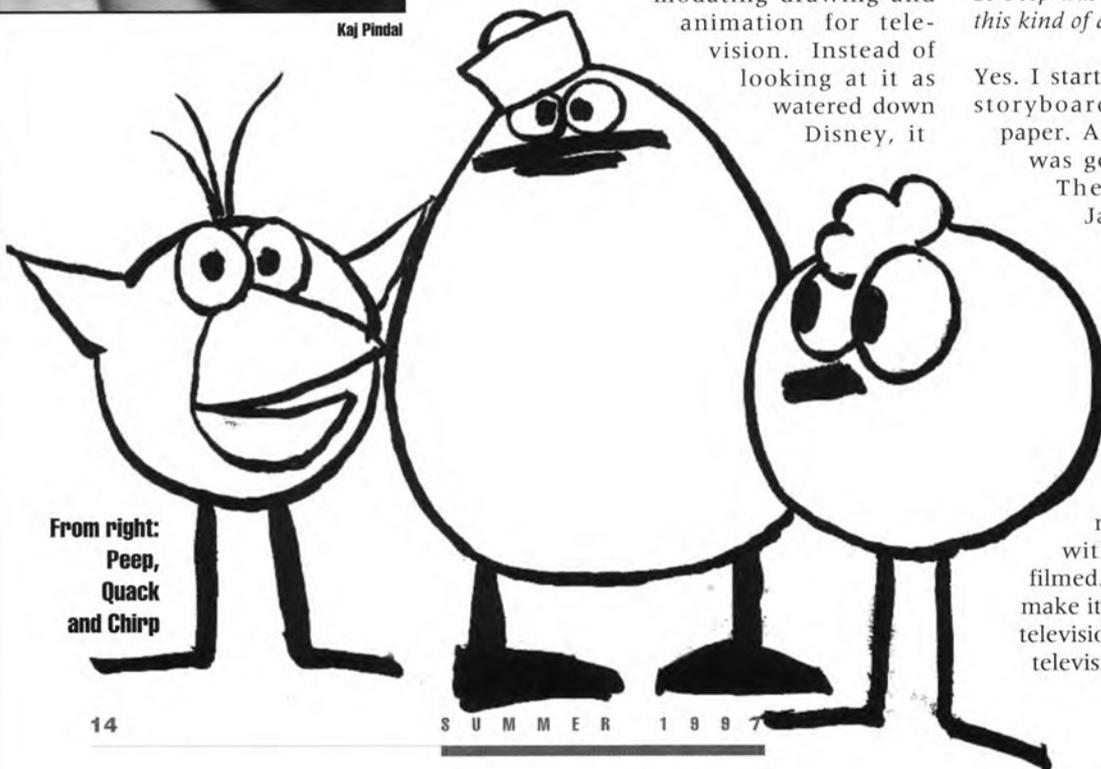
It was kind of a compromise. First of all, I knew this process had to be for children. Secondly, it should be simple, and what can be more simple than baby birds? Thirdly, because they are so small, their movements are jerky. If you watch a bird, it just goes from hole to hole.

So Peep was a very logical character to have for this kind of animation.

Yes. I started very quickly to do a rough storyboard with this adding-machine paper. At the time I wasn't sure how I was going to do the final drawings. Then I went to talk to Stanley Jackson [a veteran NFB writer, actor and voice].

He replaced Lorne Greene as the "voice" for the Board.

Yes, that's right. And he liked children. He had never had a child but he had been a school teacher. So he took a liking to Peep. We discussed it and I realized I had to draw the story with pen and ink if it were to be filmed. It was natural in those days to make it in black and white, especially for television. Colour had come to film, but television was black and white.



From right:
Peep,
Quack
and Chirp

Around that time, I found these new marker pens, with ink cartridges in them. I found using those I could get the smooth, even colour I needed that would not change from drawing to drawing. With them, I could colour in the characters. I did them in colour even though they were shot in black and white. I needed to know what tone of grey they would be. It was simple to do, and then we left the background white. Again, my reference was comic strips. They have no movement, no colour—works fine. I have always felt that when faced with limitations, restrictions, you have to use your ingenuity to overcome them. They often end up as an exploration rather than a hindrance.

To whom did you show your adding-machine drawings and demo reel?

Tom Daly was the head of the studio at that time and Colin Low was our immediate boss. I had no problem getting it programmed, and that was in 1962.

They both liked the idea?

Yes. Of course, it was very much done in line with the whole thinking of the time. It had to be done very fast and very inexpensively. I did *The Peep Show* [1962] in about a month. I had storyboarded it but the actual drawings took a month.

You animated it totally by yourself?

Totally, yes. Annie, my wife, played the music on a toy instrument, as she did on the later version in 1987, and Stanley Jackson was the storyteller.

