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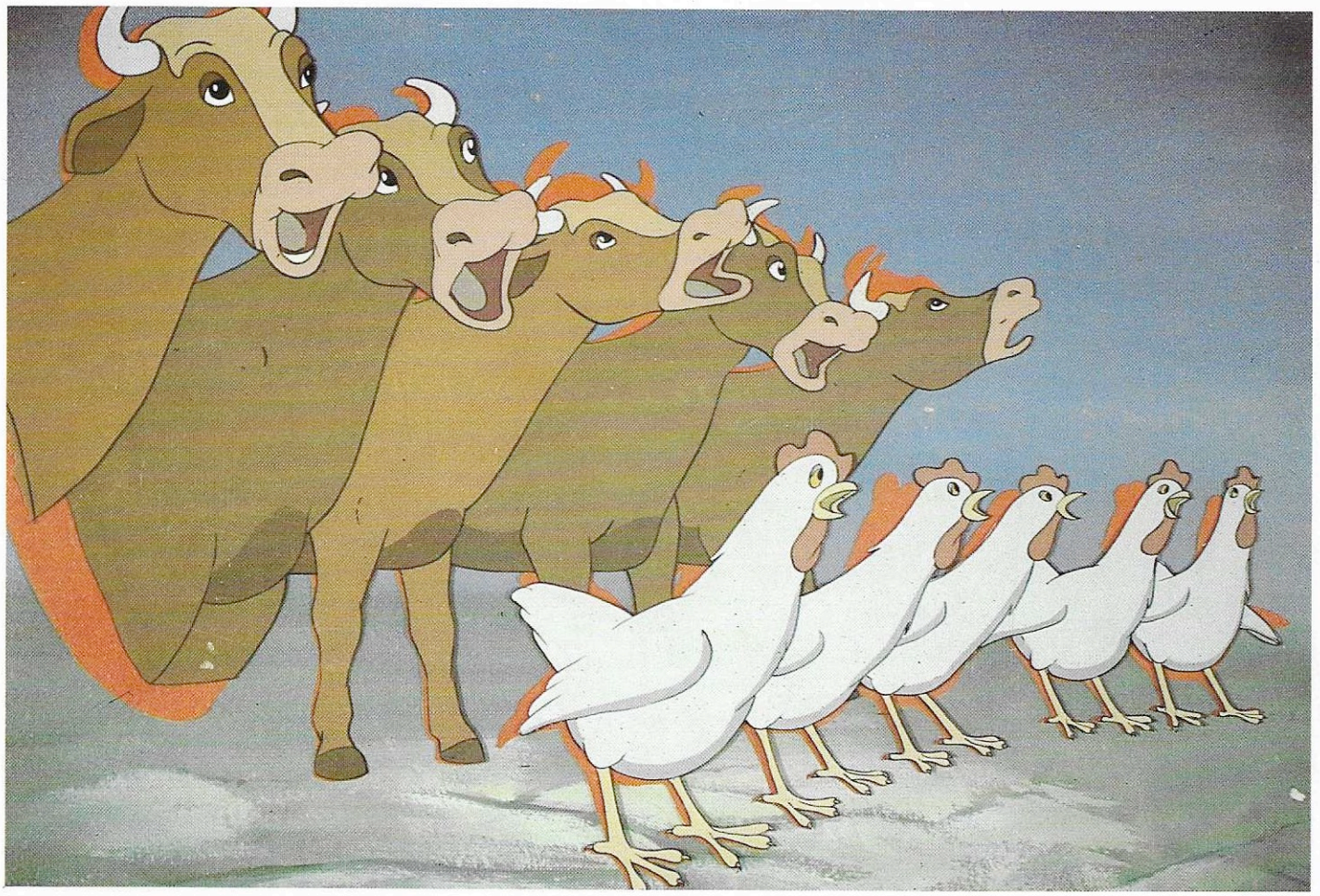


Canemaker Visits Halas and Batchelor

Clay Animation: Gumby! Will Vinton!

Comics by Holland's Daan Jippes

Halas and Batchelor

A Visit with England's Leading Producers of Animated Films

BY JOHN CANEMAKER

Joy Batchelor and John Halas, after almost forty years as England's premier animation filmmakers—a status recognized in 1972 when John Halas became the first animator to be honored by the Queen with the Order of the British Empire.

London, November 5, 1979. I am sitting in John Halas's high-ceilinged office on one of the three floor-throughs he owns in a former banana warehouse on Kean Street off Drury Lane. "This is theater-land," a cheery milkman informed me about the area when I asked directions to the studio. No, I thought, it is really animation-land. The vital London animation industry, consisting of some seventy-two studios employing nearly 1,500 people, is concentrated mostly in the small Soho and Strand areas of the West End.

John Halas will be sixty-eight in April. He sits at a large wood desk that holds two gray telephones, a gray intercom, various papers, books and magazines that silently demand his attention, and a leather-bound *Economist Diary* monogrammed with the initials "J.H." Behind him rest oriental rod puppets, and a huge Tutankhamen calendar covers the wall next to an unshaded window that allows in a rare appearance of the sun. Mr. Halas is dressed in a gray business suit with a white kerchief shyly peering over a breast pocket, black socks and shoes, and a powder-blue turtleneck. He languidly sips hot coffee prepared by his energetic secretary, Pat Webb, as the morning sun backlights his thinning white and silver-gray hair combed straight back over his large forehead. Uncompromisingly blue eyes peer intently over half-specs perched safely on a generous nose. He has the elegance and air of a deposed Hungarian count, but if there exists a royal family of British animation, surely it must be John Halas and Joy Batchelor, and Mr. Halas is no more count but a king.

