
Entertainment VIII

“Dialogue for Animation” by Eric Larson

Thought:

“I tell you that if you really put your mind to it, dialogue is unnecessary and most of it is a burden.”

Alexander Woollcott

Maybe Mr. Woollcott's remarks to us on that evening of March 28th, 1939 say more than he meant. His whole thrust was: “Don't rely on dialogue — don't burden yourself with it — don't put on a talk show — use dialogue when and where there is reason.”

In our discussion notes of 2/11/81 we mentioned that, in dialogue phrasing, “If the body isn't saying it, it just isn't said.” We continued this thought in the notes of 7/2/81. If we were to be reminded every day of the need for the body to “say it” — it would not be too often. It's a need we all should constantly keep in mind. Again, let's remember that animation is visual and its greatest entertainment is not in “picturing” a radio script. Such is an approach too easily and too often taken and in its wake the charm and warmth of the visual fades away.

But dialogue is important: It is an acknowledged asset in our entertainment. It's an embellishment we carefully evaluate. It should be considered and written with care and meaning, used in taste and with purpose. It shouldn't be used as an audible explanation of what's going on in our story. Dialogue grows out of needs and situations — it isn't manufactured to describe or explain them.

Dialogue is, or should be, a great inspiration in the development of our character's personality, suggesting how and why he acts and thinks as he does. The tone, structure and delivery of the dialogue phrases excites our imagination and our character. A linear drawing, becomes imbued with attitudes, actions, reactions, expressions and gestures.

Think about this: How many ways, and with what meanings, can we say, “sit down.” Will not the mood and circumstance we happen to be in dictate the inflection we give to those two words? Let's try saying “sit down” in a few different ways, mentally noting our body attitudes and gestures so automatically a part of us as we deliver the line. Is it a stern command we give? Are we pleading? Is it as an invitation or are we in a state of exasperation? In each mood what will be our body attitude and action? It will be according to the emotion we experience as we deliver the dialogue line, will it not? We're certainly not going to command someone to “sit down.” as we assume a body attitude of entreaty, are we?

The exercise we have just gone through suggests the approach we, as animators, should have to our work. Animation calls for the total involvement of ourselves in our art. If, in every mood and movement, we can feel ourselves experiencing it before and as we put it on paper, our animation will have a good chance of really communicating. It all is summed up in a simple question, isn't it — how can we express any emotion in a drawing if we do not feel within ourselves, the fullness of that emotion?

There is no “one way” of delivering a dialogue line that has need of a given emotional feeling. There is no formula. People are all different, one from another, and the reaction of each to the same emotional confrontation will be differently expressed. Our drawings on the screen should echo people — fun and live people — because we want them to be convincing and remembered.

Some of us look for a “stock” way to get our dialogue sync. To say that we must “hit” those accents in the words or phrases two frames ahead doesn't hold true, though quite often it might work out that way. But, the delivery and texture of dialogue by individuals differs and therefore is often misleading and to get the sync we want we have to experiment. Some delivery will be in good sync if we expose our action “right on the nose.” Other times the one or two frame exposure of action ahead of the dialogue accent is desirable. One thing we need to always keep in mind is that we see before we hear. We see the body move and gesture just ahead of hearing the sound the action relates to. The “time” difference may be only one twenty-fourth of a second — but we will be aware of it. In the interest of good sync it is often desirable to have an arm gesture “hit” one or two frames ahead of the body sync, which might in turn be one or two frames ahead of the facial sync. Again, it's putting the see ahead of the hear. That's what sync is all about.

A line of dialogue takes on added entertainment when we find use for our character's mannerisms and frustrations, in his anticipation before his line is delivered or as an after reaction.

As animators, we must look for such opportunities.

In the story development and in the director's considerations, these might well have been given much thought, so in the hands of the animator, knowing his character well and building upon the inspiration received from the story men and the director, an enjoyable “come to life” feeling can be visually present in a dialogue line.

A good example of a character's personality value and how it can support and help build a dialogue line is very obvious with “Bashful” in SNOW WHITE. His mannerisms were very well defined and used in his dialogue lines, and in the anticipation to them and in the action following them. Consider his line, “Oh Gosh!” after he was recognized by Snow White. In the anticipation and follow up action “added upon” support was given his dialogue line — they made it entertaining.

Too, the use of the fidgety uncertainty in Doc's character helped the fumbling delivery of his lines. It really paid off beautifully. A study of the first meeting of Snow White and the Dwarfs is a must. Therein is an education in character and dialogue relationship.

Imagine the possibilities presented by a frustrated character, anxious to be positive in his angered response to a criticism, but not being able to get the words out. He can hardly contain himself as he vibrates and stammers into an extreme anticipation out of which he blasts into his lines like a sudden burst of air from a blown up balloon. The footage used in such a “build-up” could be so very important.

If, in working out our scene, we have a new constructive idea pop up — something growing out of our character's personality and situation — something we feel might preface and enliven the dialogue line — we should, as we should with any new idea that arises as we work on our scenes, discuss it with the director and get his “in-put” and O.K. on the additional footage. We might need to develop the idea we're thinking of. But, we should be quite certain that that which we suggest is not just extra action, but really a plus to the scene.

At times there may be the problem of relating those dialogue readings on the exposure sheet to the sound we hear on the cassette or film. Does that line sound like it looks — or look like it sounds? Well, gradually it will all come together and we can get on with the business of acting it out knowing, as we must, what the thought is — how it is said — what it means and finally how to interpret it for the actions of the character on the board. The dialogue and its phrasing have become a part of us and we are mentally in tune with the mood and situation our character is to have. We double check the readings of the dialogue as it's written on the exposure sheet, checking accents and the modulation into and out of them and become fully aware of the time and footage we have to put over the business at hand.

Dialogue isn't sacred. Like all things creative, it can often stand a little improvement, sometimes by simply opening up space between words at a given point to give a needed emphasis to a word or maybe to allow time for a personality pause on a character which, in turn, will give an additional punch to the line. Sometimes we might want to pull words more together to help a mood and we find ourselves cutting out a frame or two between words or phrases.

Lines of dialogue will fall naturally into phrases and the tone and mood in each should tell the body what to do and how to do it. Like a well constructed sentence, making good and proper use of punctuation, we phrase our dialogue action with care and reason so that pictorially and audibly, thoughts and statements are clearly understood.

Dialogue phrasing has to have a rhythm; an overall movement not unlike a graceful gesture, having its beginning and its end, saying what it has to say in a simply planned but positive body sweep. Within it we put the accents and gestures needed to give the dramatics and personality we want. We can spoil the flow of the phrase in animation if we try to catch every word with accents. A key word or two may well be the “meat and muscle” of the phrase, allowing us to “pass through” other words that are part of the thought, but supportive in their use. The overall phrase has a message — has something to say. It's up to us to make it entertaining.

Eric Larson