
Entertainment III

"Acting for Animation" By Eric Larson

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Entertainment Series III - By Eric Larson

Acting:

How much thought has each of us given to our acting career? Sometimes we even forget we have one! But, we have - each and every one of us - and our "roles" are of great variety and every one makes a great demand: "GET INTO CHARACTER."

Getting into character is no small assignment. It's like changing dress for different moods of the day, but not quite so easy. It can't be done with a brew such as Dr. Jekyll used to create Mr. Hyde. It isn't physical transformation - it's an image born of observation and imagination.

That big sheet of clean white paper on our drawing board is just waiting for something to happen. The question is - will it be something exciting and entertaining or will it be - just something?

We've explored and planned the "scene business" with or thumbnail sketches. We have thought well on it and know what we want to do and to get the best results we review some very basic things, such as the quality of our drawing and the need for weight, balance, rhythm and attitude in it - we review the need for proportions and personality in our character - the phrasing of action and dialogue - caricature - silhouette - arcs - perspective - timing (pacing) - pantomime - staging and of course, acting!

Goofy might insist that "acting is just pretending." Well, maybe so, but when we, as animators, "pretend," we really act. We want that linear character of ours to be as alive as life itself!

Walt practiced what he preached in acting out the "business," as he saw it, in story discussions or in the critical analysis of the animators' scenes in the rough showings in sweatbox - and, too, sometimes in the hallway or parking lot - wherever he was, he "lived" it. He pantomimed action and "rehearsed" dialogue attitudes and phrasing. He put on a real show - and it was positive, constructive and entertaining. IN the old studio on Hyperion Street in Los Angeles, each animation room was equipped with a full length mirror, usually mounted on the door, before which one could act out, for himself, the business routines in his scenes. On a wing, attached to the animation desk, was fastened a large mirror in which the artist could see himself acting out the desired facial expressions and dialogue, suggesting the emotions and feelings of his animated character, be it Mickey, Pluto, a Dwarf , Stromboli or whoever. We have long held on to the desk mirror, but the full-length one gradually disappeared.

The Physical Properties of a character

We've been reminded time and again, that to make our animated character act and emote sincerely we must know his physical possibilities, his emotional range and depth, his sensitivity, etc. For instance, we could hardly expect Dopey to get as involved in a situation as would Grumpy. Neither could we expect "Friar Tuck" or "The Tortoise" to run the "hurdle" course with the same ease and skill with which the "hare" would do it.

The reward in animation comes with knowing and studying the traits and mannerisms of our characters - analyzing the possibilities each presents in whatever "role" the story places them - putting ourselves in their places and acting out the action and dialogue, phrase by phrase, for ourselves and then, with thought, putting it all down on paper and timing it for "life." Many of the early animators , Ham Luske, Norm Ferguson , Fred Moore , Bill Tytla and others, who carved out the Disney tradition in the early and mid-thirties , made good use of those mirrors we mentioned. They did some pretty good acting in front of them. they acted it all out - analyzed and planned the business carefully - then put it down on the board.

In those days, an assistant, working within a tight animation unit, might be asked to assume poses , move into and out of them , do a "type" of walk, turn, react in surprise or fear or do a "skip." Endless were the requests and as they were performed the animator, observing carefully such important things as body attitude, weight shift, balance and strength of pose, made his quick sketches for inspiration - all is the search for better animation.

Today, as then, the person in the next room may be helpful.¹ Maybe he's a bit more of a "ham" than we are - less self-conscious Let's get him or her to "act it out" for us. The performance will not be "professional" perhaps, but we're bound to get ideas from it, and we're searching for ideas - some we will keep and use, others we will discard.

¹ "You are only as good as your materials lend you to be ! Don't forget animators should be social creatures as well - so also , animators can be good "material" to use."

We are at our best as actors when we can visualize clearly in our minds exactly what our character must do and how he's going to do it. We close our eyes and "see" the action as it passes in review.

