

TISSA DAVID, interviewed by John Canemaker
18 September 2002

**An Evening with Tissa David,
Master Animator**

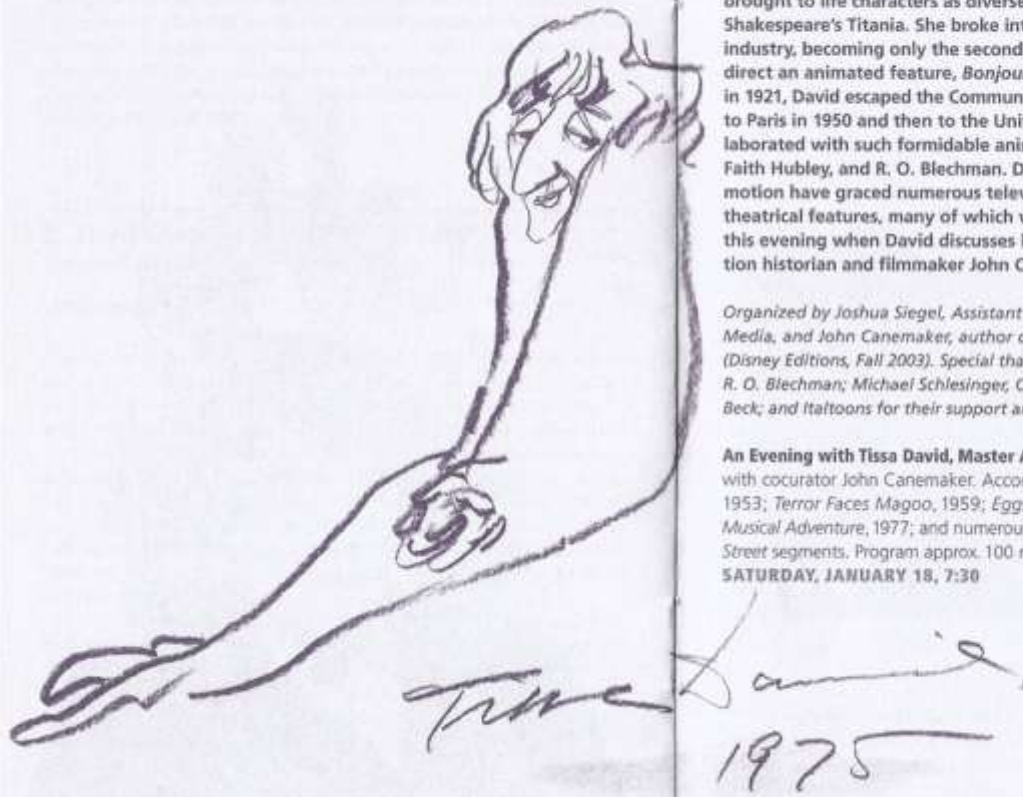
JANUARY 18

In a career spanning more than sixty years, animator Tissa David has brought to life characters as diverse as Mr. Magoo, Raggedy Ann, and Shakespeare's Titania. She broke into the male-dominated animation industry, becoming only the second woman (after Lotte Reiniger) to direct an animated feature, *Bonjour Paris*, 1953. Born in Transylvania in 1921, David escaped the Communist takeover of Hungary by moving to Paris in 1950 and then to the United States in 1955, where she collaborated with such formidable animators as Grim Natwick, John and Faith Hubley, and R. O. Blechman. David's sensual line and economical motion have graced numerous television commercials, specials, and theatrical features, many of which will be excerpted or shown in full this evening when David discusses her life and career with the animation historian and filmmaker John Canemaker.

Organized by Joshua Siegel, Assistant Curator, Department of Film and Media, and John Canemaker, author of The Art and Flair of Mary Blair (Disney Editions, Fall 2003). Special thanks to Emily Hubley; Michael Sporn; R. O. Blechman; Michael Schlesinger, Columbia Pictures Repertory; Jerry Beck; and Italtoons for their support and loan of prints.

An Evening with Tissa David, Master Animator. David discusses her work with cocurator John Canemaker. Accompanied by clips from *Bonjour Paris*, 1953; *Terror Faces Magoo*, 1959; *Eggs*, 1970; *Raggedy Ann & Andy: A Musical Adventure*, 1977; and numerous television commercials and *Sesame Street* segments. Program approx. 100 min.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 18, 7:30



