Britain's 'Independent' Animators

By John Canemaker

The work of these filmmakers is less radical in form than that of their American counterparts — which makes it more accessible to audiences.

Chuck Jones, the famous American animator-director of Bugs Bunny and Roadrunner cartoon shorts, once suggested in AFI Report (summer 1974) that the experimentalists and the commercial animators exchange personnel occasionally. "The commercial animator," said Jones, "would benefit from a little soul washing and freedom from the very disciplines his opposite needs."

This wishful exchange has not occurred in America, nor is it likely to. The "independent" animators, free from profit motivations, continue to explore alternative approaches to the art of animation, using a variety of media (from sand, cel, and clay, to flipbooks and Xerography, to optical printers and computers); they express their personal visions in ways other than traditional narrative film structures, ways that are not always esthetically accessible to a wide audience.

The studio animators continue to turn out profit-motivated entertainments and

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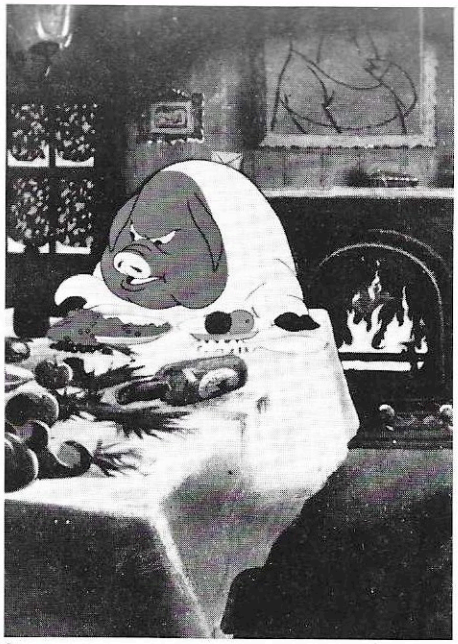
advertisements in traditional forms and styles that appeal to the mass public. The predominant technique is transferring cartoon character drawings onto separate sheets of transparent celluloid acetate ("cels"), a time- and work-saving procedure patented 66 years ago.

The independent experimentalists, who often create an entire film by themselves, deplore the "tyrannical" hierarchical structure of the studio system and the "shocking lack of personal vision" in the industry's productions. The studio animators decry the independents' "lack of discipline and craftsmanship" and their "self-indulgent films."

By contrast, most of the artists creating independent animation in Great Britain also work full-time in studios producing cartoon commercials. The resulting independent films are personal in approach and individual in style, but few employ the radical departures in technique and structure common among American independents. The British filmmakers generally use traditional cel techniques and forms of character animation. The design and structure of their films, the timing and staging of the animation, plus the ready access to studio equipment and personnel for the projects, give a glossy, high-quality "professional look" to British independent films, reflecting the pride of the studio craftsperson. It also makes the films more accessible to a general public than many of those of American experimentalists. This is not calculated pandering by the British filmmakers, but is rather the result of a genuine, innate ability to communicate directly, an ability on which the survival of British animation itself has always rested.

World War I devastated the European film industry, while America during the same period (1914-18) went from strength to strength in production and distribution. British animators, who were among the world's earliest experimenters with the genre (Birt Acres in 1895, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper in 1899), turned for survival to government-sponsored war propaganda and training films (*Bully Boy* by Lancelot Speed, *Peace and War* by Henry Furniss). After the war, they animated industrial and educational films and cinema commercials. The famed abstract experimental animation techniques of Len Lye (*Colour Box* in 1935) and Norman McLaren (*Love on the Wing* in 1938), made by painting directly onto the film stock, were subsidized by England's



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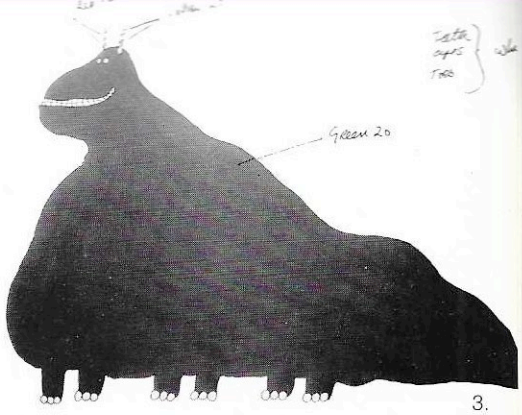

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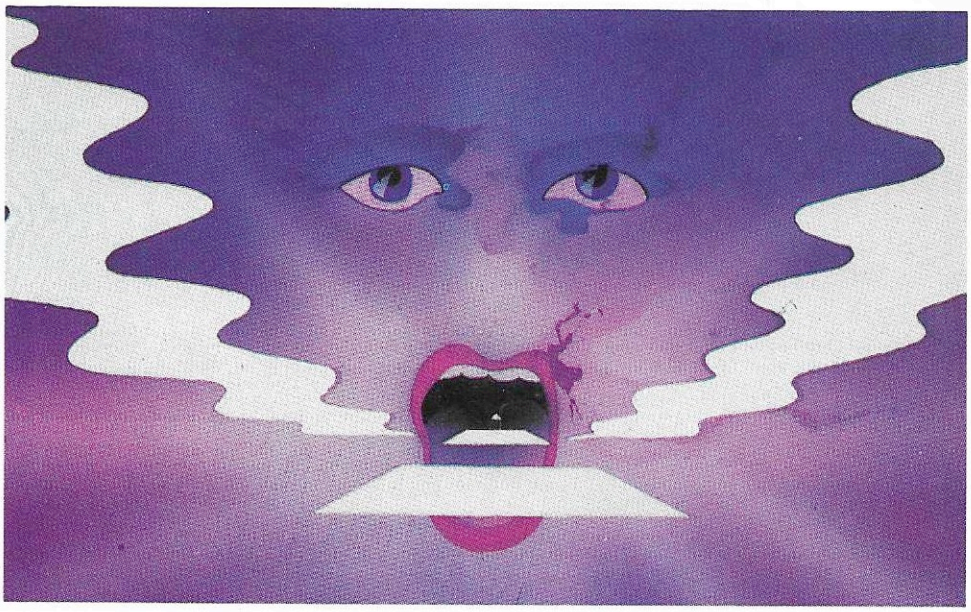
1, 3. Scenes (color models) from *Yellow Submarine*, 1968, directed by George Dunning. ©King Features Syndicate and Subafilm Ltd.
2. Napoleon enjoys the fruits of civilization in *Animal Farm*, 1954. ©Halas & Batchelor.
4. Scene from *Autobahn*, 1979, by Roger Mainwood.



