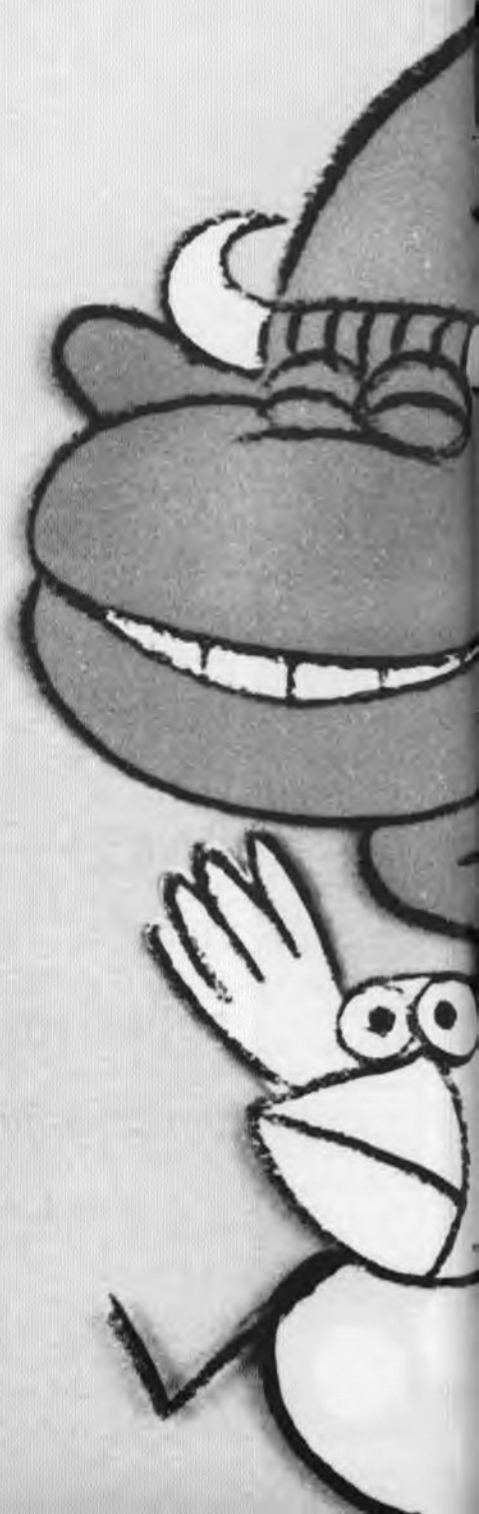


# The United Nations of Animation

by Marc Glassman

**Before Gen-X nerds began hacking away,** creating special effects for Arnold & Co., and way before the plutocrats at Disney relaunched feature animation as a cool thing for kids, countries other than the United States were keeping the home fires burning for the lovers and makers of animation. Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were three of the nations that garnered worldwide acclaim for their artful animation—and we know what happened to them. In the freedom-loving West, as it was then called, a kinder, gentler form of socialism produced equally memorable animated films through our “state culture” studios at the National Film Board. Not too surprisingly, artists from all over the world flocked to Canada where they could work and live in an atmosphere of freedom. It is timely to recall those days now when the “brain drain” is pulling so many of Canada’s finest young animators down south where green cards and U.S. greenbacks hold sway.

Many of the animators who arrived at the Film Board were not political refugees. India’s Ishu Patel, Caroline Leaf from the United States, and the Dutch animators Co Hoedeman and Paul Driessen, sought out the Film Board so that they could make personal films. To a certain extent, they were fleeing the constraints of the commercial world. Advertisements for all manner of products ranging from jewellery to bars of soap formed the content of far too much animation in the 1960s and





# Animation

**Derek Lamb's and Kaj Pindal's *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*: A memorable assembly of brilliantly drawn characters—a terrorist Cat, a Spider that resembles a magician, a Peep-like bird, a dancing Dog wearing a Derby hat, and a wacky grey-haired Old Lady—play out the darkly comic fable of greed based on the classic folk song.**

