
Entertainment IV

"Drawing for Animation" by Eric Larson

OUR DRAWING:

The little man from China who, thousands of years ago, stood firm in the defense of his art with his cry: “A good picture is worth a thousand words!” may not have realized just how true his conviction was. If it be so - and we know it is - that drawing we make must say a lot of things and do it at first glance. It must be alive and believable and convincing.

(Please review thoughts in “Our Drawing” and “Our Character” on pages 3 and 4 of 2/11/81 notes.)

Our drawing and what it “says” is our communication with the audience. It is the visual factor in our efforts to entertain. It interprets life, caricatured and alive. Our drawing is a statement of personality and attitude - be it saucy, bold, impudent, arrogant, accusing, happy, sad, quizzical, embarrassed - whatever mood the story demands, our drawing must express it simply and clearly.

As we have often discussed, in our drawing we must search for interesting, expressive poses that make strong, easily understood statements, all in keeping with our character’s personality and physical structure. Will not a child and a grown-up, experiencing similar emotional reactions, show their feelings in different body attitudes? Will not their physical make-up help dictate? We know that in adults, children, animals or birds, no two are alike; similar maybe, but not exactly alike. So let’s let nothing become “stock.” We can’t afford to be lazy and follow the thinking: “It was good enough in that picture - so why not in this?”

(Though this is what has taken place in many scene: admissible though, for compensation of lack of talents. Hopefully, not a permanent thing!?) Given the same situation and mood, no two characters will move, stand, sit or laugh in the same way. We must always consider this fact so our drawings will reflect good analysis and will be more interesting and entertaining.

Sometimes we might say: “I know all that, I know my drawings must appeal to an audience and convey a thought - how else can I communicate?” Knowing all this as we do, we still so often minimize their importance and our efforts. We “sluff off.” Don Graham used to say in his quiet but positive way, that we were lazy when we failed to constantly search for the very best way to present an action and an emotion on the screen. Today we, too, might pay attention and give heed to his words.

We must always be fully aware of the life a good animation drawing can project - of the emotional experience and sincere response it can induce. It takes nothing from reality - it flavors it - it makes it more exciting, more imaginative and more enjoyable. As animators, do we not secretly wish to put something extremely humorous or dramatic on the screen - to create a bit of lasting entertainment?

How often have we thought of Robert Newton and his delightful and pleasantly villainous portrayal of “Long John Silver” in our live action picture “Treasure Island,” and how we might like to animate old “Long John” displaying all the qualities Newton put into the character - and maybe try to add a little plus? If we doubt it possible to plus Mr. Newton, think again Live action and animation are two different worlds:

Just what might be the limits of an accomplished actor’s performance of “Stromboli” in “Pinocchio?” His acting talents, his physical and emotional capabilities-? Of course: Considering everything, could he out-spirit the acting and personality shown in the animated “Stromboli?” Could his performance be more convincing and memorable than that which was in the drawings brought to life through the masterful draftsmanship, timing and imagination of one of us, Mr. Bill Tytla? We certainly doubt it.

Bill Tytla put himself wholeheartedly into every drawing he made, in every sequence in every picture he worked on. It might have been a dwarf, Stromboli, the devil on “Bald Mountain”, a gossipy old elephant in “Dumbo”. Whatever and wherever it was he left not a thing undone or slighted over. What inspired his drive toward such perfection? Could it have been his Desire to be creative? To be an actor? To entertain? Was it in the challenge of breathing imaginative life and personality into linear drawings? Was it in his wisdom to understand and caricature the believable.

Each of us may draw our own conclusion. The lasting proof of Bill Tytla’s creative and analytical abilities, his acting and drawing abilities and his dedication to his work and to Disney performance and tradition are indelibly etched on film for audiences to enjoy for times to come. This is our opportunity too.

We must remember that that which gave Bill Tytla the visual outlet for all his talents is the same strength we all must rely on - DRAWING. To be able to make positive and convincing statements with drawings we make, is paramount. We have no alternative if it’s success we’re after.