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5. Scene from George Dunning's *The Flying Man*, 1961.
6. Scene from George Dunning's uncompleted *The Tempest*.
7-10. Scenes from Ian Emes's *The Oriental Nightfish*, 1976. ©Timeless Films and MPL Communications.
11. Scene from Ian Emes's *The Beard*, 1979.

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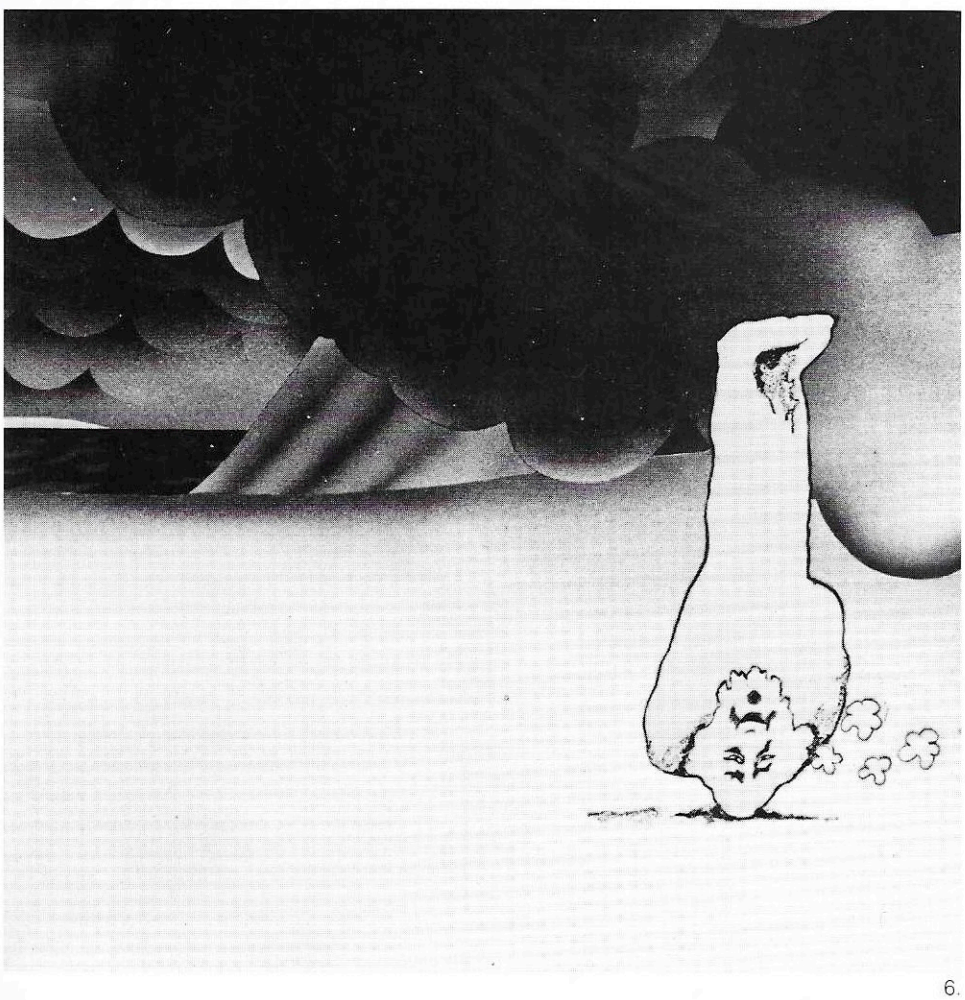

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General Post Office and contained obligatory public service messages throughout or tagged onto the end of each film, e.g., "Post early before 2 p.m."

Britain's attempts to crack the "purely entertainment" cartoon field have met with no resounding success; there are, for example, no TV-series markets comparable to America's Saturday morning hold on networks. In earlier years, when there was a theatrical short market, the British producers could not compete with the American product. For example, from 1924-26 there was G.E. Studdy's *Bonzo* series starring a round, rather stolid white pup whose slow, tepid shorts were no match for the well-paced, clever (and wildly popular) American series, *Felix the Cat.* In the mid-'30s, early British animator Anson Dyer produced a two-toned color and sound series of shorts starring a character named Sam, whose humor and thick accent were so regionalized that international appeal was impossible. After World War II, J. Arthur Rank set up an animation studio (G.B. Animation) at Cookham to produce shorts as supporting attractions at his theaters. He imported several former Disney artists to train the British staff. The studio closed within a few years because the resultant films were, according to critic David Rider, "largely disappointing."