All photos courtesy of the National Film Board

1970s. Creating a good commercial can be rewarding, of course, but it pales in comparison to the types of artistic projects regularly funded by the NFB in its glory days. Others, like Yugoslavia's Zlatko Grgic and Czechoslovakia's Bretislav Pojar, were all too aware that their position as artists gave them liberties that their compatriots at home did not possess. The NFB and Canada benefited from both types of émigrés. The work produced by the likes of Grgic and Pojar, as well as by the Dane Kaj Pindal, the "Great Brits," Gerry Potterton and Derek Lamb, and others, was a tremendous calling card for a Canada that was proud, in those days, of its artistic and cultural endeavours.

Animation at the NFB began through the efforts of two Scotsmen, the dour yet charismatic founding commissioner John Grierson and his protégé, the fey and poetic Norman McLaren. Grierson plucked McLaren out of Manhattan and the perilous world of freelance animation, placing him at the head of the NFB's nascent animation unit in the early 1940s. After the war and Grierson's departure, McLaren stayed on as the NFB's resident artist and creative spirit. The musical films he created during the immediate postwar period by drawing colours and shapes directly onto film are arguably his best works. *Hoppity Pop* with its odd shapes and circus calliope music, the folkloric *Fiddle-de-dee* and *La poulette grise* and the experimental *Loops* still stand the test of time as do the marvellous jazz shorts *Boogie-Doodle* and *Begone Dull Care* which co-star, respectively, the pianistic talents of Albert Ammons and Oscar Peterson.

It is hard now, nearly half-a-century later, to gauge the effect these films had on the world when they were first released. Kaj Pindal, then a young animator, recalls being a regular habitué of the theatre at Copenhagen's railway station in the late 1940s. "I went in to sit through the usual tedious program of news, sports and travelogues because I wanted to see the final short which was always a Popeye cartoon. Instead, what bounced on the screen was *Fiddle-de-dee*. The theatre just exploded with colour, music and movement. Then it was over. Now this theatre was filled with everyday people waiting for trains. They never responded to the films. When *Fiddle-de-dee* finished, there was a silence. People sat there and looked at one another. Then someone got up and said, 'I want my money back,' and someone else said, 'Are you joking? That was the best film I've ever seen. People started forming sides, some saying that the film was junk and others saying it was wonderful. They almost got into fights over that film!'"

By the early 1950s, the animation unit had begun to grow. Although McLaren continued to create his own particular brand of experimental work with the aid of Evelyn Lambart, a different type of artistic temperament began to infuse the Unit. Colin Low's *Romance of Transportation in Canada*, with its tongue-in-cheek narration, witty character design, and flat black-and-white backdrops signalled a new direction at the Board. In the memorable year of 1953, McLaren's *Neighbours* won an Oscar while *Romance* copped the Palme d'Or for animation at Cannes. Gerry Potterton saw both films on the same program in London, England that summer along with a travelogue about the scenic wonders of British Columbia. "They looked so fresh and new and wonderful. I turned to my friend Rich Cox and said, 'Let's go out to Canada. We'll get a nice log cabin in the Rockies and do freelance cartoons for the newspapers. And maybe we'll have a go at the Film Board at some point.'"



Gerald Potterton's *My Financial Career*

Within a year, Potterton did join the Board. His arrival marked the beginning of a new wave at the NFB. Taking their cue from Low and his collaborators Wolf Koenig and Robert Verrall, this group of animators went on to make funny, character-driven films replete with satire and whimsy. The movement would eventually include such gifted imports as Kaj Pindal and Derek Lamb as well as home-brewed talents Arthur Lipsett, Cameron Guess and Jeff Hale. It took a long time

to come together. Potterton joined the Board in 1954 but did not produce his first signed short, *My Financial Career*, until 1962.