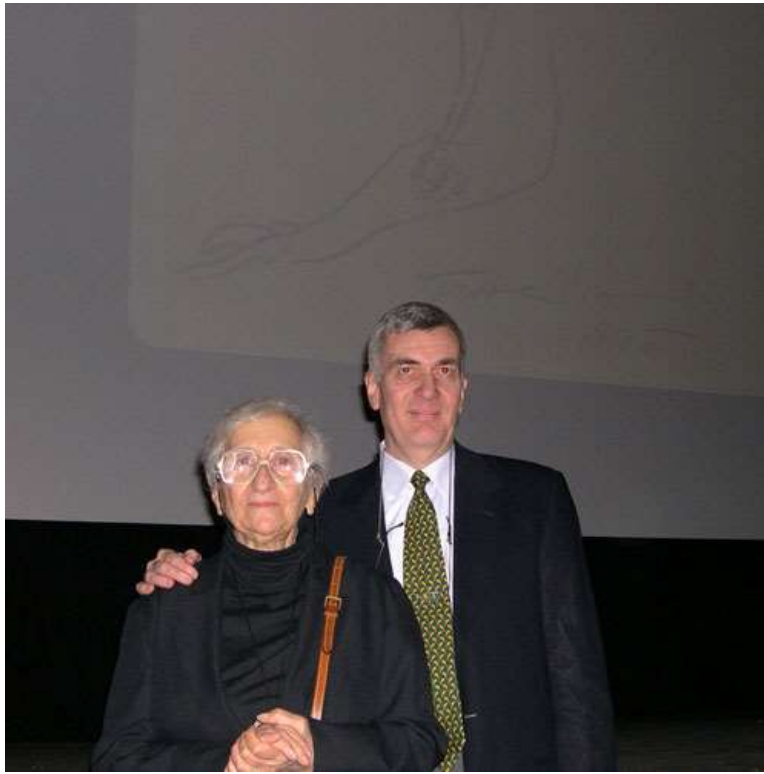
Self-Caricature, 1975. Tissa David

14

15

The Museum of Modern Art announces "An Evening with Tissa David" January 18, 2003.

The following is a transcript of my interview with Tissa David on September, 18, 2002 in which she candidly speaks at length and publicly, for the first time, about her harrowing escape from Hungary in 1950, her life and work in animation in Paris, and her first experiences working in animation (with and without Grim Natwick) in New York.



Tissa and John Canemaker, moderator/co-curator (with Josh Siegel) of the MoMA program

John Canemaker: I wanted to talk about your history. We've known each other so long.

Tissa David: (laughs) Yes!

JC: Today is September 18, 2002. My godmother's Agnes Burke's 90th birthday.

TD: Oh, wonderful!

JC: So, I thought it would be appropriate to speak to you today. You were born in January 1921.

TD: On the 5th, but I don't like the date.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

TD: I have two brothers and six sisters. One brother died.

JC: Were any of them in the arts?

TD: No. I am the black sheep. I am second [eldest] from the top.

JC: Your name is Thérèse?

TD: Yes. Tissa is just a nickname. It is not [named after] the [Tisza] river. It was in France that they gave me the name Tissa. Because I had always nicknames, but they are unpronounceable.

JC: What about [*Házi Sárkány*] the House Dragon [a legendary monster found in Hungarian mythology]?

TD: (laughs) My mother used to say [that]! Not only my mother. I *was* a house dragon. Means I was [a hellion]. *Házi*, the “a” has an accent. *Sárkány*. “Ny” is [pronounced] “nah”. [*Házi* means house and *sárkány* means dragon].



Tissa David's parents, Dr. Lajos David (1889-1962) and Szaniszlá David, neé Bíró, (1892-1978).

JC: Were you temperamental as a child?

TD: Yah. I still am. Very temperamental.

JC: What was your dad's occupation?

TD: He was a professor at the University of Szeged where I grew up. It is a town south of Hungary. By the river Tisza. But I have nothing to do with that river. [Called the “most Hungarian river” because it flowed entirely within the Kingdom of Hungary. Today, it crosses several national borders.] I was born in Kolozsvar in Transylvania. That was just before . . . that was given to Rumania after the first world war. The university was at Kolozsvar and when the Rumanians came in, the whole Transylvania was given to them.

Not just the family, the whole university moved. And they picked Szeged, that was a tiny little sleepy town by the river. Because they thought that will nicely balance the university. It was completely built by Rockefeller money. I was a little over a year when they moved to Szeged. The family lived down there. But when I went to art school, at the age of 19, then I moved to Budapest. Then I worked in Budapest.



Tissa (right) with three of her siblings.

[Father taught] pharmacy. It was a little different system of university. Belonged to the medical end. [My mother], she had enough with all the house. We were just getting along. You can't be well-to-do when you live on a professor's salary. And you are [a family of] ten. With the exception of myself, the rest all made [it to] universities. But in Hungary, mostly because my father was at the [university], it was free. The tuition was not a problem. It's very hard to judge your own father and mother. My mother was taller than my father so they called them David and Goliath.

EDUCATION AND FIRST STUDIO EXPERIENCE

JC: Were they [your parents] alive when you became successful as an animator?

TD: Oh yes. In our family that was part of being, that you succeeded. We were all "A" students. That was the natural thing. I went to high school and then college [in Szeged]. Then, when I finished, I went to Budapest for the art school. [In college] I became a teacher. [She has a teaching degree.] Four year [of college]. I was [graduated at age] 21, I think. Then I went to art school. Never wanted to teach. That was the Academy of Beaux Art in Budapest. Still is.