"The theatrical markets were there," recalled Joy Batchelor recently, "but they were totally devoted to Disney and the American products." The Halas and Batchelor Studio, now celebrating its 40th year of consistent production (seven animated features, over 2000 shorts), survived because it did not concentrate on entertainment shorts *per se*, but on producing informational shorts that entertain. The husband-and-wife team of John Halas and Joy Batchelor began by animating cinema "adverts" for the London branch of J. Walter Thompson. Came World War II and the H&B studio was kept busy turning out dozens of propaganda and training films, both lengthy and short. H&B established British animation's leading role in the field of instructional films and was a leader in developing the flourishing London TV commercial market and the classroom instructional film market. In 1954, H&B pioneered with Britain's first full-length *entertainment* feature, *Animal Farm*, based on the George Orwell novel. This film predates Ralph Bakshi's efforts to create a more adult market for animated features (e.g.,

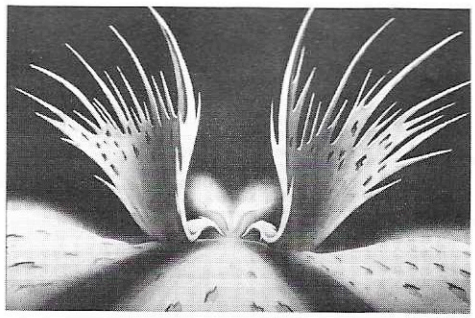
Fritz the Cat, Heavy Traffic) by almost two decades. "The Halas-Batchelor team knows its business," wrote New York Times critic Bosley Crowther in 1954. "But don't make the mistake of thinking [*Animal Farm*] is for little children, just because it is a cartoon."

The Halas and Batchelor studio has been a "nest" where new animation talents can try their wings and many now-established artists in the field have passed through the studio, among them Geoff Dunbar, Bruno Bozzetto, Peter Foldes, Gerry Potterton, Ian Emes, Alison de Vere, and Bob Godfrey. This tradition of encouraging promising talent continues: Halas recently produced and directed *Autobahn*, a surreal personal short designed and animated by Roger Mainwood, a 26-year-old H&B staffer.

Only seven animated *entertainment* features have ever been produced in the U.K., but three of them were unusually sophisticated in intention and content: the aforementioned *Animal Farm,* the more recent *Watership Down* (Nepenthe Productions, 1978), and that extraordinary pop-art time capsule of the '60s, *Yellow Submarine* (TVC London, 1968).

The director of *Yellow Submarine* was the late George Dunning, a Canadian who founded a successful commercial cartoon studio, TVC, in 1957 with Briton John Coates. Dunning, who was an intensely private, enigmatic man, has an almost legendary reputation among today's younger British animators who work on commercials and make personal films. The Dunning legacy is the three or four brief experimental shorts he made on his own over a period of years. *The Flying Man* (1961), for instance, is a culmination of years of testing the direct application of paint onto glass and cels shot frame-by-frame; in *Damon the Mower* (1972), Dunning's graphite sketches on flip books reveal the process of animation—sequential drawings—but retain the profound magic and mystery of the art as well. This experimental quality found in the short films is evident in much of Dunning's commercial work and most certainly it permeates *Yellow Submarine.* From 1974 until his death last year, Dunning was attempting to create on his own a full-length animated feature based on *The Tempest*; the remaining fragments of the film are tantalizing in their promise and Dunning's vision, audacity and dedication are inspiring to many international animators.

Ian Emes acknowledges Dunning as a



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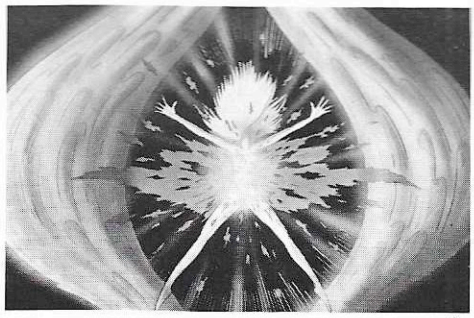

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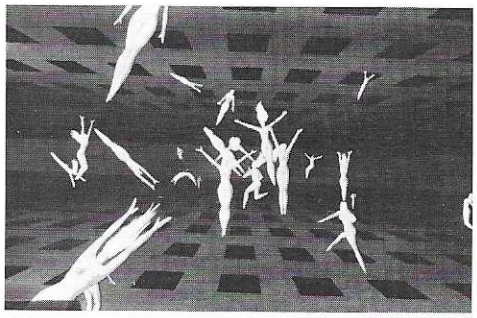

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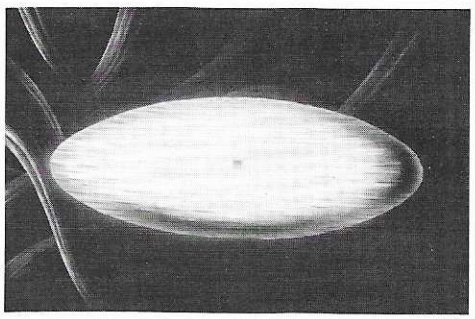

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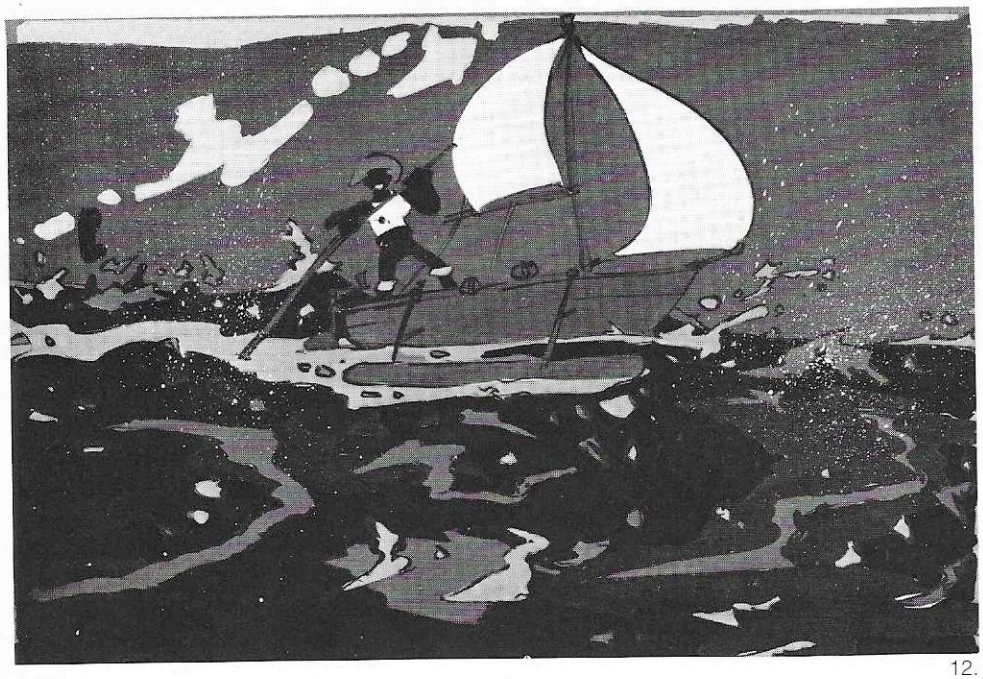