Of this group, Potterton is the only one who worked for the Board in Ottawa. Now ensconced in Quebec's Eastern Townships, Potterton recalls that the "green island in Ottawa was a haven. It was just a great place. We were in one of the temporary buildings built during wartime. Norman [McLaren] was around all the time. We had these fancy dress parties there. Bob Verrall had a great bunch of kids. [One of them, David, became a producer and director of animation in the 1980s.] We always used to dress up quite a bit and drink. It was fun." The move to Montreal in 1955 was difficult for Potterton. "It was an incredibly cold and grey and depressing day. There we were in this huge factory, brand new, out in the boondocks....[I thought] why didn't they take the budget and build half the building downtown? It would have been great. But, I've got to mention, the facilities were great. We all had our own little cubicles with washbasins for our airbrushes."

For a while, Potterton left the Board for England. But he admits, "I had the big, open air of Canada in my blood by then." On his return in 1959, Potterton was instrumental in

Top: Peter Foldès Oscar-nominee *Hunger*; Middle: Ishu Patel's Oscar-nominee *Paradise*; Bottom: Bretislav Pajar's *Balablok*.

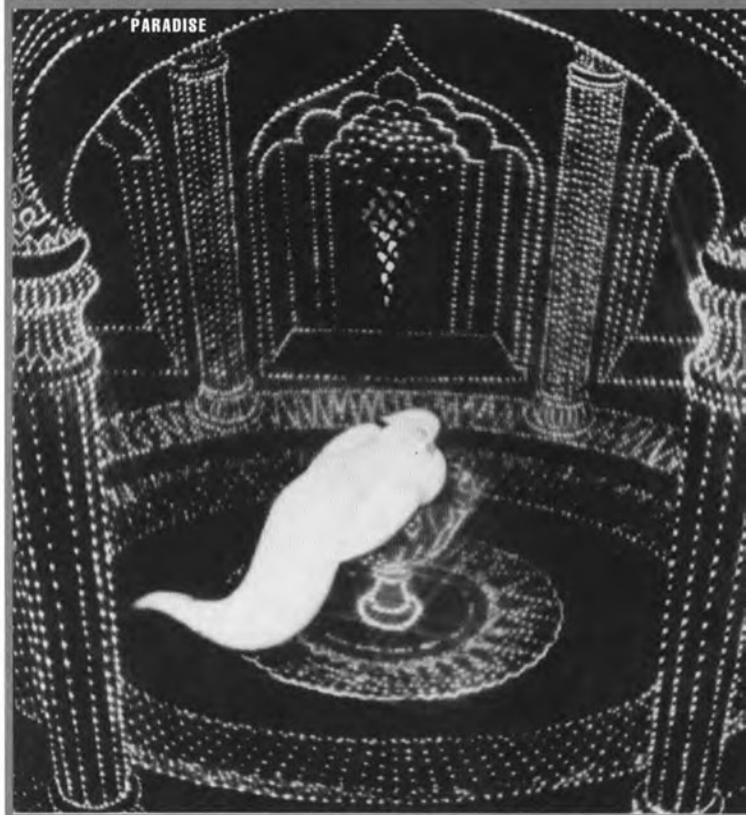
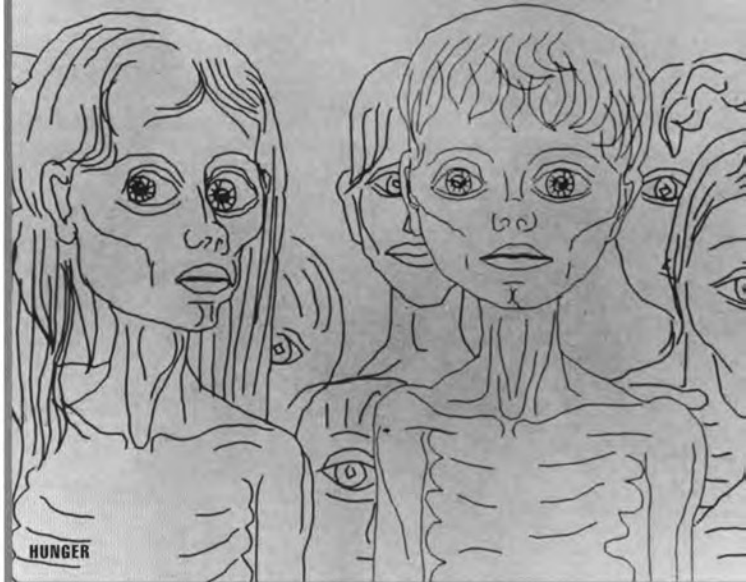
The atmosphere of the NFB was clearly conducive towards making fine art films.

