



**Above: Ludovic: The Snow Gift; Right: Sand Castle**

*Go*

Hoedeman has spent most of his adult life working at being a kid. It's an irony he's well aware of. The Dutch-born NFB animator makes his living creating fanciful little puppets which he arranges in front of a camera on miniature, tabletop sets, playfully moving them about to tell charming, gentle stories that have captivated children and adults around the world. For doing this he has been handsomely rewarded. His name is etched on dozens of international animation trophies, including an Oscar for *The Sand Castle*. There's even a movie about him, Nico Crama's *Co Hoedeman, Animator*. However, the Oscar came in 1978 and the movie shortly thereafter in 1980; for the past 20 years Hoedeman has receded from the limelight. His movies (seven since *The Sand Castle*) have won awards but not the clamour and the glamour that go with Hollywood acclaim. With the release of *Ludovic: The Snow Gift*, this may change. Paired with Nelvana's latest Babar feature, *Babar: King of the Elephants*, *Ludovic* has met with such positive response that three sequels have already been planned. Is there more limelight in Hoedeman's future?

Ludovic is the Baby Bear in a conventional three-bear family. He and his parents are old-fashioned-looking teddy bear types but 1990s folk in their attitudes. Busy but overprotective, his parents keep a tight rein on Ludovic. He is anxious to escape their rules. When the new girl bear next door invites Ludovic to go tobogganing, he tries to slip away even though he's been told

he's too little. His father catches him and Ludovic is forced to find some consolation in a doll that has fallen off the girl bear's toboggan. It turns out to be a special doll that can dance and play. When it accidentally breaks a dancing-bear statue, Ludovic is punished, and he, in turn, punishes the doll who sneaks out the window of the bears' thatched-roof home. Ludovic follows. Later Ludovic is hit by the girl bear's toboggan just as he decides to go for a ride with her. Papa Bear returns the doll to its original owner over Ludovic's protests, but the girl bear returns it as a gift to brighten Ludovic's lonely convalescence. In the end, he draws a heart on the frosty pane of his bedroom window as the camera tracks back to reveal the girl bear waving to him as she walks off with her toboggan full of dolls.

Dedicated to Hoedeman's grandchildren, *Ludovic* marks a return to the simplicity and cuteness that made his pre-Oscar films such audience pleasers. The bears are Stief-like and as cuddly as those unadorned pre-1950s bears get; the plain, muslin bear with its open face and stitched, goggle eyes is universally recognizable as the lovable receptacle of a child's projections. Ludovic's tiny-voiced interior monologue is perhaps gilding the lily, but there is a warmth and charm to these creatures that has largely been missing from Hoedeman's films for the past decade or so.

Unlike some puppet animators who work with the same or very similar creatures in film after film, year after year (Nick Park's square-mouthed clay figures Wallace and Grommit



# Hoedeman

## Master Animator

By Gene Walz

spring quickly to mind), Co Hoedeman's career has been characterized by a constant search for new subjects. He has never worked with the same materials or figures twice until now. He began his NFB career in 1969 with a cute pipe-cleaner figure for *Oddball* (*Maboule* in French). For *Matrioska* (1970), he turned to those familiar colourful but sombre-faced Russian nesting dolls. In *The Owl and the Raven* (1973), based on an Inuit legend, he used sealskin effigies. *Tchou-Tchou* (1972) featured a dragon, a boy, a girl and, in fact, an entire world made out of children's colourful building blocks. Most unforgettably, *The Sand Castle* (1977) followed a team of strange, seemingly half-formed creatures that emerged from the primal sand to build a magnificent curvilinear edifice; they were made out of bulky foam rubber over a solder armature. Hoedeman's approach in all of these early films was much like a modernist sculptor's. When questioned about *The Sand Castle*, he once told me, "You have to ask yourself what is the sand all about? In *Tchou-Tchou*, what are wood and blocks all about? With the sand it came down to smooth forms, no sharp edges. The characters had to be created to fit the landscape." He concluded by saying, "It would be nice to make a film about rope or about metal." Oddly enough, he never did.