Tissa in Hungarian animation studio animating stop-motion puppets

JC: Why did you decide to go into art?

TD: I never wanted to do anything else. When I saw SNOW WHITE, then I said that was what I was going to do. [I saw it at] 17 or 18 years old [probably in 1938]. [I had seen] all the Felix [the Cat]'s and Disney shorts. Even in school once a month we had a movie. A big part of it was always animated cartoons. I always loved them. The Academy was fine arts. But that was very important because you do learn how to draw. I didn't finish that. Because there was a chance. I had an uncle in Budapest and he always brought me little announcements from the newspapers. And one of them [from the Hungarian Film Office] was one of the film studios was looking for people to work in animation. I thought maybe I can do it in the evening and keep on at the school. They said no. This is a commitment. So, then I decided I leave the Beaux Art. [Attended the school] only two years. I left and started to work.

It was a terrible studio. But, and terrible personalities, oh gosh. Horrid. But, I remember two months after, I decided to stay. I tell you what was the test. There was a drawing of a horrible, a little like Fleischer kind of character. Looking toward us. And I was supposed to draw exactly the same pose, same character but from this angle, then from this angle. And so I did it. They wanted me to know if I could turn it around. It was a very good test. So, then I was hired. And I had to learn how to do in-betweens [drawings between the main poses of a character]. It was the Hungarian Film Studio. In Budapest. [She worked for one and a half years with Istvan Valker's on his film, *The Miller, His Son and the Donkey* (1944), based on a tale by Fontaine.]

THE SIEGE OF BUDAPEST

JC: What did your family think when you quit to go to art school?

TD: I already have one profession. I can always work as a teacher. It's my life and I do what I think I want to do. That was already during the war. [1942/43/44] And then came the siege of the town.

And the Russians came in. That was the end of . . . The siege was, the Germans were holding in Budapest. They blew up all the bridges. Those are big bridges 'cause it is a very wide river. It was quite a strange time. [I kept working at the studio] until December 1944. The siege started on Christmas night. The Russians were shooting the town and the Germans were in the town. I remember when I went to the studio with the tramway, the soldiers came with the same tramway only they went a little further and there was the war going on, between the Russians and the Germans. Outside of the city. The city was shot at for at least six, seven months. And bombed, every single days, three times a day.

JC: And you went to work at the studio every day?

TD: Oh yes. Every day.



Tissa animating puppets in Hungarian studio

JC: Where were these films being shown? Was there an industry?

TD: Yes. Strange when you ask me this. It sounds strange, but the movie houses were going, everything was going.

JC: So, you were an inbetweener?

TD: The second month he gave me two characters to make them walk. So, I made them walk. That is the most exciting moment in my life when I saw it on the screen. It was something, John, I still feel it. I suddenly realized I made something that came alive. That's the magic of animation, really. And it stayed with me. Yah.

Then I [became an] animator. It was the lousiest film. I worked on many bad films but this was the worst of them. This was one film, *The Miller, His Son and the Donkey*. But it doesn't matter. I remember I did a walk of the miller [who] walked from here down the road up the stairway to the mill. It sort of worked so it made me very happy. A theatrical short, maybe seven minutes.

Then after the war I started to work on commercials with a friend of mine who was on one of the pictures. Who is in Holland now.

JC: But, Tissa, we were at the siege in December 1944. What happened?

TD: 1944. That was when the siege started in January and we were in the cave and we were starving and eating dead horse flesh, things like that. And the Russians came [in February 1945]. The final last group up in the castle were chased away. The war went on. That was only Budapest. They were chasing the Germans. I just left the studio in December. I didn't go back. That was the end of it. I lived in a dormitory and we were down in the underground for about two months. A horse was shot in front of the building, we sneaked out and cut as much as . . . I mean John, we starved so much we ate boiled beans without salt, without anything for two months. Just starved. Starved. This is why I can't throw out food. Three David's [two sisters were there in the dorm] University students who got stranded there. They couldn't get home. The town was surrounded so quickly there was no way out. That went on for two months. February, March. Life started very slowly. I really don't know how we did it.

Then people started to come up from the little villages. They had a sack of flour. They didn't want money. They wanted a suit for it. Or a bed or a piano. You gave anything you had. 'Cause then you mixed it with water and cooked it on the top of a stove and you ate something that was not beans.

JC: A difficult time.

TD: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I am so glad I went through it. Because I see life in a very different way and I see people in a very different way. I remember, John, came the news that in the next street, uh. You see constantly we were bombed. By the Russians in the evening. 4 o'clock in the morning came the Americans and around 11 the English planes. You could set your clock by it. That was three times a day for eight months. And they were bombing the town with cannons. They hit a building and it came down. You just write it off and went on. You get used to everything. Even to that.

JC: What did you learn about people?