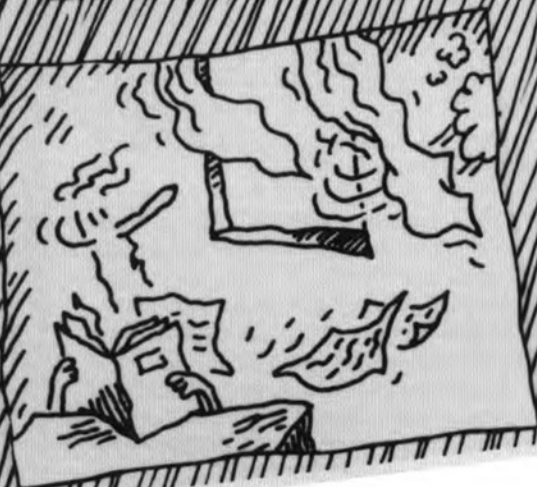
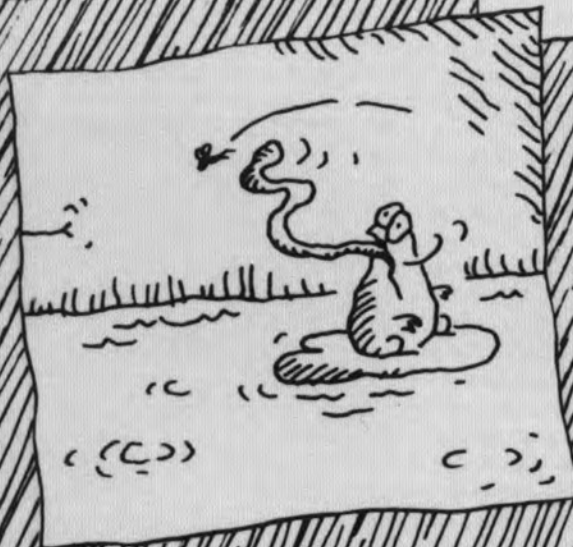
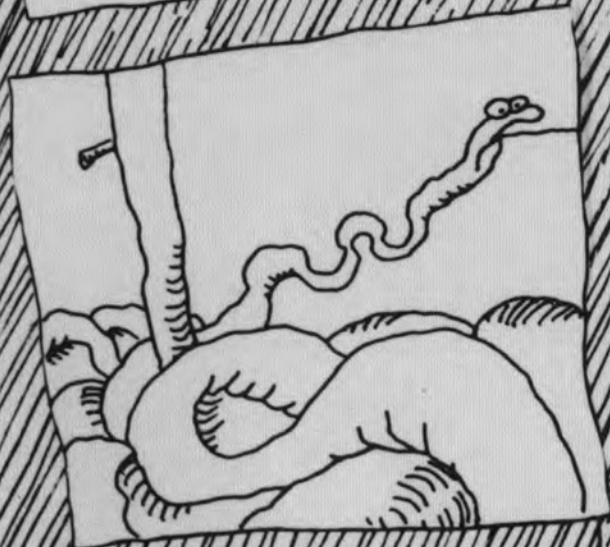
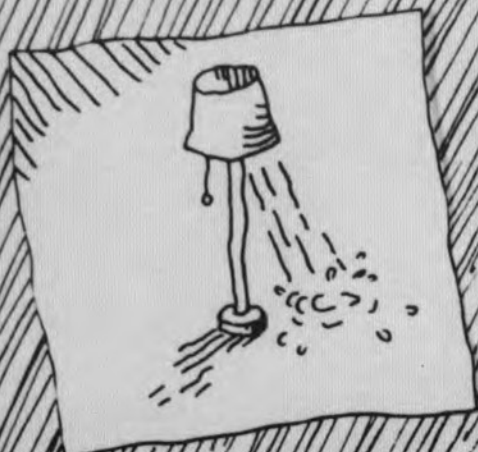
persuading Colin Low and the reigning powers at the CBC to commission the young animators at the Board to produce one-minute spots for television. Derek Lamb, then a recent arrival from London, remembers that the pieces "were excellent training. You can't go far wrong in one minute and even if you do, there are ways to rescue the work." Lamb, Pindal and the rest of the animation unit's young recruits received informal educational sessions from McLaren, whose credo "animation is movement," seems to have influenced them all. With the success of the short pieces and McLaren's training behind them, the group was ready to move forward and make their own "signed" works.