The king speaks: "As a madman myself, who feels animation in my blood circulation and thinks animation as at least 70 percent of my consciousness, I would say it was forty years of

fight to put animation on the map." Mad like a fox. 1980 marks the fortieth year the Halas and Batchelor Studio has been in continuous production. All told, this remarkable husband and wife team has produced seven animated feature films and about 2,000 shorts.

They began modestly by making theatrical advertisements, then during World War II the various British ministries of information and defense kept them busy producing dozens of training and propaganda films, followed in the late forties by industrial films. In the fifties they adapted with ease to the production of TV commercials and 1951-54 saw the H&B studio pioneering with the production of England's first entertainment animated feature, *Animal Farm,* based on George Orwell's tale of social revolution expressed in terms of farm animals. This film anticipated both *Yellow Submarine* and Ralph Bakshi's features in its bold appeal to mature audiences and the sophistication with which it approached the subject matter.

The New York Times, in its review on December 30, 1954, said:

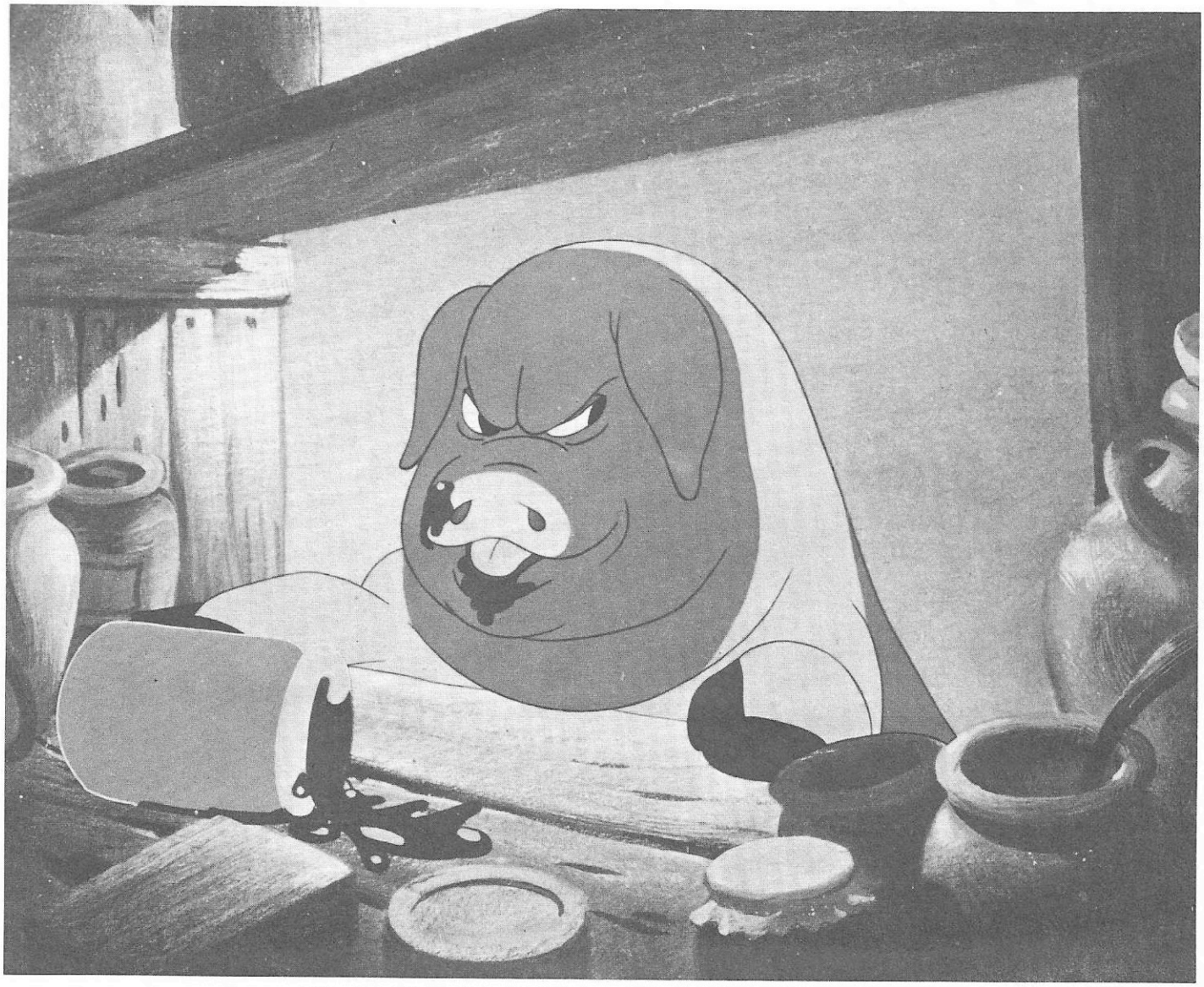
> . . . the drawing of this cartoon is very close to what is known as the Disney style . . . But the theme is far from Disney, and the cruelties that occur from time to time are more realistic and shocking than any of the famous sadisms that have occurred in Disney films.
>
> The shock of straight and raw political satire is made more grotesque in the medium of cartoon. The incongruities of recognizable horrors of some political realities of our times are emphasized and made more startling by the apparent innocence of their surrounding frame.
>
> The cartoon itself is technically first-rate. The animation is clean, the color fine. The Halas-Batchelor team knows its business. But don't make the mistake of thinking it is for little children, just because it is a cartoon.
>
> Bosley Crowther