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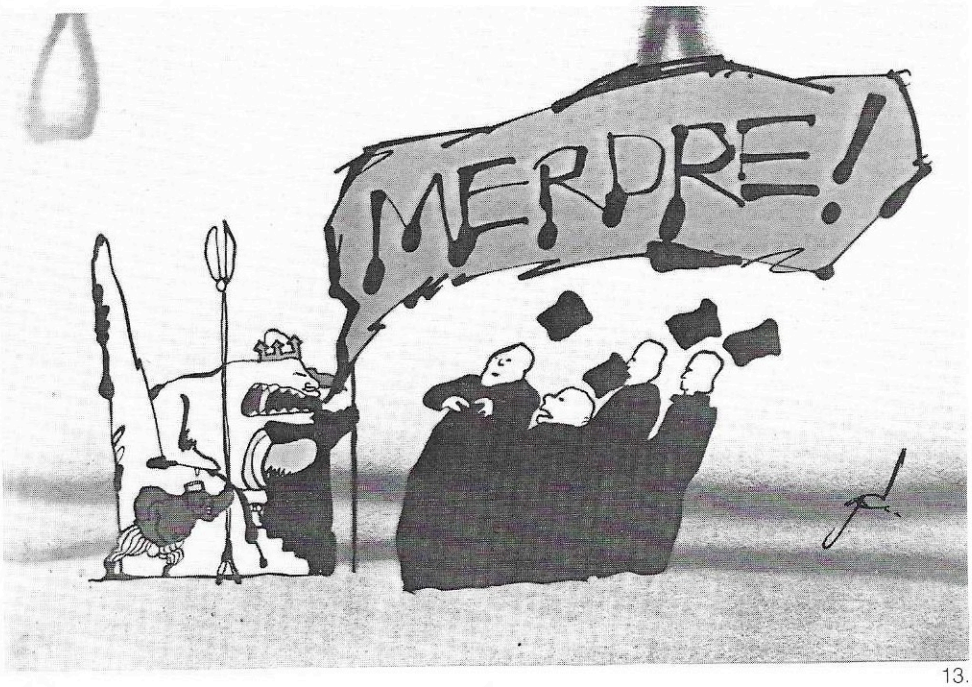

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12. Original cel from *Seaside Woman*, 1979, by Oscar Grillo. ©Dragon Productions. This film won the Best Short Award at the 1980 Cannes Film Festival.
13. Scene from *Ubu*, 1979, by Geoff Dunbar. This film won the Grand Prize at the 1980 Ottawa Animation Festival.
14. Poster for *Ubu*, by Geoff Dunbar.
15-17. Three TV commercials designed by Oscar Grillo. ©Dragon Productions.

major "influence" on his artistic "purpose." The 30-year-old self-taught animator from industrial Birmingham has "a total ambition to do film in the cinema." In his tiny walk-up studio on Greek Street near Soho Square in London, Emes earns a living making a select number of industrial films, but he refuses to do commercials, which he considers "garbage." Emes's first major personal film, *French Windows* (1972), used music by Pink Floyd, a rock group that subsequently commissioned Emes to make *Time Sequence*, an animated section of their *Dark Side of the Moon* concert tour. In 1975, Linda McCartney, of Paul McCartney's Wings, phoned Emes to commission *The Oriental Nightfish*, an animated visualization of one of her songs. The three-minute, 30-second short took Emes and four assistants eight months to create due to the marvelously complex, fully animated designs. The short is a triumph of technique over substance and a demonstration of Emes's mastery of his art. The tepid song is bolstered by the strong, lush visuals, which have no purpose but to dazzle us.