With *Masquerade* (1984), Hoedeman began working with less familiar, less childlike materials. *Masquerade* is a science-fiction story set in a quarry-like world where a large group of children create their own costumes and masks for a community dance. They are elaborately coiffed and costumed figures made from

brilliantly printed papier mâché. *Charles and François* (1988), the story of an old man and his grandson, is Hoedeman's most adult-oriented work. It is populated by two-dimensional drawn figures cut out of thick paper. They are moved about in a three-dimensional, construction paper world with elaborate moving scenery shots to indicate changes in time and space. For *The Box* (1989), he returned to preschool characters (in what would now be termed a vaguely *South Park* style), but they were virtually two-dimensional, constructed out of thin slats of brightly painted wood. Hoedeman himself appears in the film—to encourage the "children" he has constructed to find a life of their own outside the box.

Just prior to *Ludovic*, Hoedeman's search for new puppet materials took another turn. *The Sniffing Bear* (1992) and *The Garden of Ecos* (1997) are animal stories. Hoedeman started by making his own art paper. For *The Sniffing Bear*, a parable about substance abuse, he merely cut out three different shades of the roughly textured paper into the two-dimensional shapes of a bear, a seal and an owl. For *The Garden of Ecos*, a more elaborate parable about the deadly consequences of disrupting the environment, he shaped the paper into a variety of odd, three-dimensional figures with cut-out or drawn-on features. Interestingly, the more resourceful Hoedeman became in his search for different puppet materials, the more distracting these materials have become. So, while his films since *The Sand Castle* have been impressive (and often award winning), they have not been as universally engaging. They have also strayed somewhat from his initial themes and concerns.



**Charles and François**

Hoedeman's two major films of the 1970s, *Tchou-Tchou* and *The Sand Castle*, as well as most of his other early works, are celebrations of inspired action, joyful movement and creative transformation—matters central to all animator's art. At some point in all of these films a small, unprepossessing creature demonstrates its creativity by transforming itself and/or its environment in a captivating display of its hidden powers. This demonstration is almost always accompanied by or takes the form of a dance. In *Oddball*, challenged by a colourful array of beach balls and children's agates, the title character—a pinpoint of white light—bounces around and reveals that it contains all the colours of the rainbow. Beneath the stern countenance and unpromising bulk of the *Matrioska* doll are six smaller nesting dolls charged by a vital terpsichorean spirit which propels them into a snap-the-whip-style dance at the sound of the Russian folk music. The appearance of the dragon in *Tchou-Tchou* seems to be in response to the exuberance of the little block children. Whenever one of them performs a happy flip, the beast menaces them. Their early coping strategies (hiding from it, bombing it or tricking it) prove inadequate. It's only when they turn it into a train as it sleeps that they are successful. Then they can ride it through town accompanied by playful music in a kind of mechanical dance. Likewise, at the climax of *The Sand Castle* when the unlikely team of builders and shapers has transformed the barren beach into a castle, they celebrate their achievement with a happy dance. Against an empty, black-felt backdrop that suggests a void in *Oddball* and *Matrioska*, in the frozen high Arctic of *The Owl and the Raven*, in the cramped and circumscribed world of blocks in *Tchou-Tchou*, and in the fragile and transient world of wind, sand and waves in *The Sand Castle*, creatures still dance and express themselves. Creativity, Hoedeman repeatedly stresses, is irrepressible.