Producer Louis de Rochemont, John Halas, and Joy Batchelor at the start of work on Animal Farm *in the summer of 1951.*

Assistant producer Borden Mace, Joy Batchelor, and John Halas at the opening of Animal Farm *in the United States, in January 1954.*

During *Animal Farm*, H&B employed seventy people in both a London studio on Soho Square and a second unit 120 miles west in the small town of Stroud. Currently, there are eight people working on educational films at Stroud and about thirty-two employees in the London Kean Street studio turning out TV commercials and informational films on child care, energy, et cetera. In the offing are two theatrical films Mr. Halas is "contemplating." One is based on Wilhelm Busch's *Max and Moritz* comic strip, the other film is *Heavy Metal,* "an adult space fantasy." Halas is "exploring" a puppet TV series for German television, and in storyboard stage is a French/English co-production educational series "re-writing the Ten Commandments." He recently produced and directed *Autobahn*, a surreal personal film on traveling designed and animated by Roger Mainwood, a young H&B worker. The studio was (and still is) a place where young talents are welcome and can break into the animation industry. Among the established artists who have passed through H&B are Geoff Dunbar, Ian Emes, Alison de Vere, Bob Godfrey, Bruno Bozzetto, Peter Foldes, and Gerry Potterton, among others.

In 1968, Trident Television bought out Halas and Batchelor for a tidy sum. "It was our most prosperous year," recalls Halas. "They wanted us because we were the golden studio." John and Joy devoted their attention to their educatonal film company, Educational Film Center, formed in the early sixties, which developed classroom information films and loops. Trident, with ATV (Lord Grade's company), had by 1971 swollen the company's wage bill with 260 employees and concentrated on producing Hanna-Barbera Kidvid series — *The Addams Family, The Jackson Five, The Osmonds.* After six years of steadily losing money, Trident asked Halas to buy back H&B.



Napoleon, the protagonist of Halas and Batchelor's Animal Farm *(1954).*

"They made a mistake," Halas says with a slight grin, "by appointing a managing director who was, as usual, not an animation or film man but a marketing expert." How did Halas make out financially, selling high and buying back low? "I never complained," he says, then breaks into laughter. "No, no," he continues, "it was only a modest means of survival, a means to achieve an end. If I were only a businessman I would have sunk decades ago!"

Joy Batchelor, who is two years younger than John Halas, retired in 1973, but John consults her constantly and she lends her expertise part-time to the animation students of London's International Film School. John Halas continues vigorously on, clearly not the type to even consider retirement, but able, he says, to devote only one-half of his time to his smoothly running studio. The other half is "absorbed in wearing four different hats."

Mr. Halas holds his head in his hands as he figuratively throws invisible hats all over the room. He is, first of all, chairman of the Federation of Film Societies (a group set up in the 1920's by G.B. Shaw and H.G. Wells), "a force in influencing alternative cinema in over 700 film societies in Great Britain."

Halas covers his eyes as he drops another hat. Since 1975 he has been President of ASIFA, an international network of individuals interested in animation. "Our continuous struggle, I shiver to think," he says dramatically in a deep voice and a Hungarian accent, "is to advance a status for animation and fight a position for it alongside other more established art forms. To get better exposure for world animation." Extensive traveling to various countries and animation festivals is an important part of the ASIFA president's duties. At the time we speak Mr. Halas has just returned from festivals in Varna, Bulgaria, and Yorkshire, England.

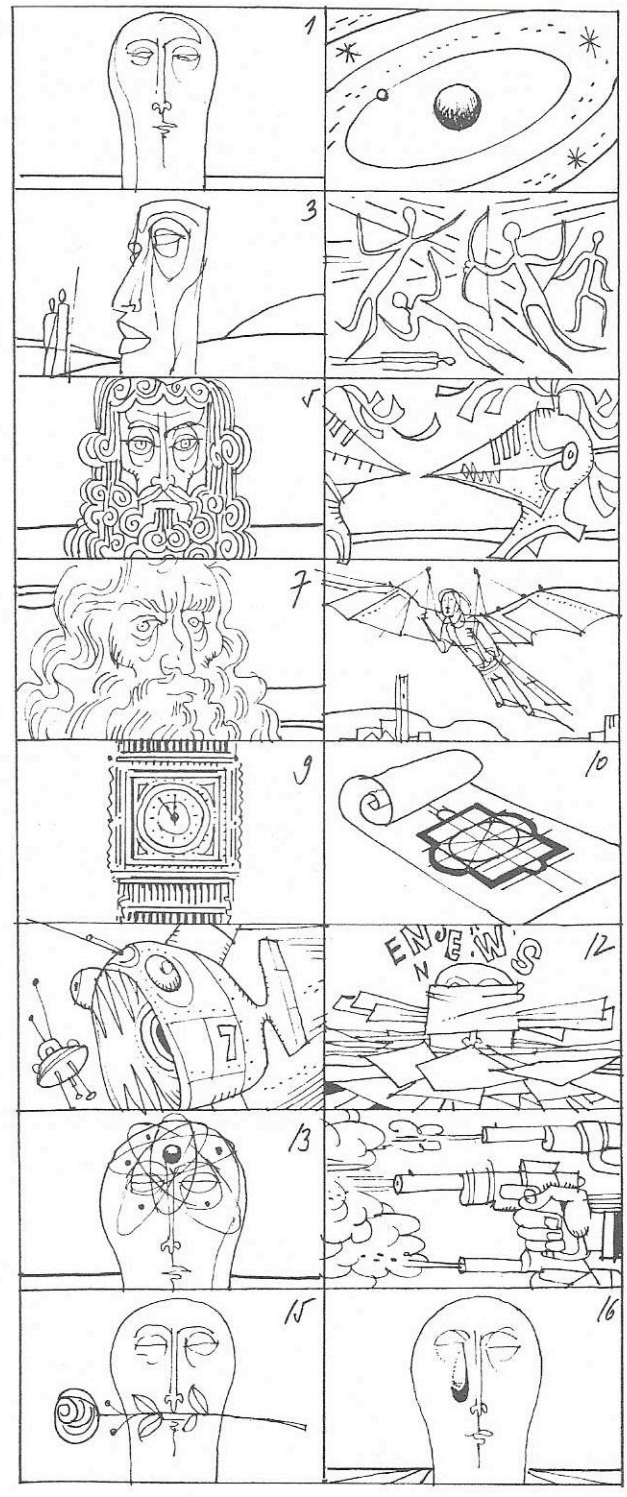
His two other hats include film advisor to ICOGRADA, an association of 26,000 graphic designers, and contributing editor and film/TV correspondent to *Novum*, an international monthly journal for visual communication and grpahic design, published in four languages in Munich. (Halas is also a prolific writer/editor of books on animation, including the now-classic *The Technique of Film Animation*, written in 1959 with Roger Manvell.)