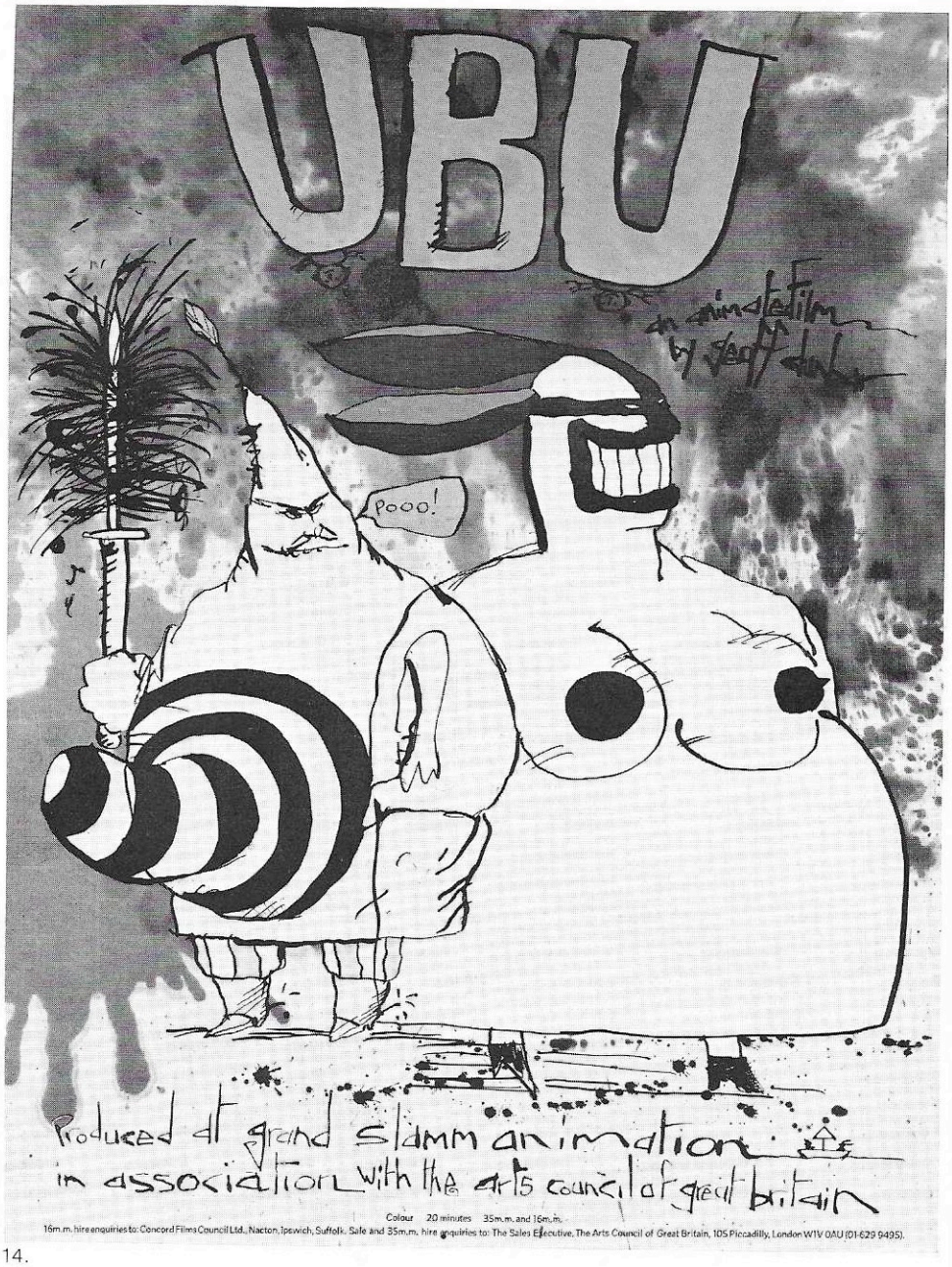
"I don't worship technique," said Emes recently. "Technique is a tool. The rock films are calculated to gain people's trust —this guy knows how to make films and spend money. I want to do a feature eventually and I have a strong narrative property which I will make combining the *Nightfish* techniques with those used in my new short, *The Beard*."

To Emes, *The Beard* represents "the untamed side of nature, frustration and anger with the system. "In this film, the visuals are stark and spare, rendered in little color with felt-tipped pens, as opposed to the multi-colored extravagance of the cels in *Oriental Nightfish*. The film builds, alternating between sight gags and shocking imagery as an at-first young man attempts to shave his beard, which becomes a hirsute horror by taking on a hairy life of its own. The beard runs the man like a dog on a leash up and down barren landscapes; it becomes sexual, transforming quickly to breasts, a phallus, a corkscrew; it grows outrageously in film-like frames of faces rushing out of the man's face at great speed, and it attacks the man with a hatchet, provoking a harrowing bloody battle. The final image is the beard's bone-crushing triumph over the man, who is reduced to an empty pile of clothes. *The Beard* is an emotional roller-coaster and a *tour de force* of anima-

tion. "The film is not mundane enough for distributors," commented Emes with detached irony after a screening. "There is no happy ending."

A contrast to the cool visions and distanced personality of Ian Emes is Oscar Grillo and his animated world. Thirty-five-year-old Grillo is an ebullient Argentinian who resembles Pinocchio's nemesis, Stromboli (or Popeye's rival, Bluto); he has bounced about the London animation scene for over a decade and for the last six years has been the creative force behind Dragon Productions, currently London's hottest commercial shop. Grillo passionately claims to "love" animation, especially the Disney films ("Their generosity—they give so much to each frame, the amount of work and devotion put into them"). Grillo also "loves" the rubber-hose-and-circle style of the 1920s cartoons, particularly Felix the Cat, and he "loves the violent, aggressive colors used by UPA," an American studio of the '40s and '50s most famous for Mr. Magoo.

Somehow, Grillo manages to incorporate some or all of these "loves" into the commercials and personal films he designs and animates. His recent four-minute short, *Seaside Woman*, commissioned by Wings, contains cartoony characters, full animation and bold, painterly hues. It is a delightful film, full of the warmth and bouncy life one might encounter on a sun-kissed south seas island. Grillo, too, wants to make longer films, and his artistic philosophy is "to be charming; I try to avoid the punchy, brutal hard-sell and make my characters softer,



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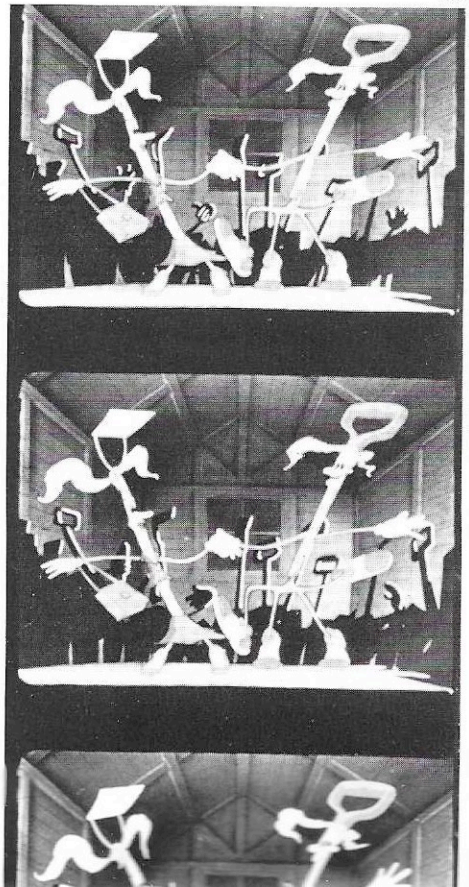

