

Marv Newland's International Rocketship: A West Coast Original

By Mark Freedman

For 22 years, Marv Newland and his world-renowned animation company, International Rocketship, has been the cornerstone for animation production in British Columbia. An important contributor to and advocate for Canadian and independent animators throughout the world, Newland epitomizes the ideals of the West Coast animator—resolved to make his own films and not run an animation “factory.”

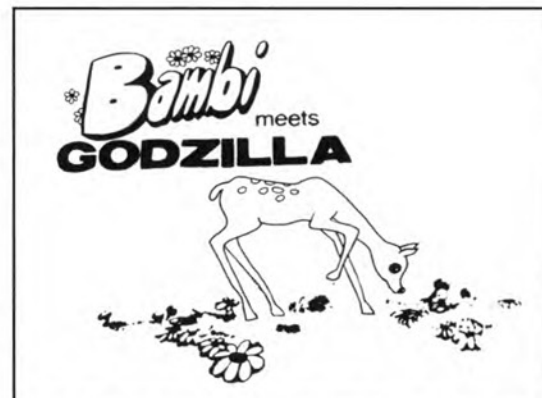
Newland's early film memories are of his parents dropping him off at the local movie house every Saturday morning with enough money for admission and a snack. During those days, the shows would include previews, serials and about a dozen cartoons (classics from *Terrytoons*, Max Fleischer, Tex Avery and *Looney Tunes*). Two important lessons were learned at these movie marathons: one, cartoons, loud music and noises are a lot of fun; and two, he could survive for long periods of time in dubious environments on minimum amounts of food. “Both of these lessons prepared me for a life in animation,” Newland recalls.

When the Los Angeles Art Center College of Design offered classes in filmmaking, Newland abandoned his design classes and changed mediums, until the day he was stymied by some clouds while attempting to film a sunrise. Under a tight deadline to complete his graduation film, Newland shelved the live-action film and switched techniques, making instead the famous black-and-white animated short *Bambi Meets Godzilla* in 1969. Still receiving residuals from sales, Newland rarely discusses the film, allowing it to speak for itself; but half-jokingly he likes to say “that film ruined my career.” After graduation, Newland landed a job at Frank Terry's L.A.-based company, Spungbuggy Works, designing animated TV commercials. Here Newland learned, as he puts it, “the nuts and bolts of animation.”

Given the choice to live and work in New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, Newland instead came north to Toronto in 1970, freelancing for companies such as Cinera Productions and the Ottawa-based Crawley Films

on a variety of commercials, shorts and *Sesame Street* segments. The next few years were spent working in Vancouver with the first generation of B.C. animators (Al Sens, Wayne Morris, Erik Eriksen and Malcolm Collett) and in Europe. Returning to the West Coast in 1975, Newland launched International Rocketship, producing commercials for the Bay, Eaton's, Levi's and TV inserts for *Sesame Street*, MTV, MuchMusic, Nickelodeon in the U.S., and CBC-TV. He co-produced films with the NFB (*Deadly Deposits*, 1993) and a pilot for the series *Eek! the Cat*. He also started a pattern of investing in films of other talented animators, producing Dieter Mueller's *The Butterfly* (1982), Danny Antonucci's *Lupo the Butcher* (1987), J. Falconer's *Dog Brain* (1988), Dan Collins's *Waddles* (1989) and Debra Dawson's *Pollen Fever* (1994). “There used to be more opportunities for the independent Canadian animator to access government funding from the Canada Council or NFB, but today those monies have to come from other sources. Independent films used to create markets; now most films made are purely market driven.”

When asked why Canadians excel in animation and have come to dominate this field, Newland says, “Our strength is our ability to remain open to the influences of the animators who come here from around the world. There is more interaction and less tendency to control their approaches. The results are unpredictable, fresh and although not always commercially successful, more artistic.” This is clearly evident in *Anijam* (1984), a film made up of 22 segments in which the animators made their segments without ever knowing what was done before or after. Utilizing the talents of animators from all over the world (including Paul Driessen, Zdenko Gasparovic and Sally Cruickshank), *Anijam* won the Jury Prize at the 1985 Toronto Animation Festival and was an audience favourite at many other festivals. This collaborative approach continued with *Pink Komkommer* in 1991. Sometimes raunchy, always provocative, this compilation of nine animated “inner dreams” (including the talents of Sara Petty, Alison Snowden and David Fine) has been shown in many festivals, always



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generating lively discussions.

In 1994, Newland directed the first of two half-hour TV specials, *Gary Larson's Tales From the Far Side*. (The second special was completed this May.) It's a project that he was destined to work on. Winning numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the Annecy International Animation Festival and making *Time's* Top 10 TV list for 1994, *Far Side* is one of the best examples of how to successfully adapt a project from the medium of print to the animated form. Designed, animated and filmed entirely in Vancouver, Newland had full control over the two specials with final approval from Larson. “This was the reason Gary chose to work with us, because by doing all the work in Vancouver we could control the quality,” says Newland.

A strong supporter of the independent animator, Newland's contributions are unique, creating an indelible mark on the art of animation. ■