TD: I learned that people either are very selfish or very generous. That I learned later on when I escaped from Hungary and went through almost every country without papers and everything. But during the siege, you learned how small people can be and how great people can be.

JC: So now we are in Spring 1945.

TD: We started to do anything. I was working for an old man who used to be the carpenter of the opera in Budapest. He was doing shop fronts because they would get big holes [from bombs]. And I was apprentice with him. Then they opened a night entertainment place and two colleagues of mine and myself we got a job to decorate it. Do the ceiling, walls. I remember we agree 100, 000 pengä [currency later became florins]. But by the time we finished, there was an inflation. You have never anything like it. That 100,000 was enough to buy maybe a pound of prunes.

Little job here and there. Then this friend of mine who later moved to Holland was a cameraman. He was very young. I was young, too. I was 22, 23. I was once 22! Can you imagine? He had an aunt who had a little shop selling female clothing. So, we painted some of those dresses. We did fancy painting on the dresses. Sometimes the paint was not right and when they washed it, it became holes. It was very adventurous. You see, nothing worked yet. No train, no nothing. My family came up for the last few months of the war. My sisters were small. They shouldn't have. They should have stayed in Szeged. But they were afraid the small town was more dangerous. So, they went back. We had a huge big apartment at the university [in Szeged] and practically everything was stolen. The university never stopped except for a few months [so father started teaching again].

We first did the dresses. That didn't work out very well. The he knew somebody who knew somebody and they were selling liquors. So, we made a little commercial for them. Then a graphic artist [[Gyula] Macskássy [1912-1972], they were doing commercials before. They all, died except that young cameraman, so we got there and made a little company. I worked with that company [making commercials in Macskássy's studio] until the state took everything away.

We had a nice big studio in Budapest. Those puppets were done there. Macskássy and Company. He [was alive but] other colleagues died. Julius [Gyula] Macskássy. He has since died. Then we worked until 1949 when the state took over, took everything. I remember we had little lamps and every lamp had a name. And they just came and just packed everything away. We had to go out to the state studio to work. Russian communist rule. That's 1945 on. The Russians came in and the communists were in power. Everything was taken away from everybody. Oh it is a horrible. I am not going to talk about that. That's nightmarish. Budapest., The state studio was in Budapest also. I was very clever. Because we had a lot of work done before we were taken over. And we had to show how much work we were doing. How many meter, instead of footage it was meter. I had enough reserved, it was already done. To show that we did this and that. So we were always doing first class. But then I knew I am not going to stay there. I knew that in no time at all I would be in jail. For example, we were obliged every week two mornings to go to a conference where the communist party had explained you what was going on in the world. I wasn't interested. I never went once. I knew I would be able to keep on. They asked how come I wasn't there. I said I didn't feel well or something.

ESCAPE TO PARIS



French magazine article on 1953 feature, **BONJOUR PARIS**. Tissa David was supervising director of the animation, analyzed and edited the sound tracks, including the music.

I decided then I would somehow have to go out. I had no idea how. Now this friend of mine [from art school] Judith, the painter. Judith Reigl [1923-2020, became a well-known abstract gestural painter whose work is in the collections of the Tate in London, Guggenheim Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art and MoMA in New York, and other major institutions]. We escaped together. [It was Reigl's ninth attempt to escape Hungary, which had been taken over by a Soviet-style authoritarian regime.] They [Reigl and other artists had] lived down in Italy for several years. They came home, Reigel and a whole group of painters. Some of them knew they should not go home. They went direct to Paris from Italy. But some came home. The first thing they took away their passports. And there was no way they'd get a passport. With Judith, we said I want to go out. She wants to go out. We want to go to Paris. I had somebody who was a nurse when we were young and she loved me very much. She would have done anything for me and she lived very close to the border. So she helped us. That was a real, real nightmare the way we came out. Nurse was Anna. You know you don't have to give all this details.

JC: This is to have a record.

TD: Okay. We went down to her place. Toward Austria. This is where she lived. Very close to Austria. She had a brother, a relative that lived right on the border. As a matter of fact, he was a state police right on the border. Now that is the best. So it was very complicated. He went down, he came back the next day. He says, don't even try. So the next day we went. I mean we just went. Because we knew that nobody will say yes we will come help you. I don't know how we did it. I don't know, John, how we had the courage to go there. I really don't.

When we got off the train, luckily he was the one who looked at the papers. He knew immediately that that's us. Because Anna came with us. So we went to the village where he lived and he came home that night dead drunk. He was so scared. We slept there that night all night long, all night long the bombs. You know the iron Curtain? That's not a joke. It's a very high, two meter high wire thing and mines. They were so sensitive a rabbit touched it. Bang! They went off. And screaming and yelling and dogs and all night long. We were in the attic. The next night he saw an Austrian contraband and told him he has two persons that want to go. The next night he took us and that contraband guy was writing with a letter on the other side and he put the letter on the path. It was night.

