

# Sweetly

Subversive



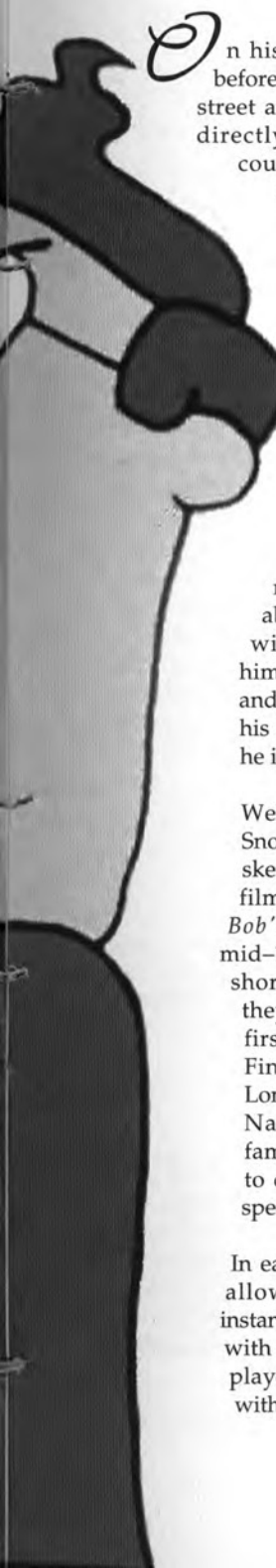
Image courtesy of Nelvana

Bob and Margaret

The comic style of

# David Fine & Alison Snowden

by Marc Glassman



On his way home every night, an old man pauses before he enters his empty home. He looks across the street and sighs, thinking of the aging woman living directly opposite him. One day, he plucks up his courage, crosses the street to ask her out and is summarily grabbed at the door by the binocular-toting granny who has been waiting for him for ages. In a coarser, and earlier, variation on the theme of aging love, a lusty woman, supposedly too old to care about such things, unwraps an eagerly awaited item. Arriving via second-class mail is her object of desire, an inflatable and quite elderly sex doll.

In a third story, written and illustrated in the same wry style, a childless couple are nearing 40, comparative youngsters to the geriatric set depicted in the earlier tales. The man, a dentist who engages in futile fantasies about his female assistant, is unaware that his wife has planned a surprise birthday party for him. While the party guests hide behind couches and curtains, he pours out his middle-aged angst to his bewildered wife and a far larger audience than he intended.

Welcome to the world of David Fine and Alison Snowden. The two, partners in life as well as in art, sketched in their own imaginative terrain with the films *Second Class Mail*, *George and Rosemary* and *Bob's Birthday*. Made over a decade, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, these three animated shorts defined their developing sensibility while they were finishing film school and getting their first jobs in Canada and England. Snowden and Fine seized the opportunities given to them by London's National Film and Television School, the National Film Board of Canada and Britain's famously enlightened producers at Channel Four to create sly and funny looks at that endangered species, the bourgeoisie.

In each of these films, the graphic design is simple, allowing the ordinariness of the situation to be instantly read by the audience. Primary colours prevail with some pastels thrown in for contrast. The main players are drawn in a deliberately cartoony style with prominent almost bulbous noses, emphatic hair

stylings and flat but fleshy physiques. Most importantly, characters who appear on the surface to be the epitome of banality reveal themselves to have secret erotic and romantic sides.

It's the attention to character-defining details that make these works so remarkable. In *Second Class Mail*, Snowden's student film, in which Fine worked as her assistant, the slow way that the woman takes off her sexless apron before sitting next to her love doll establishes her loneliness and desire. Their first signed professional piece, *George and Rosemary*, confidently takes us through a series of George's romantic fantasies without ignoring the reality that he has to leave his dentures in a glass every night. And in *Bob's Birthday*, the dentist's Shakespearean soliloquies to his dental assistant mark him as a fool for love.

All three of these films were nominated for Oscars and the third, *Bob's Birthday*, garnered the prize in 1995. It pushed Snowden and Fine into a special category as internationally respected artists. Until recently, the Oscar would have assured them of potential indie projects for short films and a continuing career as anonymous but highly paid creators of commercials. But this is the 1990s, the decade of *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butthead* and *South Park*. With animated television series suddenly becoming successful on prime time and cable, the duo found that studios were knocking on their door to produce more work about a 40-something dentist and his wife.

