Entertainment XIII

"Personality: A Command Performance" by Eric Larson

"It has been said that no two people are alike, though similarities may exist in physical make-up and perhaps in certain moods and behavior. In our pictures we think of each character as being an individual - one of a kind. By so doing our personality development of each character assures his positive identity. That is what we want and that is what our pictures demand, if they are to be successful.

Recently an animator asked why we no longer have characters like those we had in earlier pictures - strong, believable and entertaining. What do our characters now lack?

Perhaps the answer might be found in ourselves. Maybe some of our stories have come up a bit short. Maybe our feeling the need to dig deeply into the personality possibilities of our characters slackened. Then too, we began to lean heavily on dialogue to identify our characters. But dialogue is inspired (or should be) by the situation a character finds himself in and the mood and behavior the situation dictates. Animation at its best is a pantomime art in which the character's strength and appeal will be measured by his performance.

And this might well be where we have strayed. Personality is brought out not so much in words but in actions, attitudes, mannerisms, peculiarities, moods, etc. and all according to just who our character is and what might make up his personality. He must be visually sincere and convincing in all he does. He must be entertaining and believable. We must, in addition to being able to draw him, search out all his little traits - the way he walks - the way he sits down - his way of gesturing - how he uses his hands in pose and for expression - in short, what makes him the character he is? And as we find him out and come to know and understand him and believe in him, we animate him!

With pencil and paper we, as animators, are acting to entertain an audience and pull it emotionally into our world of make-believe, letting it share the experiences of our characters on the screen. Therefore, we must so define our characters that an immediate identity of each is clearly projected.

Who our character is, what he is, why he is, must dictate his attitudes and movements as he responds to situations in our story. We would have no reason for greatly exaggerated action on the stepmother in CINDERELLA. If we had used such we would have minimized, if not completely lost, her sinister, scheming and brutal personality. So powerful was she in pose and expression and in her confined movements, that our audience gladly accepted her final defeat. Frank Thomas studied and analyzed the soul and ways of the step-mother most thoroughly before he began his animation of her. There was no guess work.

John Lounsbery was an exceptional animator. He was known as an animator's animator. He studied things through. It wasn't unusual for him to spend hours, with pipe and coffee handy, in pointed dicussion with other people about a scene he was planning - the business involved, the personality of the character in it, what he might do and how he would do it to best put over the story points. In all, a discussion zeroing in on all the entertainment values in the scene.

There are times when personalities explode through zany action and routines. One such sequence was the introduction of the Mexican rooster, "Panchito", to Jose Carioca and Donald Duck in THREE CABALLEROS. To get a maximum of fun out of the business in the scenes, Ward Kimball paid close attention to every little detail making up the personalities of "Panchito", "Jose" and "Donald" and came up with a bit of hilarious entertainment simply by, as he says, illustrating the lyrics in the THREE HAPPY CHAPPIES song. Can you imagine Cinderella and the step-sisters going through such a routine? Their personalities would hardly lend credence to such goings on.

As we look back to favorite characters in our animated pictures, the seven dwarfs immediately come to mind. Each one appealed to the audience because of his individuality. There was Doc, the nervous, frustrated leader of the group. And old Grumpy, who was just that! And then we have Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Bashful and Dopey, the name of each suggesting his personality and the traits and mannerisms that were finally developed for him. It would be interesting to know just how many drawings Fred Moore, Bill Tytle (sic) and others made and how much time they spent in searching out the qualities and shapes that eventually made each dwarf a memorable character.

And of course we have Br'er Fox, Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Bear in the Uncle Remus sequences in SONG OF THE SOUTH, all excellent studies in personality. Old Br'er Bear, gullible and easy going but determined. And Br'er Fox, an excitable wheeler-dealer, often exhibiting a bit of fiendishness. He was nervous, edgy, taunting and conceited. But Br'er Rabbit was a most capable adversary - crafty and alert - an opportunist. He lived by his wits.