John Halas was born in Budapest in 1912. As a boy of fifteen, he relates, "I applied to a small advert for the only animation place in the city looking for an apprentice, somebody who could sweep the floors and clean the paintbrushes. One of the key artists was George Pal, who was eighteen, freshly out of art school." Halas prides himself on "never forgetting anything" and he proceeds to spell out, with his index finger tracing out the letters on his desk top, George Pal's family name: "M-A-R-C-Zed-I-(um), N (um) . . . Marce . . . Marczincsak! It was not until he went to Berlin and Holland that he mercied [sic] his bosses and changed his name to Pal."

Halas continues his story: "George was used by the studio owner to do local advertising spot films for the cinemas, paper cut-outs. I learned from George Pal how to sew together the limbs of characters and how to cut out eyeballs and move them under the camera. Gradually I absorbed a sense of timing in relationship with the passing film frames. You could see the finished work the next morning. By evening it has been projected in the cinemas. To make a film in forty-eight hours was pretty impressive to start with, but also to shoot it under the camera, usually between 6 p.m. and 12 midnight, and being left on one's own to do that, was a lesson not to be forgotten. The skill with which George Pal carried out this instant performance was also something to be remembered."

After two years, the ambitious Halas left for France. "My life seems motivated by small adverts. I saw a notice advertising for a young artist who would serve as an apprentice to a window-dressing designer who was on his way to Paris. The offer was for very little money but for the experience and pay to Paris. And I got the job! We arrived in Paris and I found out next day that really he was not a window-dresser but a *salami agent* for Hungarian salami! And he walked out on me. I was penniless, losing my assumed job. I don't know even to this day why he needed an assistant." Halas could not speak French or English then and so, he says, "I starved!" But not for long. The resourceful young man looked up in the phone book every Hungarian restaurant in Paris and in exchange for food he offerred his services as a menu designer. Two restaurants out of thirty "pitied on me." Next, he had to "fight myself into a graphic design studio." Doubtless these early struggles as a naive youth have been a factor in Halas's practice of "pitying" young unproven talents and hiring them to cut their cinematic teeth at his studio.

He returned to Budapest after eighteen months. "I felt I should continue my work in graphics and in order to progress I should learn more." He became an assistant at Atalier, a graphic design school that employed a couple of teachers from Germany's legendary Bauhaus, the most influential school in the history of architecture and design. Atalier's faculty included the Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, an important propagandist for abstract art, constructivism, functional design and film experimentation. Halas assisted artist Alexander Bortnyik, who he found "a very impetuous man who only played with the film media. I did his inbetweens, trace-paint on six or seven figurative films, none have been completed." Another Hungarian, Victor Vasarely, later a master of optical art and a perception theorist, preceded Halas as an assistant to Bortnyik. The liberting Bauhaus theories appealed to the young Halas, particularly the idea of learning by doing, of developing an aesthetic based on sound craftsmanship, and finding



Sketches from Dilemma, *for which a computer was used for in-betweening.*

"simple, imaginative solutions to a visual problem."

In 1934, John Halas joined two associates to open his first animation studio; it was called Hallas, Macskasi and Kassowitz, which sounds more like a Hungarian law firm than a cartoon studio, but Halas found "there was a market. That was the miracle of that period. We made at least thirty or forty commercials over two years for cinemas all over Hungary."