So what goes into the “making” of a good drawing? Let’s think--back on a few basic things. First, we must have the desire and accept the responsibility to make good, imaginative, expressive drawings, well defined in attitude, action, volume and perspective. We must know our character, his strong points and his weaknesses. He has certain physical traits and proportions. He has emotions, mannerisms and energies. He has weight, balance, solidity and rhythm, even if he’s stumbling or trying to balance himself on a rolling log. He overacts or he underacts, according to the situation and his personality. He lends himself to caricature in his make-up and dress and in the things he does. His proportions and mood will have a positive bearing on how he moves, stands, sits and gestures. His thought processes and actions resulting from them must be positive and well displayed. And in all this, for the sake of communicating with our audience, we must constantly consider simplicity and directness and the visual importance of such in our drawings.

Before we begin drawing we should have on our desk, in note form, all the tangible personality and physical peculiarities our character may have. As we begin to animate, additional qualities and possibilities in his “make up” will develop through story and what we, the animators, learn as we “make him act.” His true self will become exciting: But all this only if we have honestly put ourselves and our imagination into our drawings.

We can never ignore the need for us to really “become” the character and live it up:

A few sentences back we mentioned (as we so often have) the need of weight, balance, solidity and rhythm in our drawings. Weight and balance might be more easily applied to our work than solidity and rhythm, but neither will be convincing without the latter two.

In the quest of solidity, we must always consider the relationship of each part of the body, one to another, so we do not get disjointed units and figures. Even in the strongest caricature, it’s desirable to have a head that has a proper relationship to the neck, a neck that properly relates to the shoulders (even when shoulders are minimal, as are Donald Duck’s), shoulders that relate properly to each other in all perspectives, a torso that logically connects all this with legs that are properly related to the body as a whole and can sustain its weight. We should always be aware of the form underneath the clothes our character is wearing and, too, the basic anatomy hidden under the fur or hair on the animal we’re drawing. As animators, we exhibited a lack of concern for the relationship of clothing to the anatomy in much of the drawing of the old Hunter in our picture THE FOX AND THE HOUND and this threw a heavy and unfair burden upon those people responsible for the clean-up function in the picture as they struggled to make him look sincere.

This “concern” we speak of should be deep within each one of us, in all areas of animation. The anatomy of any character can be envisioned and simplified by any one of us and we cannot move our characters convincingly and in an entertaining way without the knowledge and use of it.

We may try. We may “fake” it. But that is disastrous and certainly unnecessary. Clean-up people should not be expected to save our work. We should take great care and be sure the features and other identification (hair, beards, ribbons, etc.) are solidly placed on the head form of our character and kept in proper relationship to that head form in all moves and perspectives. Too, we should, as Don Graham repeatedly pointed out, know where elbows, wrists, knees and ankles are and how and when they work for us to embellish our character’s actions. We should strive to know and show how his coat collar fits around his neck and over his shoulders - how long his coat sleeves are - how tight or loose his coat and pants happen to be - How big his feet are and the shape and fit of his shoes. Regardless of design and style of his clothing, whether it’s baggy, tight or torn, he should “wear” it in a way to give emphasis to his character and personality. So elementary, we might say - but, also easily forgotten and not made use of:

And what about rhythm? Isn’t it another way of saying our drawing has movement, twist, form and feeling - that it’s alive and appealing and truly has something to say? Rhythm keeps our drawing from being static, brittle, lifeless and as stoic as a cement column holding up a government building.

We readily associate the word “rhythm” with a musical beat, with the dance, with the pattern of ocean waves hitting against the rocks or surging and retreating on a sandy beach - things and action that repeat over and over in an ordered recurrent pattern. But in an animation drawing we have to consider rhythm as being an expression or statement of action, of movement, of pose, of attitude, of emotion. We strive for it in a single drawing or in a series of drawings, timed and phrased to give “an illusion of life.” Certainly all poses from the least active, like the dwarfs at Snow White’s bier, to the explosive ones of a villainess like Maleficent must have “rhythm” if we expect them to convey a positive thought to an audience.

We will further consider the “rhythm” thought later in a discussion on action and phrasing. For now, let’s look again at this reminder from Don Graham on the animated drawing:

“The essentials which made the drawing come to life, the gesture, the staging, the expression, the inner vitality, have all been established by the animator. Only through truly great draftsmanship in the sense, not rendering, but of creation, can the animated drawing be significant, this is the new drawing of our time.”

Eric Larson