We climbed up very fast down on the other side and then we had to run because there was a 300 meter raised ground. And all the way down were the towers and every seven minutes the light was going around. So we just got back down we went, the light went around. I remember that as we were lying there, back in the little village, the train just came from Budapest. John, even now the cold comes down on my back. It was so weird and unreal the whole thing. Then we walked for about 30 kilometers. We had to go very fast. The *contrabandiere* took us. Arrived to the Russian zone.

At that time, next to the Hungarian border there was a Russian zone. The reason we picked that town to go over is because the Russian zone was only 30 kilometers wide. Otherwise much wider. I would say [30 k is] about 20 miles. Climbed over. Then we rushed about 300 yards. A cornfield. That 300 yard is naked. No Man's Land after the border. As we were lying down there already safe. We had to wait for the light to go around. Then the train came in, in Hungary, arrived to that small town we just slept the night. That's the train we came the previous night. So that was Hungary and we were already in Austria. It was a very strange, very weird experience. Then we walked all night.

We got to Fürstenfeld a small Austrian town [in the British zone of occupation]. We thought the best thing is to go to the police. That was 3 o'clock in the morning. We had to go fast because the moon came out. Beautiful big moon. Judith said, oh, the police is in that street, next street. And there it was. I don't know how she knew. Never been there before. We went in knocked on doors and people were sleeping. They said, "Who are you?" We said we came from Hungary. "Go back!" So we went to the end of the corridor. There was table. We climbed on the table and fall asleep. Then later on they put us on a jail where there were seven men and we were the two girls. The food and everything was unbelievable, you wouldn't give it to a pig 'cause a pig wouldn't eat it.

JC: Did the men attack you?

TD: Oh no. Everyone was so . . . We were there for a week. That was an English zone. Every day we went to the English army and they were asking questions. What we saw on the way from Budapest. We saw trains, cannons and everything. That was in March 1950 [when we escaped]. Austria was still four zones. We had no problem getting to the American zone. But to get into the French zone we had to do it illegally. It was beautiful. Up the mountains and down, just gorgeous. We got to the French zone, Innsbruck and Tyrol. Because we wanted to get to Bregenz [in western Austria], to go into Switzerland.

There was some friends there who might help us. We did get to Switzerland. We got all the information in official IRO, that's an American international organization. It was so precisely written – "you have to take this train, get off here, take 200 steps north, then go to the right." Just perfect. So we got all the information how to get into Switzerland. We were there for one week. Now I learned people. We arrive to Paris in June. We were in Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium. France. And I know exactly how people are. I learned so

much, John. It's fantastic. It was warm. We got out the train coming from Belgium. It was Sunday and everybody was drinking aperitifs in the open air.

We got money from that IRO organization, free railroad ticket. International Refugee Organization. That time Europe was filled with refugees. In every town there was a refugee thing where you could get some awful food to eat, or some horrid place to sleep. Dirty and filled with lost people. The towns were in ruins. I remember in Munich, just nothing. Just rubble.

JC: Just you two women. Weren't you afraid?

TD: Just the two of us, yes. No, after you go through the Hungarian border there's nothing that will scare you. The only thing that scares you is they might catch you and put you back again. And we were very careful not to be put back. Then we were in Paris.

SURVIVING IN PARIS

The first money I made I made wallpaper design and sold. But then there was nothing. And we had not right to get jobs in France. You had to have papers. So I worked as a maid. Cleaned and cooked. I learned to cook there. We got an apartment. That was another lucky, lucky break. Another friend in high school who married a Swedish guy, they got an apartment in a beautiful little private street. Off *Parc Montsouris*. I got a room there. Judith got a room there.

Now we had to work in order to live. I worked as a maid, then later on up the social ladder, I became a cleaning woman. And then I got a job at Jean Image [animation studio]. He was a clever guy. He knew he can pay me practically nothing and I be happy to work. And so I was. Somebody told me about Jean Image from Hungary. So I went to him. He was Hungarian, yes. [Born Imre Hajdu in Budapest 26 Jan 1911, died Paris 21 Oct 1989. Produced the first full-length animated film in France JEANNOT L'INTREPIDE (FEARLESS JEANNOT), 1950.] And so he asked Macskássy. So, this is how I got the job. It was the best deal he ever got, 'cause I slaved for him for more than a year. Probably [hired] in the Fall, December 1951.

JC: So, you were living in Paris almost a year before working at Jean Image's studio. You came in June 1950.

TD: Yes. But I had to learn French. I didn't speak a word French before I got to France.

JC: What is your ethnic background?

TD: My father is not Hungarian at all. He is "Hungarian," but he is Armenian from both sides. In Transylvania there is a big Armenian group that is there since 17-something. My mother was half-Armenian and half Hungarian.

JC: No other strain?

TD: Isn't not enough? That's plenty. Jean Image isn't far from the Palais Royale. I ate lunch every day at Chiboust, which was a very famous *patisserie*. The Jean Image studio was really a big apartment. As you went there was a hallway, then his office, then a big room where I worked and then another big room for inking and painting. **[TAPE SIDE TWO]** For some reason he was always able to get money out of the government. That was always government money.