The talented imports Potterton, Pindal and Lamb led the way with *My Financial Career*, *The Peep Show*, *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* and *The Great Toy Robbery*. Potterton, who had already worked on a feature-length animated adaptation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* before coming to the Board, skillfully realized Stephen Leacock's *My Financial Career*. This quintessentially Canadian subject about a customer's fear of financial institutions found a home with Potterton who admits, "I've always had trouble with banks, especially that big Bank of Montreal building on St. James Street in Montreal which is just terrifically imposing." Pindal's *The Peep Show* remains a wonderfully naive work reflecting this Danish-born animator's love of the rustic life, but it is with *Old Lady* that he reaches his mature style. Here, in collaboration with director Lamb, Pindal creates a memorable assembly of brilliantly drawn characters—a terrorist Cat, a Spider that resembles a magician, a *Peep*-like bird, a dancing Dog wearing a Derby hat, and a wacky grey-haired Old Lady—to play out the darkly comic fable of greed that is the basis of the classic folk song. Lamb also worked closely with Jeff Hale on *The Great Toy Robbery*, a delicious exercise in camp aesthetics in which the Three Wise Men from the Nativity are Wild West bandits whose attempts to steal Santa Claus' gifts—hula hoops, balls and horns—are thwarted by a square-jawed, pure and utterly fatuous hero.

The NFB's animation unit found its style with these films, winning awards in festivals from Belgrade to San Francisco. Animators and educators, both nationally and internationally, began to think of the unit as a place where artistic work could be done. Production of animated shorts grew rapidly during the 1960s, culminating in the decision near the end of the decade to split the Department of Animation into two units, one English and the other French. Placed at the head of the new French division was veteran animator René Jodoin. This decision proved to be a fortuitous one for the next wave of foreign recruits who entered the Board.

A former protégé of McLaren, Jodoin was, himself, an experimental animator. His natural inclination was to give an artist the broadest scope in which to do a piece. While the English unit found itself weighed down by a top-heavy staff and a multitude of commissioned educational pieces, Jodoin's neophyte unit was given time to orient itself at the Board. Paul Driessen, who began to work with Jodoin in 1970, reflects that "He was a philosopher. René was a typical Film Boarder. He loved to talk. He could go on for hours! But he was a very inspiring person, especially to young people." Co Hoedeman





Paul Driessen's *THE END OF THE WORLD IN FOUR SEASONS*

recalls that the French unit at the time "was really a great place to be. There was a lot of camaraderie. People were always interested in each other's work. There was an incredible exchange of ideas and a lot of social interaction." Caroline Leaf, then quite young and reclusive, remembers parties that took place "at the drop of a hat. What was nice was that people would go into the prop department and get props and change into costumes. People would cook and eat and play music."

The atmosphere was clearly conducive toward making fine art films. Within a few years, Jodoin produced, among others, Ron Tunis's sensual *Wind*, Bretislav Pojar's satirical *Balablok*, Kaj Pindal's wicked *Horsing Around*, and Peter Foldès' innovative, computer-animated *Hunger*. While the English unit's Wolf Koenig and Robert Verrall stalled on employing young animators, Jodoin busily hired a new generation of foreign and domestic talent: Paul Driessen and Co Hoedeman from Holland, Ishu Patel from India, Caroline Leaf from the United States, and Peter Foldès from France, all found work under the auspices of the French unit. Of course,



Jodoin also brought along native talents like Pierre Hébert and Jacques Drouin, but it is clear that the influx of animators from abroad helped to make the French unit a distinctive and prestigious studio within a decade of its formation.