The result is now on stations in Canada, the United States and Britain. Coproduced through Britain's Channel Four, America's Comedy Central and Canada's acclaimed Nelvana studio, *Bob and Margaret* continues the tale of that troubled dentist and his podiatrist wife. "We thought it was amusing that they work at opposite ends of the body—teeth are fairly funny for Bob and there's something unromantic about feet," notes Snowden. The two have offices down the street from each other in downtown London. While at work, they are constantly talking to one another on the phone, sorting out each other's problems. Bob still has his assistant, Penny, while the more capable Margaret soldiers on, fixing what Fats Waller memorably called "peddle extremities" and occasionally helping her dentist husband out with his practice.

At home, the two take care of their silly but affectionate dogs Elizabeth and William. Acting as substitute children, the dogs play games with Bob, eat lots of food like their masters and are doted on by Margaret. In "Holiday," a script penned by Snowden for the first season of the show, Bob and Margaret



### **George and Rosemary**

leave the dogs at a kennel while they go away on a vacation. The owner of this animal "motel" turns out to be a repressed psychopath with delusions about his mother. This second-grade Anthony Perkins plays out *Psycho*-based delusional scenarios in which he controls the feeding and sleep habits of the thoroughly terrified animals. A nightmarish projection of what can happen to children while their parents are away enjoying themselves, this episode colourfully illustrates how the comedy in the series is played out.

Like *Bob's Birthday*, the series locates its humour through detailed observations of the everyday foibles of British professionals. Bob and Margaret are timid representatives of that much-maligned group—the middle class. "There's a lot of British people who are very insecure and modest," Snowden notes, "middle-stream people are very apologetic for themselves, saying 'sorry' and often fumbling." The comical adventures of the two are based on their marvelous inability to cope with even the slightest changes in their normal game plan.

In "Shopping," Fine's satirical hand can be spotted in the depiction of a conflict-resolution manager who is employed by an enormous grocery store to make sure that customers don't get overly stressed out while gathering items to purchase at the shop. Margaret's attempts to stop an aggressive but self-aware mother from abusing her child leads into an argument about whether the childless podiatrist should comment about what a real mother does to cope with her children. The store's conflict-resolution manager couldn't care less about who is right in the case; his task is to calm everyone down so they can go about doing the most important things, purchasing and consuming.

Just as Margaret attempts to be assertive in "Shopping," it's Bob's turn in the "Dental Convention." Here the low-key dentist

is forced by a very successful dental school friend to present a paper at a prestigious conference. Bob's anxiety level rises as he realizes that he has to address an audience of his colleagues at the most important conference of the year. By accident, after making fun of himself for being a nondescript member of his profession, he discovers that he is talking to an audience who can relate to his distress. As a crowd of fellow dentists laugh and applaud, for once Bob loosens his tie and gets angry, launching into an attack on modern dentistry with its glamorous technicians and code words for simple medical procedures.

Although Bob and Margaret have these small spasms of success and self-revelation, their willful ignorance of the way the world works remains the comic premise of the show. They go through their days in a state of mild shock and disappointment. Although life in London still allows for soccer matches and neighborhood pubs, the age of computers, supershopping malls and psychobabble has irrevocably shifted the way even that city operates. The lovely confusion that Bob and Margaret face is due to their belief in the old verities that don't exist as meaningfully as they did in the past: professionalism, loyal service from employees and good shopping in local communities.

"We want to deal with the frustrations of Britain," allows Fine. "Bob and Margaret aren't us but they aren't characters that Alison and I are inventing. They are characters we are drawing from our own experience. There's a lot of unhealthiness in Britain and we're making fun of it. The business of how Britain is organized, the class system, charging for every phone call which makes every service more expensive, inhibits people and makes them less expressive."

The result, the somewhat inarticulate but resolutely British duo

of *Bob and Margaret*, has become a hit show in England, Canada and the United States. The surprise, of course, is that such a "local" story line has provoked a positive international response. Fine and Snowden have created characters whose circumstances can be understood by anyone with a nodding acquaintance of the middle class. The sheer banality of Bob and Margaret's lives allows for the insertion of mildly satirical bits into nearly every episode of the show. The audience is allowed easy access into their bewilderment as they attempt to negotiate their way through such day-to-day events as parking a car in a huge commercial lot, finding a conference room at an international hotel and giving the proper Halloween gifts to neighbourhood children. By being about people who are so average, *Bob and Margaret*, as a series, aspires to a universality that is obviously attractive in a global marketplace.