JC: What was his reputation as an animator?

TD: That he made lousy films. (laughs) Yes that's true. And everyone was always furious that he always gets money. Oh, he was a rat. He was dishonest. Very simply dishonest. No [he wouldn't try to charm you]. He said this is what I am going to get and when the film is done then I will get so much for each month that I worked on it. So when later I had a contract. Fortunately, I had a feeling. I read it through. Of course, that extra money wasn't mentioned. So I said I'm not signing. "Oh, that was a mistake." So when the film was finished and I got the extra money I bought a car. (laughs) That was a 17-year old Peperino. I called it Figaro. I bought it from that artist who's in that picture, who bought it and immediately killed somebody and wanted to throw it in the Seine. I said no I buy it from you. So he didn't give it to me. He made me pay for it. (laughs)

JC: Image hires you on the word of Macskássy he gives you the directing job on the film? Weren't you surprised?

TD: He gives me the film! No [I was not surprised]. I found it natural. So, I just did it. I worked on it. Some parts were already done previous years. A few scenes here and there. I was the only animator. At one point I had an assistant who cleaned up some of the drawings. I worked over a year. Such a bad film. It wasn't [limited animation]. At the very end, it went on and on and on, and at the end there was a sequence where the fire department is called to find the Eiffel Tower, who goes away from Paris.

Peter Sachs, an English filmmaker, very nice fellow, he was called in. UPA was at the time was a big thing. I saw all their films. And everybody else did. When UPA [was showing] with a feature it was marked in the guide. Even a lousy feature there was a line around the block. He says he wants to finish the last sequence in this style because he thought UPA, you don't have to animate. That's what he believed. Peter Sachs came and worked it out. He was the master on this last sequence who really kind of made it happen. But animated the sequence. He just kind of planned it. I don't know what you'd call it but I did the whole film.

[Peter Sachs and Denis Gilpin created graphically advanced educational films for Bill Larkins studio in England founded in 1940, that preceded UPA in stylization.]

JC: Were there storyboards?

TD: No. But it was written words. And it was recorded. Francois Périer did the voice. Very nice guy. Jean Cocteau came in at the very end when there was a problem with the Tour Eiffel being a man. Cocteau wrote a text that rolled up before the film started.

JC: Did Jean Image animate?

TD: No. He didn't do anything. He picked the voices and the music. There was a very good musician a Russian. I don't remember his name. He wrote the music, which is a good music. I read all the soundtracks including the music tracks. Then I edited it too. I enjoyed doing it. I don't remember the premiere. No, I wasn't excited. Not at all.

I had to have a permission from the government to work in that French studio. Otherwise, the only job I was allowed to do without permission was to be a bum, a cleaning woman, or this kind of jobs. So in order to work in a studio I had to have special permission. But Jean Image had strings to everything, so one of the senators, somebody pushed the button and I got the permission. There wasn't work immediately so I like Christmas cards. Like that. I didn't go back to cleaning woman.

That friend of ours who lived in that small building we lived in was Jewish so she took me to the Jewish organization. So that I could do some cards for them. Was a very sweet lady the head of it. I knew that the fact that I'm not Jewish is not a good point, but I thought I'm not going to talk about it. She knew, that friend of mine. So I was asked one day if I was Jewish. I said, why? That's a problem? And they all begged my pardon. It was a very quick clever answer. After this answer they can't do anything. It is so embarrassing. I would never say that I am and I would never say I am not.

After the war we got a big book of FANTASIA [Deems Taylor] we thought it was absolutely fantastic. Macskassy got that. Big huge book. I saw PINOCCHIO [in Hungary]. Oh I thought it was fabulous. We were so starved for [animated films]. Then I didn't see anything till Paris. I probably saw all the films. FANTASIA I saw in Paris. I remember in the studio the Pastoral Symphony has that charming melody and someone was singing it. The other girl asked, what is that? She says oh that's the Disney FANTASIA. I thought, Oh my goodness. Out goes Beethoven. I didn't like FANTASIA very much except the animation. It's in very bad taste.

UPA I saw [and preferred]. I decided when I go to New York, because I asked for a visa immediately 'cause I had two cousins here, nobody in Europe. They told me it would take about 20 years to get a visa. Then in 1954 the Congress said that anybody who has a direct relation can come out of quota and this is how I came. In '55. One in Chicago and one in a small town in Ohio. The first two months I lived in Chicago. I had to learn English. I didn't speak English at all. See, in five years I learned two languages. Also my German was, we spoke German in Paris.

JC: Before we go on, who took you to SNOW WHITE in 1938?

TD: The whole family. All ten of us and the parents. Everybody was crazy about it. We had a record that of course had the march of the dwarfs and also when she wakes up with the animals around her. ["With a Smile and a Song"] Yes. When I hear that it comes back. We didn't understand the words, but it was . . .