This optimism is somewhat compromised in *The Treasure of the Grotocceans* (1988), where buoyant, underwater creatures make a life out of salvaging human junk that has been discarded into the sea. They are creative, but the ecological threat casts a pall on the film. After this, Hoedeman focuses increasingly on those things that stifle creativity. In the future world of *Masquerade*, weird machines make everything from food to music to masks. Although there are young girls to organize and prepare for the final dance, there are, ominously, no adult females, only old men to run things and offer advice and fathers to interfere. Despite this, the children succeed in making crude and amusingly amateurish costumes and masks for the dance. The film seems to be more concerned with human persistence and the acceptance of childish limitations rather than the triumph of the spirit evident in Hoedeman's earlier work. The relationship between mentors and protégés is the focus of all the films since *Masquerade*. In fact, that is the most noteworthy change in the work Hoedeman has completed so far. Before *Masquerade*, his films are inhabited exclusively by precocious children, unsupervised creatures or naive animals. Since then, with the possible exception of *The Sniffing Bear*, adults are a constant presence and the fallen world is too much with us. This has meant not just an addition of characters but an altered point of view and a change in tone. Muted colours predominate in *Charles and François* and *The Garden of Ecos*. Both films end with deaths. A sombre sense of inevitability and loss, never far below the surface, gradually emerges. The bounce and sparkle of Hoedeman's earlier films is nowhere in evidence.

The one exception to this virtual sea change is *The Box*. A Pinocchio-like story, *The Box* combines live action with animation as Hoedeman appears as himself at his animation

# Co Hoedeman

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table. Starting with a drawn-on smile and then a blue, paper heart, the animator subsequently provides the little wooden boy with periodic nods of encouragement and useful props to help him negotiate his way around his boxed-in world. In the end, on his own, the puppet boy creates a three-dimensional star which Hoedeman places on the wall of his own studio, allowing the boy to escape his own small box for the larger one of the animator. More overtly metacinematic and philosophical than his earlier work, *The Box* nonetheless reprises many of the qualities that made his films so refreshingly attractive—bright and lively colours straight out of a child's uncomplicated imagination and a story composed from the simple and yet familiar trials of childhood, amusingly and unexpectedly plotted. Accessible by children, yet attractive to adults at the same time (like the best of his films), *The Box* provides the added bonus of clever allusions to Hoedeman's earlier work.

What is most distinctive about Hoedeman's 30-year career as an animator is not, however, his ups-and-downs, his consistencies or inconsistencies. Nor is it his constant search for new materials or the appeal he holds for both the sophisticated and the uninitiated. What stands out is the fluidity and involvement of his animation camera. Working on a precarious tabletop landscape of blocks or paper, sand or stones, requires extraordinary patience and delicacy. Negotiating an inquisitive and sympathetic camera through a maze of features with nary a visible flow is nothing short of God-like. Continuity lapses, out of focus shots, wonky setups are nowhere in evidence. That he can do this with a moving camera and often in extreme close-up with four-inch creatures (where the tolerances are exaggerated) is a testimony to his wizardry.

For Co Hoedeman is nothing if not a magician. In *Tchou-Tchou*, the camera movement, after coyly withholding the children's activities, discloses in close-up the transformation they have wrought on the dragon and tracks back and around to follow the train ride throughout the building-block village, is electrifying. Likewise, the tracking shot in *The Sand Castle*, which reveals the *tour de force* stop-motion choreography of the team of creatures upon the completion of their sand castle, is sheer delight. A distinctly different but equally impressive moment occurs in *Charles and François*. As the two men are driven by cab from the inner city to the country via street and superhighway and lane, the passing scenery flashes by them as if on meticulously pivoted billboards. The freshness and metaphorical appropriateness of the effect are unmatched in any other animator's work.

Grace notes such as these are evident throughout Hoedeman's remarkable career. *Ludovic* has its fair share—an extreme close-up of the bear's face as a tear glistens and descends down his cheek; an unexpected point-of-view shot from under the bear's bed as the doll hides while Mama Bear sweeps up the shards of her broken statue and chastises Ludovic. What these shots and many others reveal is just how inadequate the term animator sometimes is. Hoedeman's precise mastery of camera movement is the equal of any Industrial Light & Magic computer team. His understanding of expressive camera setups and the dynamics of visual storytelling is positively Hitchcockian. He "directs" his puppet actors with the modesty and beguiling understatement of François Truffaut. Co Hoedeman is an animator with few peers. In fact, he is a master film director in a class by himself. ◉

**Masquerade**

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