



Arthur: Cinar has flourished by providing programming which is gentle, intelligent and optimistic.

Industry

Cinar's Arthur and Wimzie's House Set High Standards

By John Connolly

What Canadian production company has animated television programs airing daily in over 100 countries around the world, has more than 1,000 half-hours of programming in its library, is listed on the Toronto, Montreal and Nasdaq stock exchanges, and has the number 1-rated children's program in Canada and in the U.S. on PBS? If you didn't immediately answer Cinar, you can be forgiven. The Montreal-based producer of both animated and live-action programming for children is not exactly a household name; however, its shows—principally half-hour animated television series (58 at last count)—are instantly recognizable by children around the world. In an industry dominated by American giants with an eye to the next feature tie-in or toy licensing bonanza, Cinar has had considerable success by creating educational and entertaining television that resonates with young viewers, regardless of their nationality.

Cofounders Micheline Charest and Ronald Weiner were cineastes (she graduated from the London Film School and worked for the NFB; he was a director of the first Women's International Film Festival) who met in New Orleans in 1976. They soon married and shortly afterwards founded Cinar. Initially they both wanted to make features and went into business together simply to make enough money to finance their own productions. Their first venture was to drive across the U.S. promoting a previously shelved horror film from the trunk of their car. Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), for which they had bought nonexclusive distribution rights, became a modest success on the American repertory circuit, grossing approximately \$250,000 over the next two years. The pair then switched to buying, selling and versioning a variety of East European and Japanese animated productions for the

U.S. market, eventually returning to Montreal in 1984 to set up shop. By 1988, Charest and Weiner had built their own sound and post-production facilities, and by 1991 they had released the first two series to be produced entirely in-house—*Smoggies* (environmentally conscious trolls) and *Madeline* (based on the famous series of French children's books by Ludwig Bemelmans).

Since then Cinar's growth has been explosive. In 1996, the company produced 171 half-hour episodes of both animated and live-action television for children. Recent joint ventures and co-productions have seen Cinar involved with HBO, Nickelodeon, the Reader's Digest empire, Polygram and Japan's largest TV network, NHK. Cinar also owns 10 per cent (soon to be 20) of Teletoon, Canada's newly licensed animated speciality channel which will be launched this fall. What really sets Cinar apart, however, is the type of programming it produces. In an industry which has not always been synonymous with social responsibility and high ethical standards, it has thrived by providing animated shows which manage both to entertain and have inherent messages of tolerance, self-acceptance, and nonviolence. This tenet is one of the foundations upon which the company has been built.

The lack of violence is remarkable. Instead of brutality, we see young characters talking, playing and generally interacting with each other in a positive yet realistic manner. Parents and friends offer guidance. When disputes arise, they are settled amicably, using reason, ingenuity and patience. There is humour (in some instances a great deal of it), conflict, real-life problems (at least, real-life children's problems) and enough ambiguity and intelligence to keep things

interesting. No fluorescent dinosaurs hopping around and hugging kids here.

Two of Cinar's most popular shows are *Arthur* and *Wimzie's House*. *Arthur* (co-produced by Cinar and WGBH Boston) looks at the world through the eyes of its eight-year-old protagonist, who each week deals with two interrelated storylines involving friends, family and school. Based on Marc Brown's award-winning series of books, *Arthur's* main goal is to help children make sense of the world around them. It also (subtly and not so subtly) promotes literacy and has an outreach campaign with storywriting kits that can be sent to its young viewers. *Arthur* is currently the most popular children's program on PBS in the U.S., recently surpassing the mythical *Barney & Friends* in overall ratings. *Wimzie's House* is a series designed in conjunction with educational psychologists at Harvard and Concordia Universities. Using foam puppets in the tradition of *Sesame Street*, *Wimzie's House* involves a cast of engaging young characters who spend time doing various kinds of activities at—yes—Wimzie's house. While entertaining, the series is also designed to allow children to develop an understanding of their own emotions and those of the people around them.

In a sense, the world of children's television has begun to catch up with Cinar. Regulatory trends in many national jurisdictions are moving toward the control of violence and the inclusion of at least some educational content during peak viewing hours. The fact that this is occurring and that Cinar has flourished by providing programming that is at its centre gentle, intelligent and optimistic, is itself reason for hope. ■