*So what happened with *The Peep Show*?*

I did it very fast. When it came out, people seemed to like it. We went to Toronto, Colin Low and I, to try to sell it to the CBC. Michael Spencer was with us, but for some reason we didn't succeed. A French version was made, called *Les aventures de Piou-Piou*. Jacques Bobet liked it very much and saw to it that it was done in French.

In the meantime, Derek Lamb and the *Old Lady* project came along. Derek had been developing an animated version of the song for a long time. Also, Wolf Koenig became the head of the animation department. Wolf had been a very strong supporter of *Peep* but he was a very practical man. Suddenly, the *Old Lady* became a priority, and I was asked to work on it with Derek. So *Peep* was put under the mat.

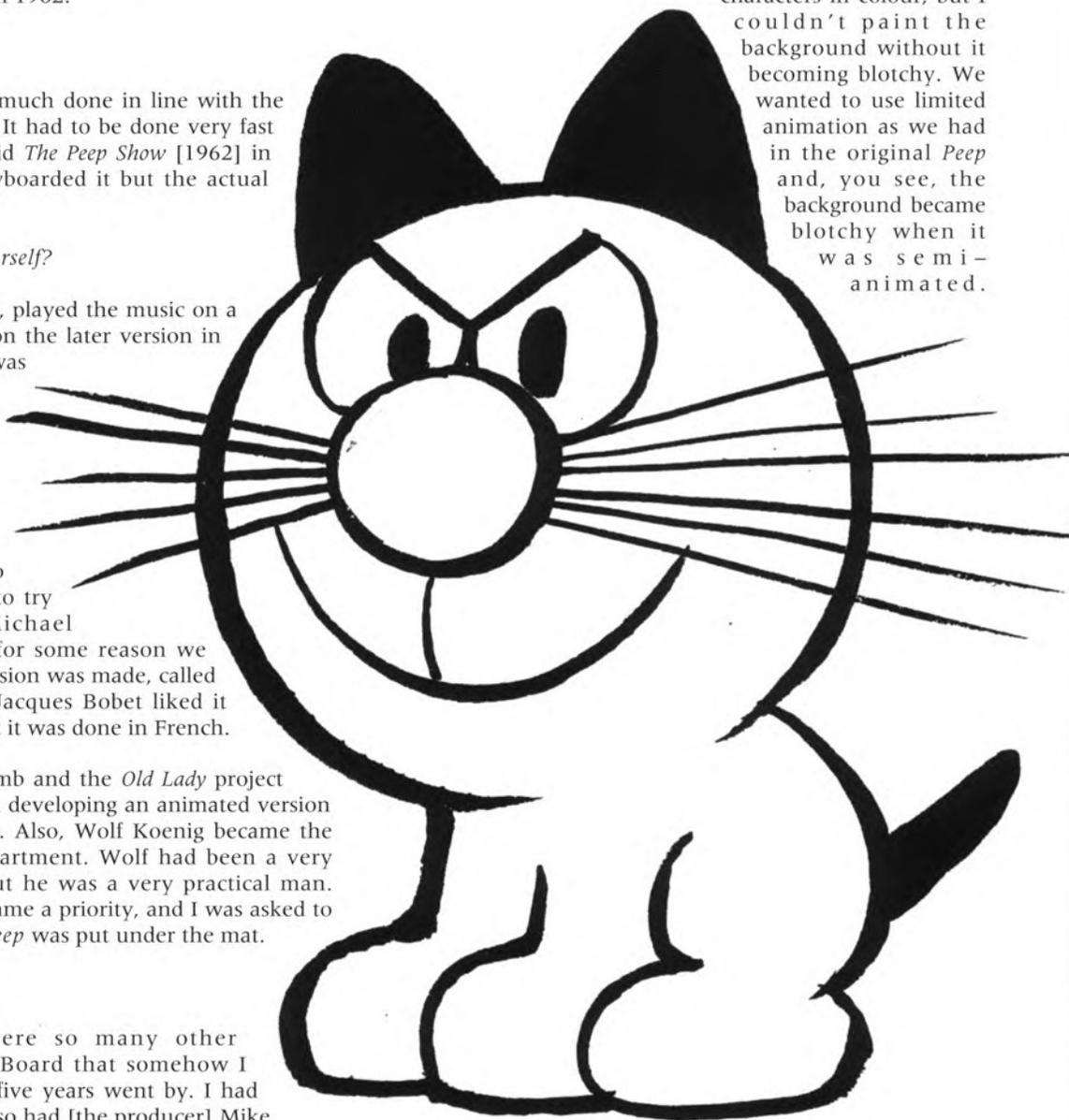
So more than 20 years go by.