COMING TO AMERICA

JC: When did you come to USA?

TD: It was October 1955. I had a [friend, a] French girl at UPA. I was in NY a few days. That French girl I had letters because the people I worked in Paris at the last studio was the Comet, the [Paul] Grimault studio in Paris. They wrote to that girl in NY, Jackie, and she worked at UPA. She was an inker. I went to visit and it was so sweet. That was in the old building on Fifth Avenue. [666 Fifth]. They showed me all the films and was so nice. Grim was in Wisconsin working. Then I told them I would like to [work]. Jackie said she would let me know the moment there is work. Then I went to Chicago and in January she called and I came the 16th of January 1956 to NY for an interview. And they said they would call me in as soon as they are ready. Then they called me in in February. I was living with a friend of mine in NY.

JC: What did you think of America?

TD: I was very unhappy. I was walking up and down Fifth Avenue. Inhuman proportion of everything. I was so disturbed, John, that for a year I completely lost all memories. Everything. I couldn't remember anything. Then when I started work at UPA, Grim was a very great help to me 'cause he was so fatherly, so gentleman, so, so good. So slowly I got on my feet.



Tissa and Grim Natwick, upstate New York, 1950s

JC: Who interviewed you on January 16?

TD: Ken Drake, and I'm sure Lou Garnier, most likely, Don McCormick. No, Grim wasn't there. He came there in February. Grim changed his job in Wisconsin. In Madison he was working for someone. Probably some industrial [animated film]. That's typical Grim. He said before I go back to California I go to New York to say hello to friends. So he came to New York and they got in 30-some Bert and Harry [Piel's beer] commercials.

They told Grim that we are sure you will have two months' work here. And so Grim stayed for twelve years. Yes. In February 1956. [My hiring depended] on him [Grim]. They called me in. Said there's an animator who needs an assistant, so come in and you will have an interview with him. So I sat in what was a very dirty, dusty office. Because the buildings were going down around it. [The little office building at 666 Fifth Ave.] It was a little bit like during the war when a bomb fell into the next building. Then a big, big loud guy comes out. I became so small. Later I learned Grim was so insecure. He just has that big [persona]. So anyway, [he asked] do you know what animation is? I said animation is animation. Then he said I can't argue with that. So I became his assistant.

I [had done a] test before that. So they said okay, we'll call you. My English was so little. I just said yes and no. They gave me drawings and I did it and then they said they'll call me.

JC: Sounds very lucky.

TD: John, very lucky. Extremely so.

JC: Was it difficult working with Grim at first?

TD: No. I very nicely cleaned it up and made Grim look good. He said because of me that he was able to work another ten years. So I learned everything from Grim. Absolutely everything.

JC: How did he teach you or correct you?

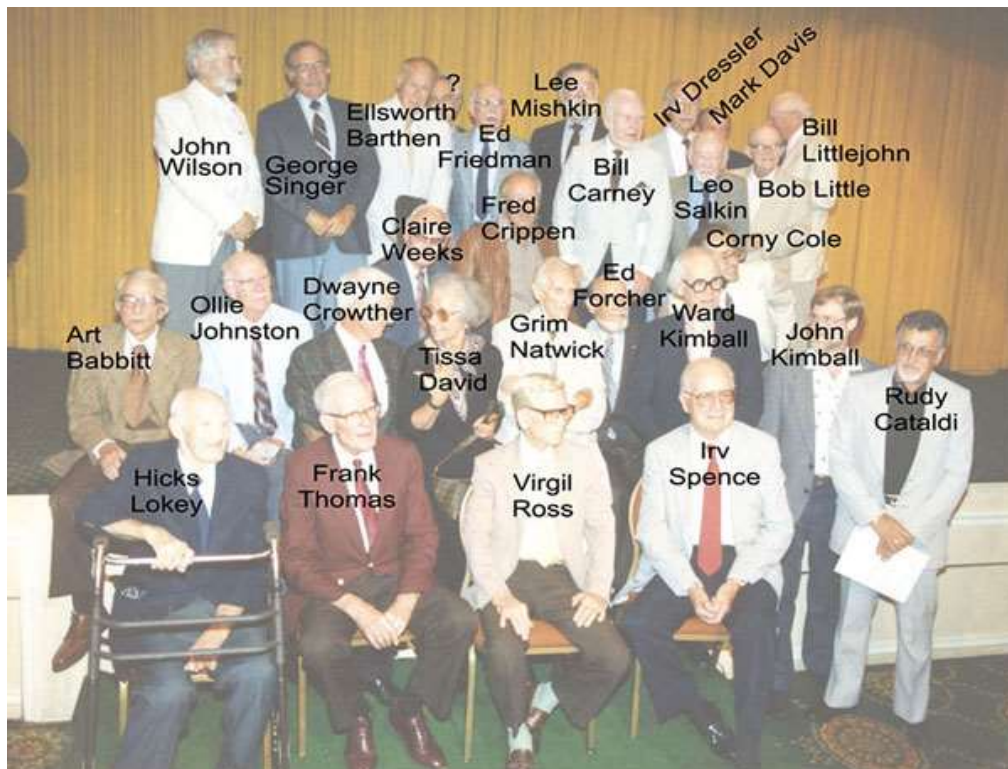
TD: I don't really know. He was doing that with everybody. Except other people resented it. And I welcomed it. Anybody can teach me anything. I am always willing to learn it. Grim is so gracious. He is so generous. He told me how he does lip sync. But I must have something in me because he gave me a little piece of animation. And he said it's very good because I didn't do, I moved things like this. So it was good. But he just, I don't know. By just cleaning his stuff up, teaches me. I knew he was the animator of Snow White immediately, 'cause somebody told me. I told him that SNOW WHITE was really the film that made me decide to want to do this. It's just you fell to the right place at the right time at the right moment.