Getting to that place in the worldwide flux that is specialty television has not been an easy trip for Snowden and Fine. Studios and television producers were interested in *Bob's Birthday* as a property particularly after it won the Oscar. Fine and Snowden also saw the potential in a series based on the short but, being feisty independent filmmakers, were unwilling to give their characters away to run-of-the-mill TV animators. "We wanted to keep lots of control," recalls Snowden. "We felt that it had to be the same in essence [as *Bob's Birthday*] or else we would have made something entirely different. It took a long time to get a deal where we could keep it British and keep the quality." Fine chimes in, continuing the conversational flow in a manner typical of couples who work well together, "We were negotiating with Universal for a long time but then they had a complete change of personnel at the top. The new people were still very interested but they kept saying things like, maybe Bob and Margaret should have neighbours who are American, or maybe this other person...suddenly London was going to be populated by all these Americans. There was even some talk that Bob and Margaret should move to America. We just could tell that it wasn't going to work."

Transporting Bob and Margaret out of London would have cost the series its main source of humour. It is the changing nature of the British spirit and character that is under scrutiny in the stories. Fine, a Torontonian who met Snowden at England's National Film and Television School, is acutely aware of this as is Snowden, who is not only an animator, director and writer but also the voice of Margaret. The talented couple clearly feel proprietorial rights on the tales of their medical duo and don't relate easily to the Hollywood model of doing things.

Fortunately, another option existed. The highly successful production house, Nelvana, was interested in working with Snowden and Fine on *Bob and Margaret*. Nelvana is a Toronto-based company that has produced a host of award-winning animated television series ranging from *Stickin' Around* to *Rolie Polie Olie*. Operating in Canada, Nelvana has worked hard to create international partnerships and it counts among their coproducers on various series such well-known names as Nickelodeon, Germany's ZDF and France's ARTE. Artistically, it has achieved its greatest renown through adaptations of well-known children's stories such as *The Adventures of Tintin*, *Pippi Longstocking* and *Rupert the Bear*. "They were always really supportive of keeping *Bob and Margaret* British and

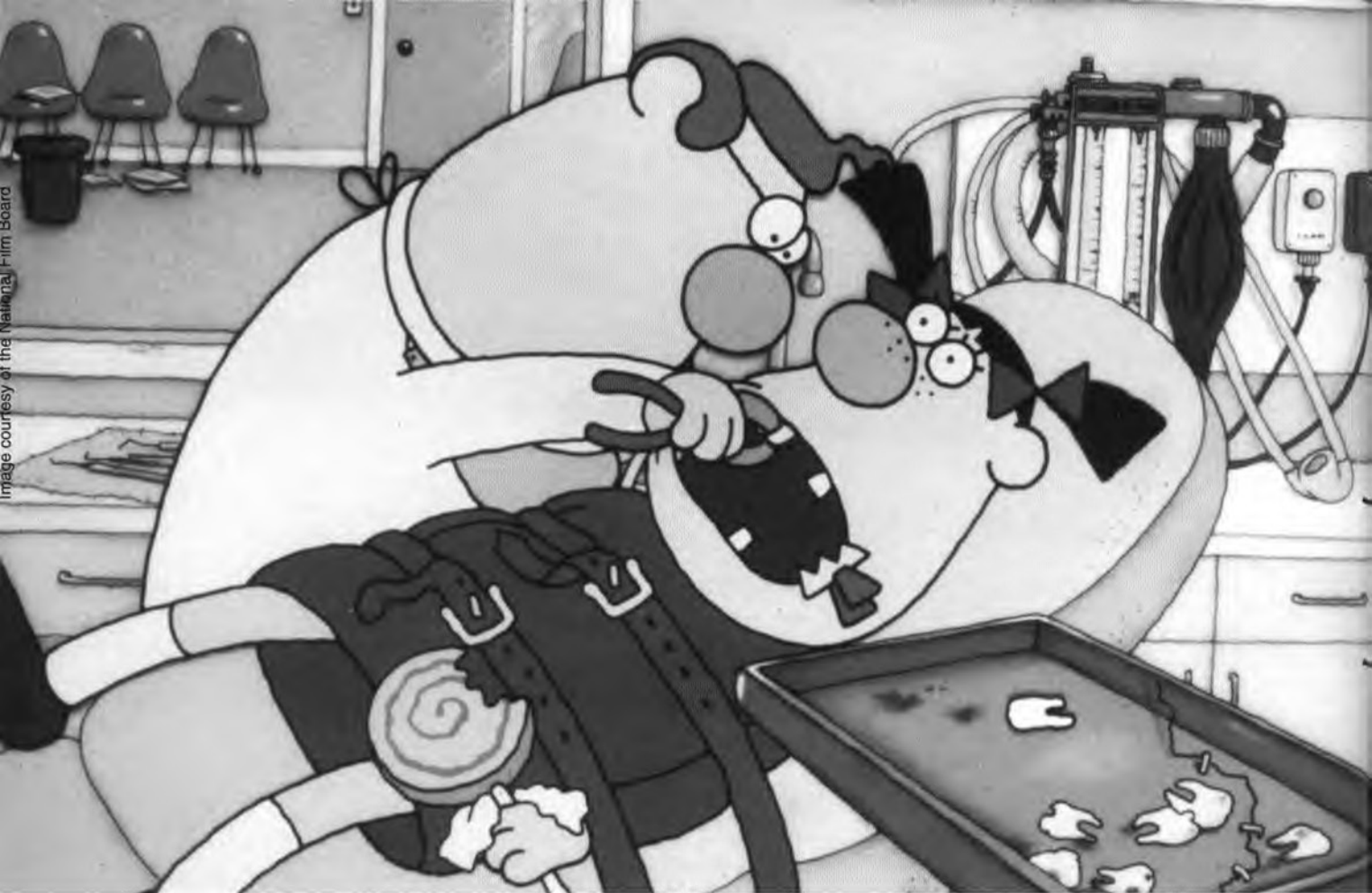
*Bob and Margaret*  
are timid representatives  
of that much-maligned  
group—the middle class.