I don't know, there were so many other opportunities at the Film Board that somehow I forgot about *Peep*...Twenty-five years went by. I had moved here to Toronto and so had [the producer] Mike

Scott. He called me in to discuss what we could do to create animated films in Ontario [where the Board had rarely produced animation]. He said video is upon us and there is very little at the Film Board for very young children. Then I told him about the old *Peep Show*, which he didn't know anything about, and suggested that we could revive it. We checked with NFB Distribution on how the picture had fared, and it turned out that, for the year 1985, *The Peep Show* had more than 400 rentals a year, which was not bad. So that gave us a boost. I got the budget to make a storyboard for a half-hour show, which we decided to break up into three pieces.

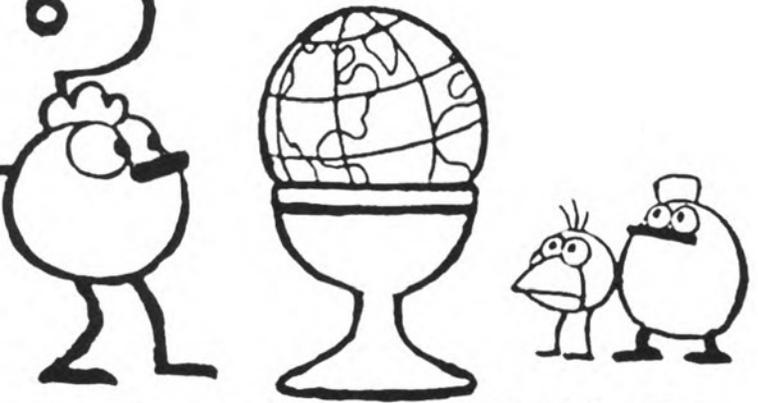
For the first episode, we took the original story, remade that and added two more stories. But we had some problems. First of all, this film was being made in colour and the technique I used in the black-and-white version had to change. We

found that I could paint the characters in colour, but I couldn't paint the background without it becoming blotchy. We wanted to use limited animation as we had in the original *Peep* and, you see, the background became blotchy when it was semi-animated.



PEEP

AND THE BIG WIDE WORLD



Fully animated it became a moving texture, but we couldn't have it like that, because our idea was more basic than that.

So, in this case, the comic-strip style couldn't work.

Exactly. So this was a problem. It seemed a minor problem at first but it really was a serious problem. Eventually, I came up with the idea of using what was then new computer technology. At that time, companies started to colour old movies and I figured there might be some way of colouring black-and-white drawings by computer. We shopped around to a variety of computer companies and ended up at Mobile Image. They could retain the quality of the drawings and add colours. So the whole production was done in black and white with the colours added at the very end by computer.

And you oversaw the computer process?

Yes, and a funny thing happened. Mobile Image kept adding texture and tones and all kinds of things. They were desperate for me to use all of their new technical advances so that they could sell their wares. I didn't want that. I wanted that stark comic-strip version, absolutely flat images, and limited range of colours. I wanted the new *Peep* to look like the old comic strips, you know the black-and-white pen drawings with the three-colour inking process, that combination.

Mobile Image told me that they could do 350,000 tones of colour, but yellow was not included. I couldn't deal with that when my main character was a chick! I chose to ignore it and somehow technology evolved just in time and they came up with yellow. That was kind of interesting because it paralleled the history of the comic strip, in a sense, because yellow was the last colour perfected for newspapers at the turn of the century. When the printing process was finally done, one of the big newspapers in New York used this to launch a major new character, *The Yellow Kid*.

Our next major problem was that our old friend Stanley Jackson, who had voiced everything in the first *Peep*, had died.

We auditioned 25 people to replace him and came closest with John Neville. We actually recorded him but he himself said from the beginning this is not for me. You need Peter Ustinov. I had wanted Peter Ustinov all the time, but he wasn't Canadian, and the Board had this thing about using Canadians. I remember one day recording with John, trying to make his interpretation work. I made a drawing of Chirp, one of the characters, but I made it look like John Neville. [Kaj shrugs and laughs.] Just then Mike Scott came in, looked at the drawing, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, okay Kaj, we'll get Peter Ustinov.

Was there any attempt to do a television show this time?

I was against it. I had this idea; if we could sell enough videos through the NFB, I could produce another three-part *Peep* show every year for quite a while. That seemed to me a perfect setup. The speed and volume of television is incredible, impossible for one person to control. It's what has kept me out of animation for television for all these years. When the home-video format came out, it seemed to me that it was the best of both worlds. Much to my surprise, the Film Board, in its wisdom, just wouldn't continue with the series. I never found out why.

Peep and the Big Wide World did go to festivals.

It went to the London Film Festival and the Berlin Film Festival. It got prizes in Chicago and Ottawa at their festivals. I have never come across anyone who didn't like *Peep*. I was prepared for criticism, but never heard anything.