Co Hoedeman, an émigré who stayed with the French unit at the Board, has created award-winning films for more than a quarter-of-a-century. His use of models and puppets makes him unique at the NFB, an institution that has shied away from that form of expression. Hoedeman has made his figures lumber (*The Sniffing Bear*), dance (*Matrioska*) and even build an artificial town (*Tchou-tchou*). His masterpiece, *The Sand Castle*, is a wonderfully accomplished fantasy in which a sandman and his tiny creations construct an elaborate castle, only to see it blow away through the force of nature. The film won 22 prizes, including an Academy award. Hoedeman left Holland in the mid-1960s because “the animation industry was limited. There were no funds and institutions to support the art of animated filmmaking. When I learned about the NFB, I thought, rather naively, ‘this must be a great place, where people can explore and make films...’ [Also] for a young person, life in Holland was not so desirable. It’s a crowded country and I was looking for other opportunities and Canada seemed a good place to be.”

Ishu Patel has also remained at the Board, weathering crises and winning awards for his lyrical films. His

sense of design and ability to experiment with everything from cutouts to the most advanced form of computer software mark Patel as a progressive artist, but his storytelling remains rooted in the myths and legends of the India that nurtured him. Patel’s signature work is *Paradise*, a tale that contrasts a bird with rainbow plumage trapped in a golden cage with a free, if monochromatic, blackbird. By using backlit perforations for the crystal castle which is the site of the drama, Patel created a stunning visual backdrop to his parable. After 25 years in Canada, Patel observe, “This is home now. I have my family here. I have never had a problem in Canada. I never experienced racism. Montreal has been wonderful since I first arrived—and that was during the October Crisis!”

Paul Driessen is a classic freelance artist. Unlike Patel and his countryman, Hoedeman, he has never worked exclusively at the Film Board. For the past 20 years, Driessen has divided his time between Canada and Europe, animating and teaching on both continents. A formalist, Driessen has created some of his finest explorations of animated art for the Board. *The End of the World in Four Seasons*, his most recent release, is a storyboard gone awry: each piece of paper depicts a separate action that moves, seemingly at will, from one sheet to another. Framed, and chronologically structured in quarters, this allusive piece deservedly won major prizes at Ottawa’s highly regarded animation festival. Driessen came to Canada after working on *Yellow Submarine*, the animated feature that was directed by a former NFBer, George Dunning. The anecdotes Driessen heard from Dunning coupled with screenings of McLaren’s work—and, notably, those of Kaj Pindal—convinced Driessen to try his luck here. Observes Driessen, “It’s exciting to make your own films. I experienced that first at the Board and I’ve never stopped doing it. It’s normal for me now but it wasn’t then.”



Above, Co Hoedeman’s Oscar-winning *THE SAND CASTLE*.

**“The mix of people was what made Canada special. We were stronger for our differences than our similarities.” —Derek Lamb**

The work of Driessen, Hoedeman, Patel, Leaf, Pojar, Pindal, Potterton and the rest helped to make Canada a recognized force in the field of animation. That time is rapidly moving toward a close. Derek Lamb, an artist who ran the English unit in its autumnal glory in the late 1970s, points out that “the mix of people was what made Canada special. One was not threatened by one’s neighbours. We were stronger for our differences than our similarities. One always felt that the NFB was a filmmaking institution for the thinking person. That doesn’t include geographical borders.” From a home for wayward artists to a place which encourages its finest talents to leave, Canada—and our animators—have travelled a strange path. Perhaps these tales of past glories may induce some current hotshots to think twice before leaving a land that was so recently animation’s Camelot. ■