JC: When did you find this apartment house?

TD: The first of April 1956. It was an apartment in the front. That was \$84 a month. Furnished. Today is \$1,800. [I moved into this apartment] in 1969. And the only reason I moved here is because the landlord, which was a niece, uncle of the landlord now, he wanted to raise my rent. I said no. The answer is no. They will change that and then you will be luckier. I said no. I take that chance. The only way they could change the rent on that apartment is to give me this one. This one was 130 [dollars]. Because it's a semi-professional, so I am allowed to work here. That is now 33 years.



Grim Natwick's 100th birthday party, Los Angeles, 1990



Identification of animators in above photograph.

[I worked 12 years with Grim Natwick] on commercials and one Magoo film. A short. John Hubley had OLD WIFF, a police dog that couldn't smell -- a Hubley short. We had a few scenes. Many people worked on it. It was a Smell-o-Rama film. He was working on MOONBIRD, on 74th Street Central Park West. I remember I saw them painting the paper black. Faith I just saw, but mostly met with John. Then I saw John at Shamus's [Culhane] and socially. John thought I was French. How can you prefer here to Paris [he'd ask]. I said 'cause John I am Hungarian. In Paris I have no future

JC: You told me once that Grim was a chauvinist.

TD: (laughs) He was. He was a male chauvinist pig. He had a disastrous second marriage. [His first wife] died. They were in Vienna and she got tuberculosis. He lived in Vienna for three years [studying art]. He met his second wife in New York. She was quite off. Art Babbitt had a German wife who . . . Because Grim's disastrous marriage he was very sensitive of other people's disastrous marriages and he would always blame the women. He never really gave me credit until much later and not so direct. I heard it from other people. Not like John Hubley who told me to my face. I could never figure out why, but in DIG there is a scene and John said one day that [my scene] is one of the most beautiful animated scenes. I watched it so many times and could never figure out . . . I did portions of the film. It's a half hour film. John did say it. He would call me up and say this is beautiful timing. I remember Sarah told me once, she says why does she have to juggle the drawings like that. Makes it so hard to follow. John said maybe but she has beautiful timing. Sarah was the, worked with John.

JC: How come you didn't become the third Mrs. Natwick?

TD: Oh no. He was not, it's not my type of guy. I loved him very much as a father.

JC: You weren't romantic?

TD: No. No. But I loved him too much for. . . See, he came to New York almost the same time I did. For twelve years it was Grim. Suddenly he went away. I was so bewildered and so I didn't know how to get on my feet after that. He left in 1967, went to Wisconsin, [but before that] he flew to the World's Fair, I went with him. Then he went back to Wisconsin. 'Cause he was on his way back to California. 'Cause there was no work in New York. Then already for about two years he didn't work in New York. He just lived here. I always worked. I did anything. For Electra, for Bill Tytla, whoever had work. Without Grim. I even took assistant work from Electra. I didn't care what I do as long as its animation.

JC: If you always had work, why were you bereft when he left NY?

TD: But Grim was always here. Like daddy was always here. He was over 30 years older than I was. Then I started to work for John [Hubley]. I went out to California . . . I called John and I told him, what was that film we worked on. I did a walk in that film. I told John out of the two scenes I animated John liked that. The first was CBS had a big program on smoking and John did 17 little inserts and I did two of those. [1967?] I did all of EGGS was the first big one and all of COCKABOODY.

EGGS is animated on 3's [3 frames per drawing]. Everything is [animated] on paper, cut-out [and pasted to cels].



John Hubley's EGGS (1970) animated by Tissa David

[John Hubley] said when it comes to women nobody can touch me. This is so limited [in animation]. . . The track was already done. He gave me the drawings of the background and the character and then let me do what I like to do. This is so much technical thing, but in COCKABOODY . . . EGGS is very daring for its time. Two months to animate it. There was never time for anything. She sits there but the drawing underneath comes right through her. It's a pity. Hard to understand [the God character's voice].

JC: I like that drawing [of God] just looking, not moving. [TAPE ENDS]