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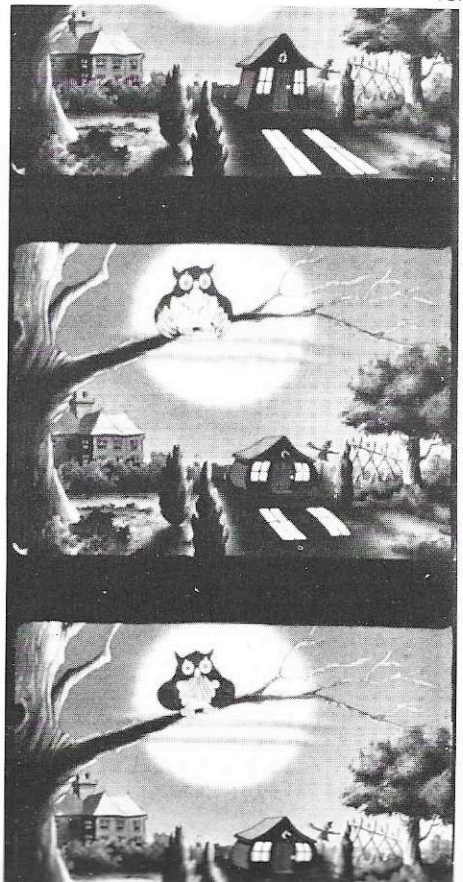

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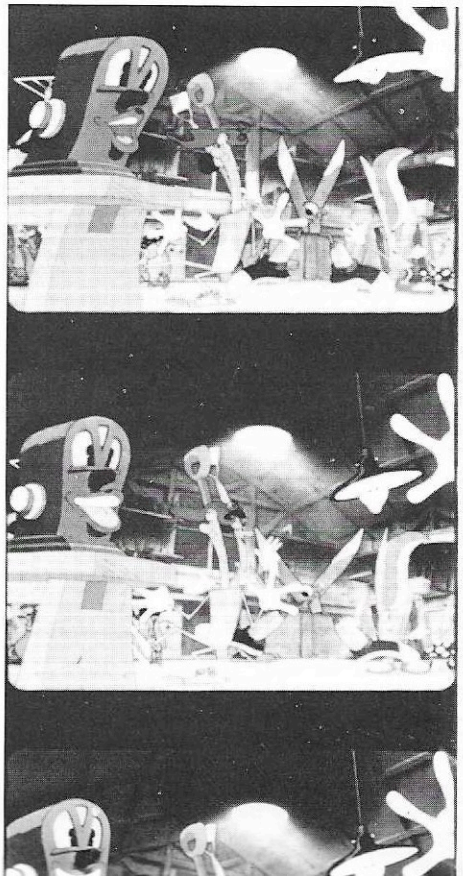
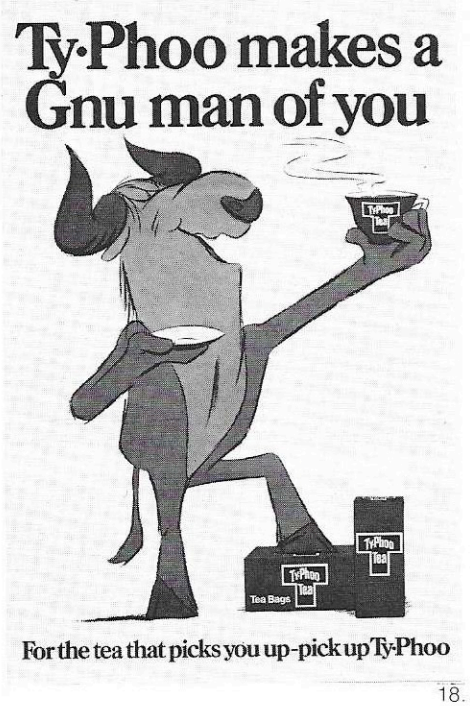


18, 19. High-toned gnu is featured on poster for Ty-Phoo Tea, by Wyatt Cattaneo Productions.
20. Model chart for Access TV commercial, by Wyatt Cattaneo Productions. Access is a credit card company.
21. Scene from *Mr. Pascal*, 1979, by Alison de Vere.
22. Scene from *Dream Doll*, 1979, by Bob Godfrey.
23. Scene from Bob Godfrey's *Instant Sex*, 1979.



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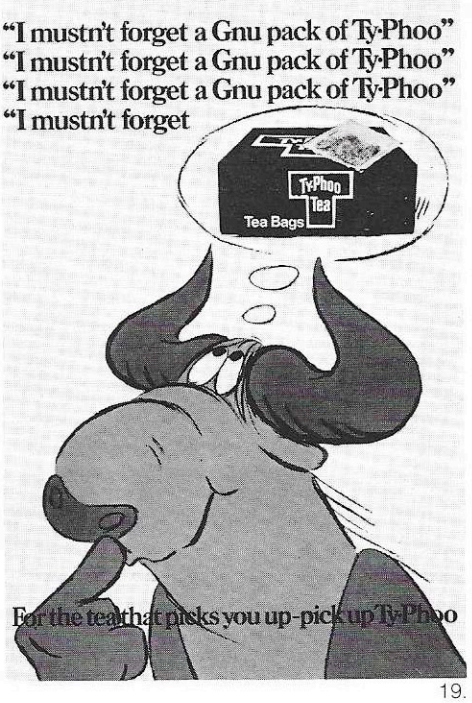