**Alison Snowden & David Fine accepting their Academy Award for *Bob's Birthday***

they could also do the deals in Europe, Canada and America so it made a lot of sense financially," notes Fine.

At Nelvana, Snowden and Fine were able to assert their authorial stamp on the series. "People seemed to think that *Bob and Margaret* would be an easy thing to do but we knew it wasn't," comments Snowden. "It's deceptive because of its simplicity but there's a lot of nuance and detail and a certain innocence that is necessary for the humour."



### Bob's Birthday

Despite its reputation for maintaining the artistic vision of such luminaries as Maurice Sendak (*Little Bear*), Jean de Brunhoff (*Babar*) and Astrid Lindgren (*Pippi Longstocking*), Nelvana's production staff found that they had to meet a new challenge with Fine and Snowden. "That's because, as creators, we are filmmakers and animators ourselves," Snowden points out. "Normally, when Nelvana buys a property, it will be a writer who's written several books but doesn't know all aspects of filmmaking. We have the ability to be more involved."

The dark-haired Fine nods in agreement to what his slighter, reedy-voiced partner has said. "We're coming from a background of caring how the music is laid, how the sound effects are laid, the storyboard... Clearly, Nelvana thought that we would get a board and review it and make some comments because that's normal. But we went through them with a fine tooth comb and in some cases requested almost the entire board to be redone because it didn't have the feel we were visualizing in the script."

Working closely with Snowden and Fine was animation director Jamie Whitney. Picked by Nelvana to coordinate the project, Whitney was involved in all aspects of *Bob and Margaret* from the creation of the series' opening credits

through the designing of the storyboards in Toronto to long-ranging discussions and revisions with the overseas production crew in Asia. Since Fine and Snowden were in London when work on the series began in earnest, Whitney acted as conduit between them and Nelvana.

The studio produced reels of each episode for Fine and Snowden's approval. Whitney had to oversee these rough cuts and make sure that *Bob and Margaret's* creators' notes were diligently applied to any problem areas in an episode. "The place where they wanted my input the most was in cutting the final picture," comments Whitney. "There were many times when I felt the show would be better served if we cut it in a certain way to make the pacing better and they were quite willing to go along with that."

The end result of Nelvana's hard work and Fine and Snowden's creative vision and expertise is a successful prime-time animated series. *Bob and Margaret* has been renewed for two more seasons by Comedy Central in the United States and Global Television in Canada. With Snowden and Fine working on the script editing of the next 27 episodes, it is safe to say that the future of a timid dentist and his podiatrist wife is leaping forward with teeth a' gleaming. ●

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