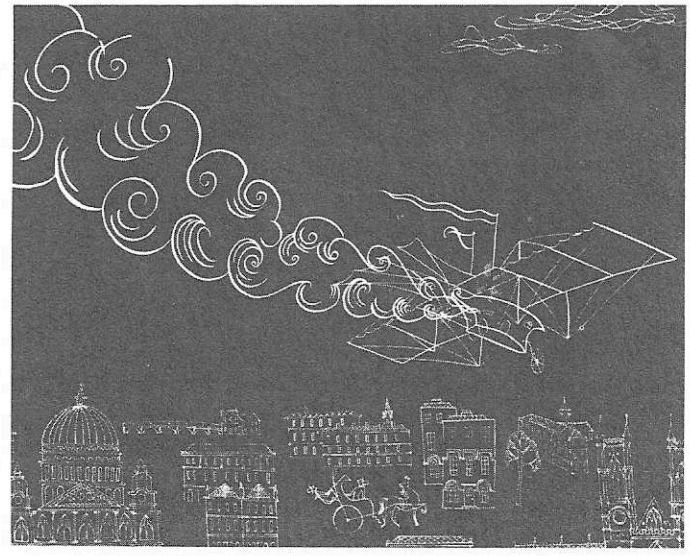
On his own, Halas made a pencil test with color rushes based on Lizst's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, a film that was seen and taken

Joy Batchelor with animation director John Reed in front of a storyboard for Animal Farm.

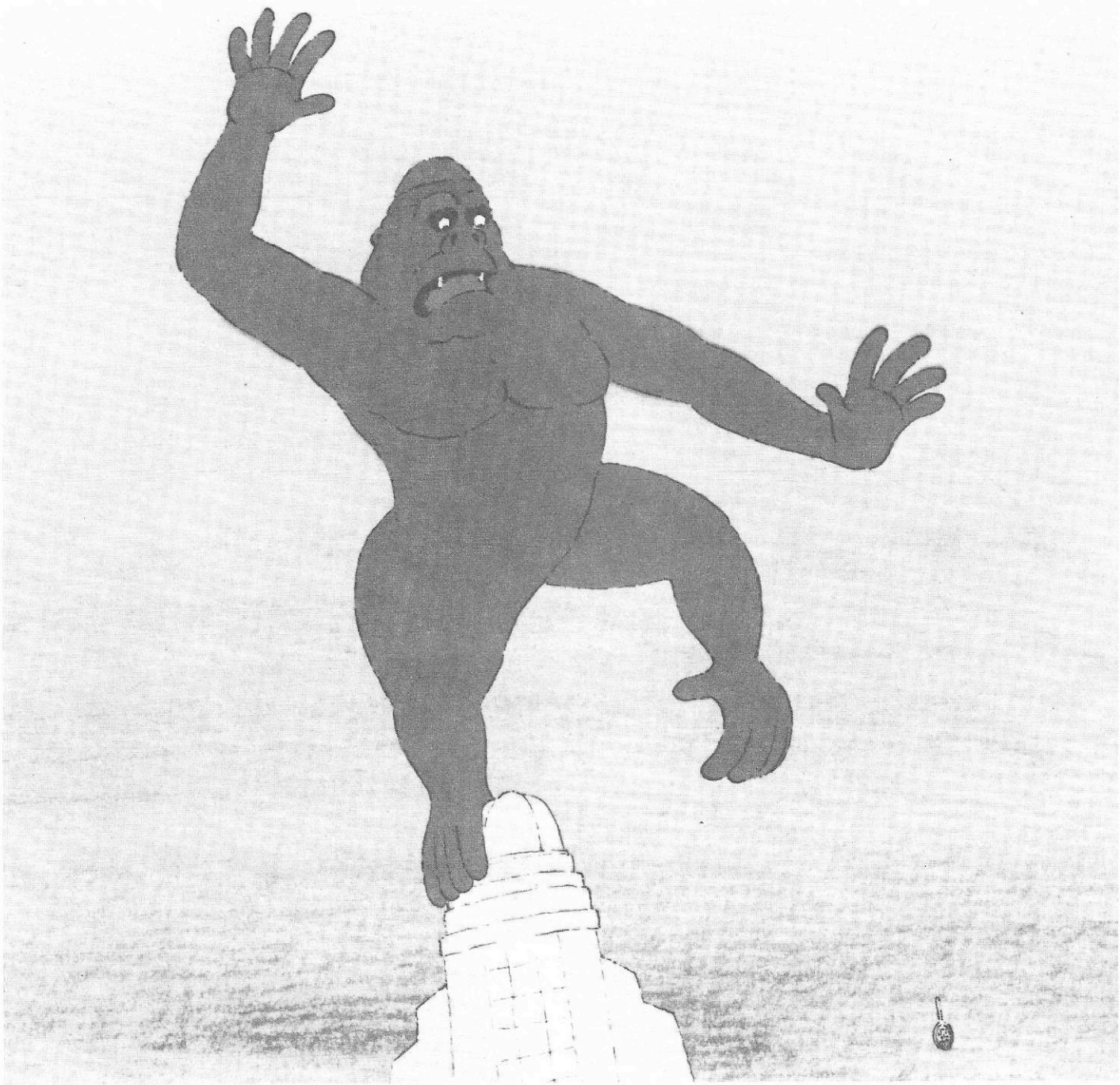
to London by filmmaker Jean Image. (Halas offhandedly spells Image's Hungarian name on the tabletop with his finger: "H-U-J-D-U!") The film was viewed with interest by a small documentary film organization eager to break into the theatrical entertainment cartoon market. Halas was invited to London to finish the film: "I wanted to get out," he says, "get some further experience. I arrived October 11, 1936," he recalls effortlessly. Soon the moneymen decided *Hungarian Rhapsody* would "have no mass appeal" so the film was abandoned, uncompleted, for a new project, *Music Man*, which "allegedly had a greater appeal for theatrical release."