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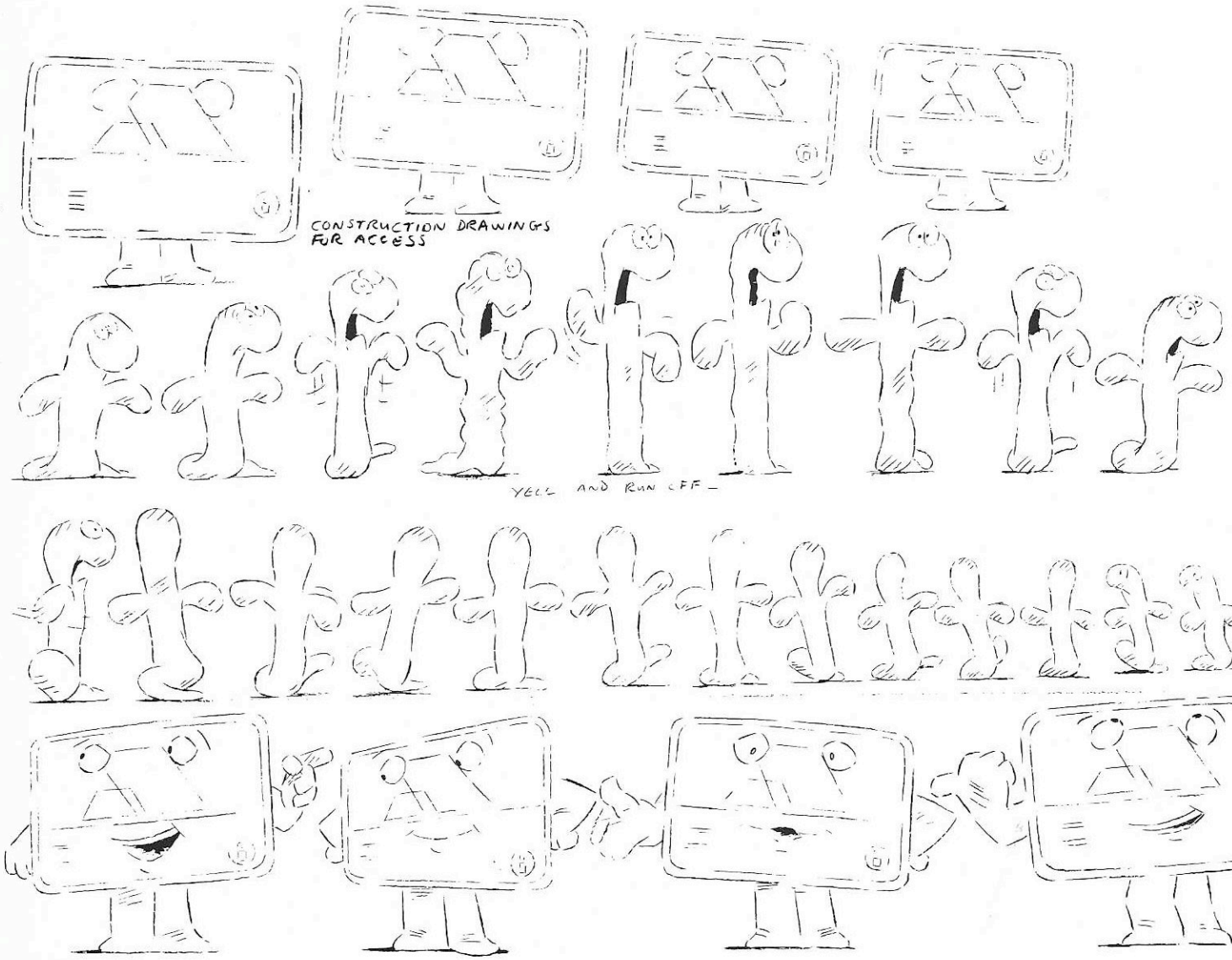

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more attractive. I want to give pleasure."

Geoff Dunbar's films give pleasure, but on a less visceral, less childlike way than Grillo's. He opened Grand Slamm Studio four years ago and maintains a half dozen staffers working on commercials for London, Germany, France and Holland. The 35-year-old animator, with financial aid from the British Arts Council, completed *Lautrec* in 1975, a film which won a Golden Palm in Cannes. This smoothly animated short brings to brief life a selection of preparatory sketches and lithographs by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. Last year, again with Arts Council help, Dunbar finished *Ubu*, a bold short of violent design based on *Ubu Roi*. "My first short," remarked Dunbar, "contained beautiful animation; my second is aggressive. Now I want to do a film that is very cartoony. After I get that experience, I want to tackle a feature."

Animator-designer Alison de Vere has been associate director for nine years at Wyatt Cattaneo, a busy commercial studio that prides itself on "creating memorable characters," e.g., an upper-class gnu for Ty-Phoo Tea, and a genial credit card and a worried pound symbol for Access. "Ron [Wyatt] and Tony [Cattaneo] financed my personal shorts, *Café-Bar* and *Mr. Pascal.*" The latter film shared the Grand Prize at the animation festival last year at Annecy, France. The shy Ms. de Vere constructs emotionally-involving films containing striking imagery that stays with the viewer; *Café-Bar* deals with male-female relationships, and *Mr. Pascal* implies a Christ-in-everyone and do-unto-others philosophy with sensitivity and taste.

Taste of a decidedly more outrageous type is a trademark of the personal films of Bob Godfrey. The slaughter of sexual taboos matched with a zany, iconoclastic humor has characterized most of them, from *Do-It-Yourself-Cartoon Kit* (1960), *Henry from 9-5* (1968), to *Dream Doll* (1979) and *Instant Sex* (1979). Some of the shorts reveal the heart of the clown beneath the make-up; for example, *Dream Doll* is as much about loneliness as it is about sexual frustration. In his Covent Garden studio, Godfrey leads a staff of 20 in the production of a full plate of commercials, industrials and personal films. He won the Oscar in 1975 for *Great*, a 30-minute short that took four years to make because of money problems.

