
Entertainment VII

“Staging, Anticipation, and Silhouette for Animation” by Eric Larson

Thought: *“After all our studies, we acquire only that which we put into practice.”*
Goethe

How often have we been deeply moved by a certain picture hanging in a gallery and have taken time to sit and study it hour after hour? If we so desired, we could go back again and again, sit before it and “listen” to its message. It might have been alive with movement, color and design — full of interesting detail — dramatic in the grouping of human or animal figures — restful in its echoing of nature's moods. Whatever the appeal, the picture communicated with us — a message visually and emotionally presented through the artists creative abilities, not least of which was his talent for “staging” and making known his deep convictions. And we responded.

How different the gallery presentation to the viewer and that of the animated picture. In our films we have but seconds, or portions thereof, to present our story to our audience. If our message has not gotten over in the allotted time, that's just too bad. We can't say we're sorry and obligingly run the film back so our audience can take a second or a third look in order to enjoy that which we have laboriously created.

And therein lies our challenge. In the short time we have for our presentation on the screen, we must be sure our message is well staged — clearly and quickly stated. This means that the business and character(s) in every scene must be carefully considered and presented. In an article in “Psychology Today” for June '82, the point was made that “Youngsters remember what they see twice as well as what they hear.” Perhaps this might go for youngsters of all ages, five to ninety-five. The famed writer-humorist, Alexander Woollcott, made it clear to us in 1939 when he warned that “animation, being basically a pantomime art, should be expressive and visual.”

How can we best respond to Mr. Woollcott's admonition? There certainly is no one, two, three and that's it approach. But let's start with our drawing — our visual statement up there on the screen. Standing apart from other considerations, is it quickly readable and delivering our message? Is the “silhouette” good or somewhat vague with arms or legs crammed in in front of the face or body, destroying definition? Is the body attitude complimenting the character's expression or gesture? In short, as we have to always ask ourselves, is our drawing alive and does it say what we want it to say? Perhaps this is rule one in staging.

More often than not, our staging problem is challenged by the movement of our character(s) and our job is to make sure the attention of the audience is focused right where we want it to be. For example: In *ONCE UPON A WINTERTIME*, one scene depicted twelve or fourteen characters, in couples, skating on a pond. The spirit was a happy one. Being a “crowd shot” the fielding was kept at a maximum and constant. The entrances and exits of couples, the use of perspective (characters going away from and returning into camera), the skating paths which clearly displayed the grace and rhythmic patterns of the skaters and the effort to keep couples in the clear, never allowing one to cover up or overlap another, except in passing, kept the scene pictorially interesting.

Scenes of this kind are not common in our pictures, but when we do use them and if we plan them well, the audience will react very favorably to them. They offer a pleasant “change” in our story continuity. Remember the “mushroom” dance in *FANTASIA* - a most charming interweaving of characters into a very entertaining routine. In working out such scenes, a perspective and path pattern of all action might well be planned on one sheet of paper, and within the fielding (camera) bounds, before any animation is done. This approach is proper planning — our only assurance of staging and figure size control.

We should have a reason for what we do. We have something to say, maybe in action, maybe in a still pose. Beyond our drawing, what can we do?

First, let's consider a camera position, or the field size, we might need. Is the full figure important in the problem before us? Will a waist shot serve us better — or do we need a good close-up on our character? Do we need to pinpoint something he's holding in his hand? Whatever the need, camera fielding is part of the answer.

“Fielding” helps us to be visual — to be specific. The camera opens wide to help us with locale — whether the beauty of the countryside - the warmth of a village street — the menace of a gathering storm — the thriving industrial complex, shrouded in a haze, kept alive by giant stacks belching out their heavy smoke. The camera can be dramatic with its high and low angles and its versatility. It zooms or cuts in or — pulls or cuts back to punctuate emotions. But before the camera is useful to us, we must know how to use it to help us in what we have to say.

It is well to have a good idea of the fielding we might need before we animate, but regardless of the camera bounds, we will do well to draw beyond the borders of our anticipated camera field so we may have a leeway with our camera position just in case we might want to make a slight adjustment after seeing our first test.