In February 1937, a young woman named Joy Batchelor answered a Halas newspaper ad calling for animators to join his small studio. She had three years experience animating on an ill-fated project and considerable talent as a designer, and to Halas "she appeared to me so much better in every respect than I was, that is to say in animation, in design drawings." *Music Man* was completed by John, Joy and five other artists and was shown in newsreel theatres and some cinemas, but "the moneymen pulled out," says Halas, because "the Disney influence in theatrical films was too strong for a British studio to survive at that time trying to compete.

"Once again, I starved. Joy starved with me this time. I decided to return to Budapest in the latter half of 1937 to develop an idea based on Anderson's *Brave Tin Soldier*. Joy came with me."



From The Power to Fly *(1953), made by Halas and Batchelor for the British Petroleum Company.*



A frame from Players, *appearing at this year's Annecy festival.*

A Berlin financier put 500 pounds (about $2,000) into the film's budget, which Halas explains was "quite all right for a ten-minute cartoon at that time. Joy and I started work." After five months, one pay day the money did not arrive: "Suddenly, the carpet was pulled out of that studio's feet and once again we found ourselves without any resources whatsover. Hitler arose and the political situation began to be very hot, so we decided to return to London. And through *great* difficulties we got back during the autumn of 1938 and struggled to set up an animation studio without success.

"Joy was good as a designer-artist and I had something. I had *some* thing," Halas says with intensity. He began doing spot illustrations and cartoons for magazines, while Joy worked as a fashion illustrator for *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar*. They were both turned down by Anson Dyer, a British animation pioneer, and the only London animation studio at that time. Halas and Batchelor rented space in a small design studio and soon developed a clientele. "We were crawling up gradually, making our way as individual graphic designers and illustrators."

In 1940 the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency asked to see a sample reel of John and Joy's film work. Out came the unfinished *Hungarian Rhapsody* and *Music Man*. J. Walter Thompson was impressed and "immediately absorbed us and made us a part of their film unit. That's how Halas and Batchelor started!" Housed in the ad agency in Busch House in central London, H&B's first assignments were two color car-

toon film advertisements *Carnival in the Clothes Cupboard* (1940), a five-minute ad for Lux toilet soap, script by Alexander MacKendrick (who also worked on design), animation and design by John and Joy; and *Train Trouble* 1940), an eight-minute cinema advert for Kellogg's Corn Flakes.

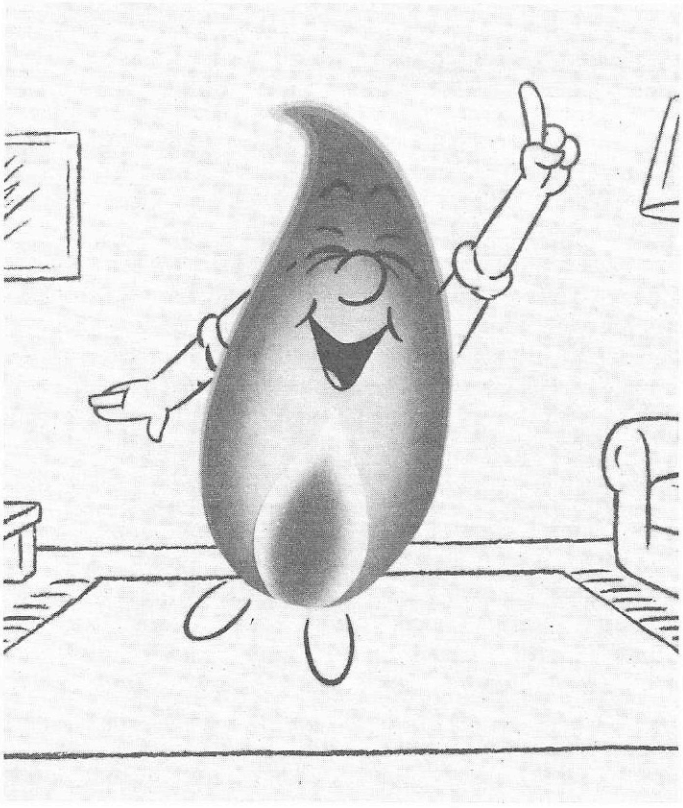
The Thompson agency was also parent to a second important British animation company besides Halas & Batchelor; this is the W.M. Larkins studio, which started, Halas says, when "Bill Larkins an agency promotion man, looked over our shoulders, fell in love with what he saw and decided to open his own shop."

Came the war and Halas and Batchelor were suddenly in demand. Through an introduction from John Grierson, the Ministry of Information hired H&B to produce seventy propaganda films in four years. The War Office, Home Office and Admiralty soon followed suit with their film needs. "I never worked harder in my life!" exclaims Halas.

One evening soon after John and Joy were married in April 1940 ("We decided it was high time."), their Chelsea home was destroyed by German bombs. John was injured slightly, but Joy was hospitalized for six weeks. "We had to move the studio to Watford outside London," says Halas. Production continued with a staff of twelve.

Dustbin Parade, one of two shorts prepared in 1941 for the Ministry of Information, is a good example of H&B's earliest work. The nine minute black-and-white cartoon is an entertaining appeal to patriotic Britishers to save their waste scraps. The anthropomorphic characters include a used tube of toothpaste, an empty tin can, a spinning toy top, and a rather chatty bone, all designed in a cute Disney-ish mode. The backgrounds are more painterly and impressionistic than Dsiney's and each layout contains a pleasing distortion in perspective and camera point-of-view. The animation is quite full, well-timed and snappy. The short looks American but sounds British.

From a television commercial for British Gas.