They were an exciting trio, so different and positive in personalities that the "play" between them excelled and entertained.

Webster says that personality is "The quality or state of being a person." That's quite to the point, isn't it? But before our character can become a "person" on the screen, a great deal of research and consideration as to who and what he is must be done by story, director and animator.

Consider the personalities of Figaro, Thumper, Flower, and Bambi. All were animals in anatomy and movement but enriched with the thought processes, mannerisms, tempers and warmth of real youngsters. Their directness in thought and action had the unforgettable charm of the four and five year olds we once were and our parents knew so well. They were fantasy at it's best and the ready acceptance of them by the audience was conclusive.

It would be safe to say that the better animators in our studio's history "arrived" because of their personal integrity and their adherence to the basic demands Walt set down - demands paramount to good entertainment. "Know the truth and caricature it," he said. Stanislavsky put that thought in these words: "There is no inner experience without external physical expression." Surely both men are saying: "Know and define your character, his emotions, his physical capabilities and his body structure and then get him on the screen, and therein lies the strength and appeal of his personality."

In our daily activities and associations we may hear something like this: "I did it without thinking." We all, at one time or another, in one situation or another, have felt that way about something we said or did. But the psychologist tells us we can't do <u>anything</u> in action or speech without having <u>thought</u> of it first. The lightening speed with which the "thought" becomes reality is frightening.

This may sound a little intangible but we should remember that the character we're putting on screen must <u>think</u> before he acts - that his words and actions are <u>thoughts</u> expressed - not just movement and dialogue ad-libbed.

Let's flash back to our friend "Baloo", the bear in JUNGLE BOOK. His character didn't develop overnight. But once Phil Harris was chosen as "voice", "Baloo" took on a real personality - a bear with a beat and a <u>philosophy</u>! His thinking was simply that life goes on one way or another and should be "lived up" in ease and fun.

Ollie Johnston began the development of the character. Danny Alguire, an assistant director on JUNGLE BOOK and a competent musician with a contagious sense of humor and rhythm and a natural at ham acting got with Ollie at the latter's home and the two worked out a musical walk pattern for the bear with Danny acting it all out before the camera for study. This action as animated introduced "Baloo" to the theater audience. Too, in the course of it he met the boy, "Mogli" and a lasting friendship was born.

With Danny's humorous interpretations of the action within the framework of the musical beat and with Ollie's constructive suggestions "Baloo", the bear, began to bounce into character. Little personality touches such as the kick of his foot as he bounced to the beat - the overlapping drag and roll of his paws as he gestured - his blank stare in wonder and disbelief - his back up anticipations before going into his action - these and many other little traits that helped identify "Baloo" as a personality began to surface and before the the session in Ollie's backyard was finally taped, many of the traits and mannerisms which would gradually shape the one and only "Baloo" into a loveable, carefree, personable character were well defined. The session at Ollie's place was a positive beginning and from it "Baloo", like Topsy, just grew.....grew into an animator's delight!

It would be quite impossible to set-up a precise order of steps that would assure us a complete analysis of a character's personality, but as a starter we might first consider:
> 1. <u>Who</u> he is.
> 2. What's his age?
> 3. What are his physical and mental traits?
> 4. What makes him a distinctive individual?

We strive for a memorable character so we look to one descriptive word that might offer a general picture of him. Is he a villain? A "milk-toast"? A regular fellow? A neurotic? A country gentleman? A used car salesman? A school teacher? A politician? Or what?

Is she a villainess? A very proper lady? A bar-maid? A dancer? A tomboy? Or what?

Is the youngster a tease? A mean little brat? Mischievous? Snotty? A leader? Or what?