What were you expecting them to say?

Well, I thought some might say that the animation is a bit simple, which it is in some ways. Nobody has ever said that. Most people seem to appreciate that I can get by with minimum drawings and still keep the story and characters alive.

The original Peep Show in 1962 is black and white and in 35mm. The new version in 1988 was drawn in black and white and colorized by computers.

We drew it in black and white. We strung up a Bolex in the studio and shot the drawings with a high contrast film stock. We developed it in the kitchen, where it was strung up to dry. I had a drawing table, a Steenbeck and a camera. That's all it really takes. I have a hard time divorcing editing and cutting from animation, because what is animation if it is not frame-to-frame editing?

Now animation has become an industry, and that's wonderful. More money and more people can work in animation than ever before. But I regret the division of labour that takes place in big television and film productions. In the old days, I shot my own animation, I edited it, put on the soundtrack....

In other words, you and possibly an assistant like Craig Welch or a collaborator like Derek Lamb, would be the complete creative team for a show.

Yes, that's how I saw myself, and at the Film Board we could do that. One of my sons is a top-notch animator, but I'm sure he doesn't know how to splice film together. We shot *Peep and the Big Wide World* on film and edited it in the old-fashioned way. We had the negative in black and white. Then we took all the drawings to Mobile Image and watched closely as it was processed on video and computer.

Again time passes. How did you acquire the rights to Peep and his friends?

François Macerola, who was the commissioner at the NFB in the 1980s, made it possible for me to acquire a copyright on *Peep*. I thought I had always had some sort of ownership of the whole concept. But in the end, money had to be paid so that everything could be done properly. I knew I couldn't do a new *Peep* project without the Film Board's approval.

So Macerola said, "I think of this as yours."

Yes. I have the copyright. It says so right on the film. In the fall of 1994, Derek Lamb arranged for me to be flown down to California to meet with Jeff Schon, an old friend, who was now CEO of a company called Living Books, which was jointly owned by Random House and Broderbund. Living Books had been set up to do children's CD-ROMs. We talked about *Peep*. Again it happened, like it always happens with *Peep*. People responded that it was "absolutely perfect and wonderful," for little children. Living Books wanted to adapt the characters and films to the CD-ROM format. But although he was CEO, Jeff had to report to other people. They were busy doing other things. Time went by. I went out to San Francisco for several trips and eventually talked Derek into joining me on the project.

I got a contract, like a publisher's contract, with advance payment against royalties and all that. In the summer of 1996, I went down to San Francisco with Derek and we created a prototype for a *Peep* CD-ROM. Then, difficulties developed. In October, Disney began to dump CD-ROMs on

the market. Living Books and all the rest had to reduce their prices. The cost of making CD-ROMs is \$8, and they were being sold for \$60 or \$70. Suddenly, they had to sell them for \$30 or \$40. I couldn't see the panic. There is still a profit between \$8 and \$30. But no, it messed up their financial predictions. Living Books stopped half its projects, radically reduced its staff, but didn't cancel *Peep*. So we plodded along. Then when I got back from a trip to Denmark last fall, there was another piece of news for me. Random House had sold its shares in Living Books. The company was now just a part of Broderbund. This is what is known as restructuring. We hear about it all the time. Part of that idea is that you pare down the administrative staff, especially an expensive CEO like Jeff Schon. Out.

Ever since, *Peep* has been in a strange limbo. Jeff has been talking about a television show with Nickelodeon. Again everyone who sees *The Peep Show* thinks it's charming, wonderful, and has nothing but praise for it. But I found out that the new management at Broderbund are worried about marketing *Peep* and *the Big Wide World* because it is unknown in America. You see, Broderbund produces Dr. Seuss's CD-ROMs. That's something that everyone has grown up with, whereas *Peep* and *the Big Wide World* may be wonderful but nobody has ever heard of it. Nickelodeon has a humongous budget for children's animation; it seems to like it, so that could make *Peep* famous very quickly.

How did the creation of the prototype work out?

Really well. We had to make the project interactive for kids. That meant changing the old stories and making them more detailed. For example, the prototype was designed to allow the kids to cursor to the egg where *Peep* is hatched. They can move it in a variety of ways until eventually it cracks and the chick appears.

Derek and I also came up with a sequence that kids can manipulate where the frog leaps higher and higher in its pond, splashing simulated mud on the computer screen.

Peep is by no means the only thing you have done in your career, but I find it fascinating the way you have adapted to changing technologies over 35 years while remaining true to the character.

I can say of all the animators I have known, very few have ended up with their own animated characters. It is a very hard thing to get done. I don't think my experience with *Peep* has much to do with the quality of the character, or ingenuity, or anything like that. It's the market, and my advice to anyone trying to create a character is stop now because it will take you 35 years. ■