Animator Richard Taylor has written:

> It is worth noting that the films of both Halas and Batchelor and Larkins share a definite brotherhood with the films of UPA in the States. Both grew out of the need to make lively the sort of films government and the armed services needed in war-time. Both reflected the style of the Bauhaus and the School of Paris more than cartoon films had in previous years. This was not mere art-lovers' whim. The style suited the function, and animation is a functional art. . . . All the arts were enriched by refugees from the Continent but animation in Great Britain owes a great deal to the impetus given by John Halas and Peter Sachs [of Larkins]. They brought to the cartoon world the qualities which — on a more sumptuous scale — Steinberg, Ophuls and Fritz Lang took to Hollywood.

At lunch at Edward's, a restaurant on Aldwych around the corner from his studio, John Halas tells of a visit to the Disney studio in 1954 soon after the release of *Animal Farm*. "I was introduced to Walt Disney in the cafeteria after lunch. First, we had to explain to him who George Orwell was. Then he asked, 'Do they make films in Great Britain?'"

It is the evening of November 5th, Guy Fawkes Day, a British national holiday commemorating the infamous "Gunpowder Plot" of 1605 against King James I and parliament. As I leave the Underground to walk the half mile to the Halas home, the damp, chilly night sky is illuminated every few minutes with sky rockets set off from the backyards of surrounding homes. The Halases live in the highest point of London, a decidedly "up market" (or as Joy Batchelor would say: "pricey") area known as Hampstead. Their comfortable, spacious house, which they have owned for over twenty-five years, is surrounded by old leafy chestnut trees and lime trees—the kind you see beautifully gnarled and bony in Arthur Rackham illustrations. An eight--foot-high brick wall guarantees privacy.

A small bonfire in the Halas' backyard gives a bit of warmth to the Guy Fawkes revelers, who include Paul Halas, a thirty-year-old screen writer, three of his friends (two of whom have brought a child), John Halas, Joy Batchelor and myself. (The Halas' daughter lives in Paris.) For the next hour, a series of sky rockets will be set off and will fly to their doom, exploding as hot snowflakes, golden rain or red, white and blue twisters. Pops, whistles, and whizzing noises are heard from all over the neighborhood. Smoke from the explosions rises into lime tree branches silhouetted by street lamps and forms beautiful vaporous shapes in a dozen shafts of light.

John Halas, hands in coat pockets, kicks his legs and flaps about like an egret trying to keep warm. "Oh! *That* went to Paris!" he exclaims with admiration as a whistling rocket disappears into the black sky. Joy Batchelor stands quietly under a chestnut bough near the bonfire. She is wearing a short overcoat and smokes a cigarette. Watching the noisy celebration with detachment, an expression of patient amusement registers on her delicate features, seen in the glare of the frequent rocket flareups. Drops of rain slip between the chestnut leaves and

From Automania 2000 *(1963), a Halas and Batchelor short subject.*

reach Joy's soft white hair.

"Shall we adjorn . . . " she starts to say before a loud whistler cuts her off. Rose, a child of eight going on twenty-eight, is having a bum time. Sitting on an empty rocket box, she holds a sparkler at arm's length with unmistakable fear and loathing. Paul and friends continue to explode every rocket. John Halas retires to the house to change into a red wool sweater. Joy takes Rose in to watch the increasingly wet celebration through the bedroom window.

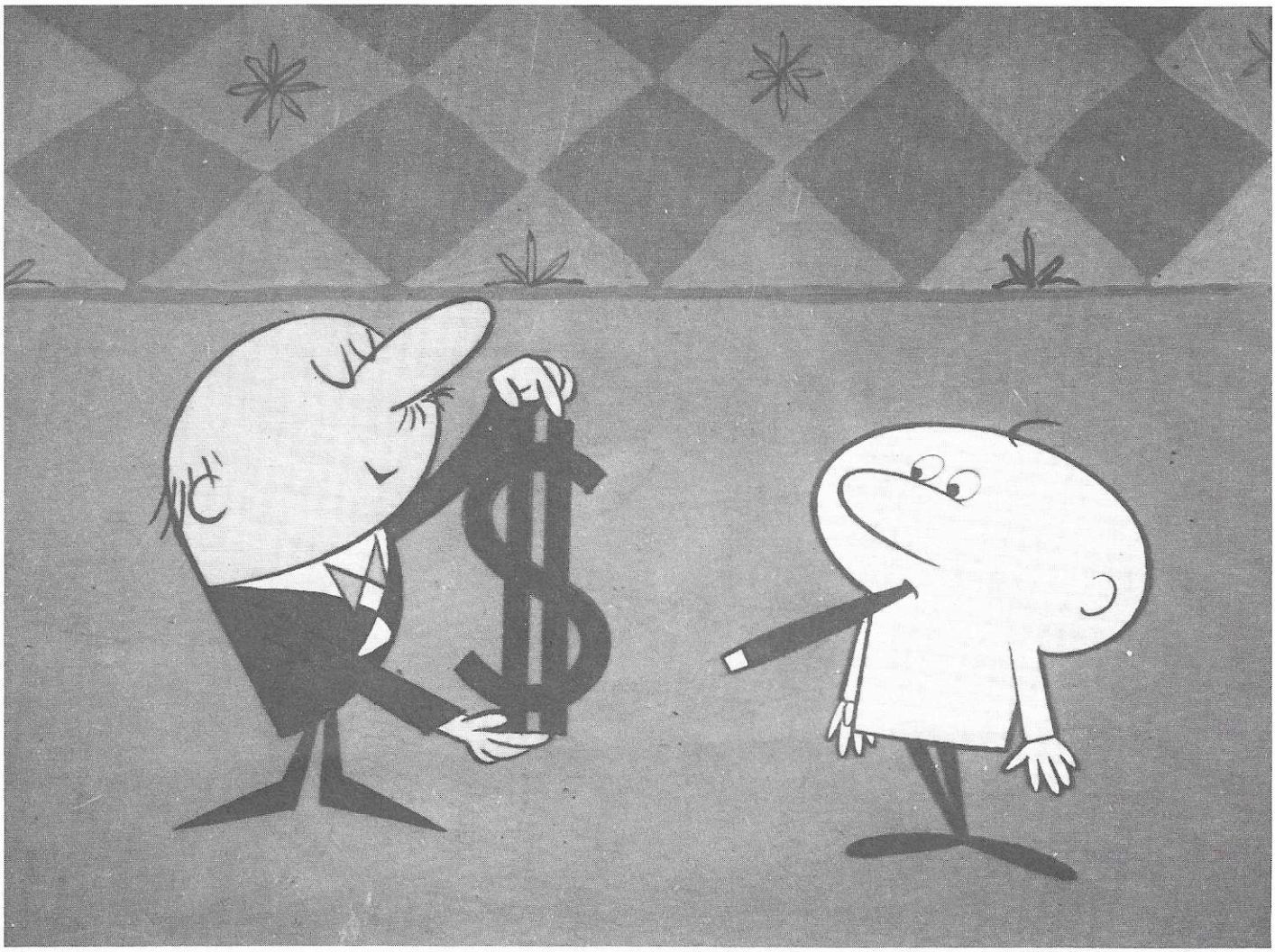
At the end, as the rain becomes more insistent, everyone returns to the yard to ignite the last sparklers in the bonfire and to swing their arms vigorously as they write their names in white light. Joy has prepared a hearty dinner of beef stew in tomato sauce with cabbage, boiled potatoes, and vegetables.