We "see" our character , robust and arrogant , stomp and gesture his way through the planned action.

We "see" Grecian Gods, reciting their incantation, summoning the four winds to playfully wreak havoc upon a mortal world.

We "see" Taran , frightened but resolute, as he meets the Horned King.

We "see" little Hen Wen as she tenses and playfully challenges Taran to "watch after her."

Or we may be doing a little Chaplin like character, and after studying the Chaplin films, we "build" on the little shuffle walk, the little hops which often lead into his walks, the twirl of his cane, the tipping of his derby, the little happy side to side motion on his head and all else our character will have to do be a caricature of Chaplin who, as the "Little Tramp" is indeed, a great caricature of a personality.

Action Analysis

Acting doesn't have to be complicated or emotional to deserve our close attention, A simple thing like descending a stairway calls for us to actually do it slowly and analytically to find out just what happens. Let's try it:

On step one, we contact the stair tread with a straight leg and foot - we squash , as needed, for weight - then lift up to the height we need to pull our opposite leg through in anticipation of our next step down we drop into our step , contact the tread - squash for weight and again into the up anticipation to pull the opposite leg through - step down to the tread - squash for weight, and so continuing to the bottom of the stairs. Basically descending the stairs has quite the same pattern as does a walk on a smooth surface with its positive ups and downs, squashes and stretches .If we forget to use these basics we lose weight and believability, We slide down the stairs, the mood and situation our character is in will dictate our timing. He may be happy and bounce down the stairs. He may be deep in thought and drop into each step with a dejected attitude. In any case, the lift and fall in the step pattern must be positive.

Our acting abilities improve as our imagination expands and becomes more and more exciting. It comes about through interest, dedication and work. Remember Stanislavsky's advice? "Imagination , " he said, "must be cultivated and developed; it must be alert, rich and active." He was talking to actors - he also talks directly to us. We should be involved in this pursuit every waking hour of every day. So much is going on around us! Let's not let it go by unobserved.

But back to our acting, with some thought to this little problem: Maybe the character in our scene is a swashbuckling swordsman - a daredevil with talent and skill. We research the great romantics - the Flynn's, the Doug Fairbanks, etc. We study their heroic actions, moods and poses. With what ease and flair they move! With what disdain they look upon the adversary! So far so good - we're getting to know what makes this character tick.

The Goof

Now the challenge. It so happens that the Goof is our daredevil swordsman. Now what? Caricature, that's what! So we now take a good look at the Goof and his manners and ways. In the early nineteen-thirties Ted Sears, one of the best storymen the Studio ever had, put down and analysis of the Goof:

" He is on the silly side and always harmless. he tries to do things in a way he considers clever - he always does them wrong, and ends up with a foolish apologetic laugh, He seldom loses his temper. Always have him go about an action in his own, particularly Goofy way. He does practically everything backwards and is amused at the results, even though he suffers from it. The Goof laughs at his mistakes or makes the most of an incidental happening."

Later, in 1939 in "Goofy and Wilbur" the Goof took on a very warm, emotional charm, so he does have his moments of pathos.

Now we have the Goof in the role of the romantic, daring swordsman, ready to exhibit his skills. He must be the Goof and he must have the movement and show of a Flynn of Fairbanks - but in his own Goofy way.

The Goofy challenge is not unlike those we face every day. In our work we, as animators, are constantly challenged to be consistently creative and entertaining. Maybe yesterday we were Mickey or Donald Duck or Jiminy Cricket. Today we might be Eilonwy, Taran, Scrooge, Willie the Giant or Gurgi - or even an inanimate chair come to life. Tomorrow maybe a Thumper, an ostrich, a dog, a Cinderella or a Captain Hook. Who knows? But whoever or whatever the character and the role, we must make it and its acting an important part of us. We are expected to no less and to perform with taste and sincerity.

So to the front must come our acting abilities to combine with all the other essential talents good animation demands. All are most important to our success and that of the picture we're working on.

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