As a character is he or she:	
Explosive	**Fiendish**
Vigorous	**Crafty**
Sinister	**Alert**
Scheming	**A back slapper**
Gullible	**Shy**
Determined	**Tired**
Carefree	**Depressed**
Aloof	**Arrogant**
Excitable	**Or what?**

In any given character, body attitudes, head attitudes, gestures, walks and runs, for instance, play an important roll in giving an identity and personality to that character.

Gertrude Stein insisted that "A rose

                is a rose

                      is a rose",

but she didn't deny that each rose of which she wrote would, in one way or another, be a bit different in texture and shape, therein having an identity of its own.

In our portrayal of arrogance for instance, we have to realize that the arrogant one could come in many shapes, sizes and degrees of self-esteem. Each may "pose" differently, gesture differently, strut differently and each, in his or her own way, will be an individual and an egotist.

The arrogant guy who yells and thumps the table top to warn another of his pending fate is no more the villain than the haughty person who is much less active, but in an attitude of superiority and disdain, looks down his nose at the victim of his wrath. Both are arrogant. The first is strong through gestures and body moves and a loud voice. The latter exhibiting the same degree of arrogance through a strong body attitude with a minimum of gestures and a surly voice. The first gives vent to his feelings through strong action, the second through controlled contempt.

As we go into animation, it's necessary for us to continue a searching analysis of our character's identity. As mentioned before, one word might well describe him over-all. Maybe he's a "milk-toast" type. What does that bring immediately to mind? A character who is hesitant? Reluctant? Disinclined? Unassertive? Would he be rather confined in his gestures? Would his head action in dialogue be minimized? Would his normal step lack accent? Would his body stance be not too erect? Does he have a slightly bowed head attitude? Would he ever stand with his hands firmly placed on his hips? Would he be a dreamer, not a doer? As we continue our animation of Mr. Milk-toast we would make note of every personality trait that came to mind and make use of each one as the situation and action he's involved in would suggest.

All parts of the body are expressive. Hips, for instance, can give a _positive_ attitude to a walk. They used to say "she sashayed across the room," meaning she had a goodly amount of side to side motion in the hip area. The phrase "tripped over his own feet" suggests that feet could have a lot to do with the development of a certain type of character - the clown - the clumsy one - the "nifty" type or the scullery maid. And don't forget the tap dancer and Charlie Chaplin!

Let's look at hands and consider their expressive qualities - how they can be used to bring out personality with movements and attitudes made possible through the flexibility of the wrists and fingers. We so often forget just how much hands have to say - how much expression they are capable of and how the ways of a given personality will use them.

Consider the socialite poised with her cup of tea - or the district attorney cross-examining a witness - or the teenager thumbing a ride - or the ballet dancer and the graceful, expressive movement of her hands in her dance - or the overly zealous salesman extolling the quality and fit of the clothing you're buying. Regardless of the action or mood our character is in, the hands can be most expressive.

Though there is no set procedure to follow in our approach to an analysis and understanding of a given character, a knowledge of the over-all story and the sequences he is in and the part he plays, is certainly a good starting point. But, to repeat earlier thoughts, we must be dedicated to searching out all mannerisms which identify with him and make use of them in his acting. As we animate we should really feel within ourselves that we _are_ that character. A lot of good thinking goes ahead of drawing. Before we try to put it down on paper we should know what we want our drawings to say. Think it through, then say it!

Trial and error approaches are wasteful, ofttimes sapping our energies and interest. The idea is to get a good action and dialogue pattern thoroughly in mind, work it out through discussion and thumbnail sketches, and then animate it and follow up with needed changes and add embellishments. As much as possible we should avoid the routine: "We'll _try_ it this way" or "we'll _try_ it that way." That should all have been done in the early planning of our scenes.

The development of animated characters that are appealing, believable and entertaining is a big challenge which makes our roles as artists and actors so rewarding. And _remember_, animation is a pantomime art - if the body doesn't say it, it isn't said. Dialogue and music, sound and artistic effects are frosting on the cake. Personality worthy of a command performance is our goal.

**Eric Larson**