"I've always had trouble raising money for my next venture," said Godfrey dur-

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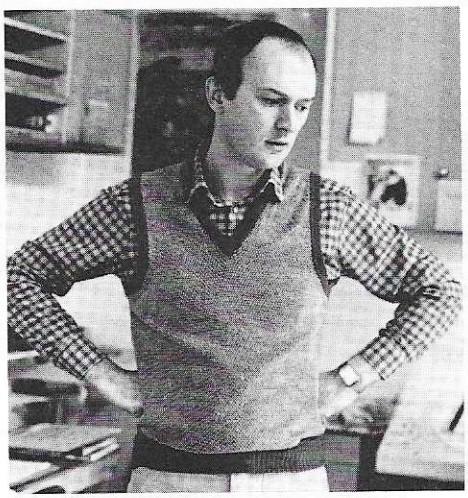
Oscar Grillo

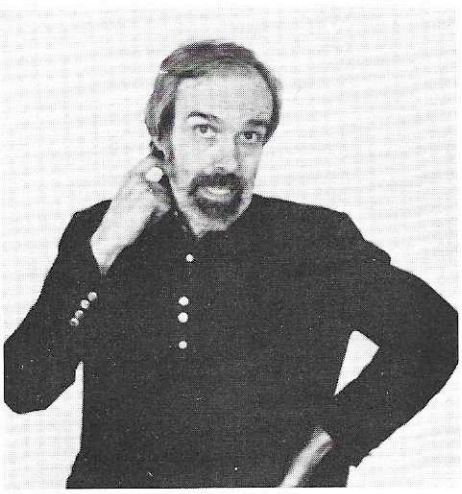


Ian Emes

Joy Batchelor and John Halas

Geoff Dunbar

Bob Godfrey



George Dunning

ing a recent rare idle moment. He was dressed in tweed knickers, a corduroy shirt, a wool vest, red knee socks and track shoes, and peered over his half-specs like a quizzical merry-andrew. Godfrey, who has been animating since the late 1950s, now wants to raise $3 million for a "dream" musical animated feature based on the famous circus elephant, Jumbo. The idea has reached the storyboard stage and Godfrey with friend John Coates of TVC are now setting out to "tackle the money problem."

The obsessive tenacity, the compromises in time and budget, the sheer will power needed to pursue one's personal animation visions while trying to earn a living is nowhere better exemplified than in the person and the almost epic struggle of Richard Williams. For an unbelievable 17 years, this in-demand director-animator has been pulling together a feature-length cartoon titled *The Thief and the Cobbler*. Williams, who is 47 and won an Oscar in 1972 for the ABC-TV special *A Christmas Carol*, heads two highly successful, smoothly running animation studios, one in Soho Square in London, the other on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. "We invest a minimum of $200,000 yearly in *The Thief*," said Williams in a recent interview in Funnyworld. "All of which we have to earn from our commercial output."

The setbacks in time and financing have been enormous and would have broken the will of a less determined man than Williams. Whole chunks of animation were discarded when Williams decided to change the focus of the film to what was a minor character, the thief; two years of production time and Williams's concentration were lost when he took on the all-consuming task of directing the ITT-

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24. Zig Zag's dragon ("a fiery dragon growing phoenix-like from the ashes uncoiling") from Richard Williams's forthcoming animated feature, *The Thief and the Cobbler*. ©Richard Williams Animation.

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"We can be where the trends are," Linda Hinrichs says, "whether they're in corporate or media. We want to be as varied as we can so that if the outside picture changes, we're not stuck in a mold." And, Neil Shakery adds, a design firm like JPHS "can be a base for innovating products and publications, for starting ideas rather than waiting to respond to someone else's."

Britain's 'Independent' Animators

Continued from page 42

sponsored feature musical *Raggedy Ann & Andy* (1977); the establishing of Williams's Hollywood branch studio has taken longer than originally planned and has required the owner's constant attention; then there is Williams's sheer and terrifying drive for perfection, his obsessive need to hone every scene until it reflects the very highest technical and entertainment standards.

"We can finish *The Thief* in two years," Williams says now, "if I get finishing money, but I would go indefinitely rather than have the picture wrecked. We have 70 minutes in pencil test now." A recent private preview for this journalist in London of one sequence of the test footage was impressive. The collection of scenes contained black-and-white rough and "cleaned-up" animation intercut with a few full-color, final scenes. Sequence 12 reveals the thief wandering through a bizarre death machine constructed of Leonardo da Vinci-like tiers, turrets, crossbows, cannons, battering rams, scissors, platforms and a human phalanx. This "terraced army" is in full battle, but the thief is oblivious to the chaos surrounding him as he pursues, with Keatonesque tranquility, three giant golden balls that belong to a Babylon-like Golden City. At one point, the thief is on stilts that are soon blown away; then he passes through spear-throwing soldiers unscathed; next he rides catapults, shoots through rings of fire, bounces off trampolines, flies from trapezes, lands in a giant bellows, just misses pots of boiling oil, exploding gizmos and gimcracks.

The sequence is funny, entertaining, visually exciting and striking in the complexity and non-stop invention of the layout and staging of each scene. But one is also struck by a visual metaphor: the resemblance of the thief to Richard Williams. The resemblance is not merely the character's physical appearance (Williams has said the thief is a caricature of himself), but in the charmed, single-minded determination of the thief to reach his goal regardless of the obstacles.

And so it is with Williams: despite the clucking tongues of impatient animation buffs and critics, in spite of the length of time and the lack of money, Williams marches on to a private beat. He has distilled the essence of what makes him happy, and what makes him happy is to work on this dream film: to supervise, direct and co-animate with his crew of four master animators. "It will be done when it's done," says he.

Another Williams quote might serve to sum up the spirit of Britain's independent animators, their pride, industriousness, and ambition: "Hell," said Williams, "I work! I don't spend my life beating my gums."