We may find it desirable to be with our character(s) throughout a given action, as in Peter Pan's flight with the children over London. In those scenes we were not only following the action with the camera but, to add vitality to the perspective effort put into the animation, we were also moving in and out on the characters with the camera for added scope and dramatic effect. Again, let's keep in mind the fact that the camera should work for us, that we are in control of its placement and movements and that it's a valuable asset in getting our best pictorial results. Whatever is happening on the screen must be clearly understood. Remember, a picture is for communication and the camera will help us make it so.

Summing up: A scene, even if a moving composition, must be understood, or there's no sense in animating it. The story it tells is new to the audience, so let's put ourselves in the viewer's place and check whether or not we have communicated.

We think of ourselves as pantomimists — and maybe, in a way, we are magicians, too. The mystical babble and gesturing the magician uses to invoke his magic is the anticipation and staging for his act. It gets the attention of his audience. It commands viewers to watch and his performance goes on with enigmatic, but fascinating showmanship, caricatured to high heaven and the audience is bug-eyed, lest it loses out on some little mystical happening.

Well, we, too, have a little thing we do to get attention and we call it “anticipation.” (See 7/1/82 notes pages 8, 9 and 10.) Sometimes it can be rather simple — sometimes involved — but whichever or however, its purpose is to prepare the audience for the action we are about to present and for best results it, the anticipation, must be easily seen, graceful, eye-catching and positive. It's got to be staged for show.

In our animation “arcs,” as we know and use them, we stage the grace and clarity of movement. Nature, at times, gives illustration of this when gusty winds rock a big, heavily leafed tree, bending it mercilessly to the ground and whipping it back in anticipation of another onslaught. The big “arcs” the tree's action follows are full and expressive of force and the “whip” (the overlap) of the leafed branches as they surge into the reverse move adds a strength and excitement to the action.

To repeat: The “arcs” we use to define our actions become a very valid part of our scene's staging. It's through them (the “arcs”) that we graphically display what our character is doing and how he's doing it. A gesture cannot be really alive and meaningful without the rhythmical strength an “arc” can give it. All “arcs” are not equal in scope or design, so we might consider any action “off the straight line” as being “arc” in nature. The “arc” gives finesse to an action. It's showmanship, it's positive and graceful. Perhaps we might add, even poetic.

It's interesting to note that while acting in live action films has become less involved with expressive gestures, stage presentations still feel the need for pantomime. Pantomime, of course, is even more obvious in musical comedy shows. Some comics play strongly with gestures, using big “arcs” for the flourish that helps their act, while others have nothing to gesture or emote about.

The old melodrama said it all. The actors were “hams” and pantomimists at heart and their caricatured acting, in pure fun, was very, very visual. Animation is that kind of entertainment — positive, expressive and visual. It's worthy of the best staging we can give it.

Simplicity is so necessary in staging, and a good silhouette in drawing is one helpful way of achieving that simplicity. The old cliché “black it all in and see if it reads” is very applicable here. We may blacken in the drawing only in our imagination, but whether imaginary or really blacked in, we should get a prompt “yes” or “no” verdict as to how clearly the drawing reads and we ask ourselves: Are we making our best statement of the body stance and attitude? Have we lost strength and meaning in the pose by ignoring definition of arms or legs? Have we let expressive hands get lost within the silhouette of the body shape? Are we striving for good silhouette in our action? (See “On Being Definite” Page 4 & 5 of 3/20/81 notes.) In the action referred to in those notes, Mickey's action and phrasing are planned to be direct — easy to read. Within the action patterns noted, we would create additional interest by introducing distinguishing traits and mannerisms our character might have — the how's and the why's he would do things.

It's like building a building — we start with a good foundation and build upward — not start with the roof and build down. It's easy and tempting to think of little subtleties that might go into an action even before we have fully planned the design of that action. I'rue, we must not discard or overlook those subtleties but should jot them all down to be considered and used later, in proper place and time, to punctuate our character's movements and personality. All in all, whatever we animate will be much more entertaining if we give it the silhouette look.

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