Later, over cheeses and red wine, she answers my questions in a quiet voice and a clipped British accent. Joy Batchelor has a wonderfully sharp and wry sense of humor — "subversive," she terms it — that can cut off the unwary at the ankles. More often her wit is self-directed. After a *bon mot* she will often invert her lips till they disappear, raise her eyebrows and hunch her shoulders, striking a pose that says, "Aren't I naughty to have said that?"

She was born, she tells me, "sixteen miles outside of London in a place called Watford, which is now a big joke cause they say anywhere north of Watford is in the sticks. I first went to art school there," she continues rapidly," then Polytechnic, and then to St. Martin's, but by that time I was already working in animation in London.

"I was an inker, but it was all so primitive that when you were inking you were also animating straight onto cel. Can't remember the name of the company but the man was an Australian cartoonist who thought he was going to make his fortune with a couple of koala bears but he didn't. He just lost other people's money." Eyebrows up. Naughty look. "Ten of us worked there for three years and we learned to animate after a fashion. After that I did a little . . . stint in a silk screen place because I had no money and that was the only job I could get. Then I met John and we worked on a film for jolly nearly a year and that folded, so I went into an architectural designer's set-up, so all together I had a lot of very varied useless experience! All those inbetween jobs lasted about nine months and that was it. Either they got fed up with me or I got fed up with them.

"I met John when I was, I suppose, twenty-two and a half, just back of the Windmill Theatre of evil fame in Picadilly Circus, but," she laughs, "it was a perfectly straight set-up." Was the team called Halas and Batchelor from the first? "Oh



From The Question *(1967).*

clouds are parting for the sun, which illuminates the wet road and countryside before us.

Joy smokes throughout the journey. John, who is driving, does not. They are such dissimilar yet complimentary personalities. Symbiotic. Their concern for each other is apparent in the many quick verbal exchanges and silent glances that pass between them. "When we worked together," Joy had told me, "we worked *very* well. But we always needed to have some separate time away from each other." John said the same thing in a separate talk.

"We had a sense of timing," John is saying, "not only as regards individual films but where the market will move to in the future. What I like to remind everybody in animation is that these markets never arise themselves. There is a lot of, um, exploration needed. A lot of foresight and the seeds must be planted in the consciousness of the users, whether it is the government or the industry or the art world or the cinemas or the TV industry. On has to . . . nurse tenderly along these markets. In my lifetime, somehow all these opened up as a beautiful . . . fan! And now, in the eighties you will see that there is not less than fifty different applications, possibilities whereby you can utilize animation. And this is obviously not the end."

After a while, Joy speaks. "Well, we've kept on, haven't we," she observes. Then, unable to supress a jolly "subversive" comment, she announces, "We are beginning to say to one another what counts is survival."

At this point—I swear—a pair of shimmering rainbows appeared over the road before us.

Since John Canemaker met with Halas & Batchelor, much has occurred. Autobahn *won numerous awards in festivals in Moscow, Chicago and elsewhere before becoming the first demonstration film for the world's first video disc system. EFC produced a ten film series for UNICEF, one of which won the Oscar in 1981. "Probably the most important film of my life," is how Halas describes* Dilemma, *a 100% digitized production, released in 1981.* Players *is Halas' latest film. It won the Jury's Prize in last year's Montreal fest, and will compete at Annecy this year. Halas has also written two books: "Design in Motion" (U.S. release this fall) and "Timing for Animation" (Focal Press).*

John Canemaker is an independent animator and filmmaker whose articles on Suzan Pitt, George Griffin, and Elfriede Fischinger have appeared in earlier issues of *Funnyworld.*