
Entertainment XII

“Our Work Habits” by Eric Larson

"The brain is a wonderful organ - it starts working as soon as you get up and doesn't stop until you get to the office."

Robert Frost

We are all creatures of habit, aren't we? We go through daily routines without concern. Usually things just fall into place in methodical order from the time we get up until we arrive at the Studio. The time lapse and routines from getting out of bed until we arrive at work will probably be quite the same day in and day out, barring the unexpected. With the preliminaries out of the way and the dressing completed, our dog takes us for a walk over the usual course, making the usual stops. We then sit down to breakfast at the given moment and are on our way to work at that given time. Arriving, "work habits" take over, they being the ones with which we are concerned.

It would be quite presumptuous to say that "work habits" should or could be the same for all of us. We're individuals with varied personalities, with different views, with different goals perhaps. Yet, some very basic demands made on each of us by a profession that is a team effort, dedicated to getting good entertainment on the screen, should be adhered to, though with an individual approach.

Our "work habits" should be geared to produce the best results we are capable of. Sometimes we reach goals with a minimum of effort. Other times the desired results are difficult to come by. The degree and quality of our success is often in keeping with our own "work habits", and sometimes our assignment. To consider again the demands made on each of us as animators will be repetitive but not redundant.

First we begin with the "pick-up" of the scene or scenes in the Director's room. At this time all thoughts and questions should be considered and a mutual understanding regarding the scene's content and execution should be reached between Director and Animator. We should discuss the story points in the scene and the most direct, simple and entertaining way to stage the action and phrase the dialogue. We consider the personality traits of the character. What is his situation and mood? How does he act? How does he re-act?

Now we find ourselves at the drawing board and our search for a full understanding and knowledge of our character really begins.

Who is he?

What is he to do?

Why is he doing it?

How is he best going to do it?

We jot down pertinent facts about our character and pin them on our board.

What is his age?

What are his mannerisms?

What are his physical traits?

What about his emotions?

Is he interesting and alive?

Will he reach out to the audience?

Will the planned action help delineate him?

As the animator, are we emotionally involved with him?

In thumbnail, with all thought on entertainment:

We plan the action, noting story and personality points.

We phrase the dialogue.

We stage the action - plan trucks - pans and fielding.

We check the background. Will the character work clearly in it? Are props positioned for definition and use?

It might be well to discuss the thumbnail sketches and action with the director or other animators. Now if the scene can be fully visualized draw it! - Not before! And stay on course!

There's nothing wrong with sitting down with others and discussing our personal goals and work habits. But whether or not we are inclined to do this, a very desirable practice for each of us would be to turn the "spotlight" on ourselves and make a very personal evaluation of our own goals and habits. Often we go merrily on our way without thinking about them or how they can shape what we are and do.

It would be difficult to note the hopes and habits each of us might build and develop as we go about making animated pictures, but a driving force in shaping those hopes and habits is a positive constructive attitude.

Grim Natwick, creator of "Betty Boop" and one of the greats in our business and a member of the Disney Staff in the SNOW WHITE days, recently reflected on his feelings about animation in these words: "Animation to me is like sitting down to a big turkey dinner." Grim is in his nineties, still keeps an active hand in animation and tells his stories with great gusto.

A positive attitude? We had just better believe it because, as with Grim, it has been one of the qualities in every person who has found his place in Disney animation . Its a force for each of us to develop and having it, the goals we reach will be rewarding and the work habits we form can't be anything but productive.

When we consider the charm and story-telling possibilities that animation offers we can't ignore the fact that the top priority in our goals might well be entertainment. Walt often commented that "It'll be up there on the screen for a hundred years." FANTASIA, released in 1940, plays daily to an audience in cities around the world. SNOW WHITE, released in 1937 remains a favorite of young and old. And so goes the Disney animated film story - PINOCCHIO, BAMBI, CINDERELLA, SLEEPING BEAUTY and all the rest - welcomed year in and year out by people of all ages, everywhere.

Contrary to the feelings of some, Walt Disney and the entertainment plateaus he established and the tradition he built have left a worldwide following today. The tradition is not yet spent. Walt never felt that he had to "get on the bandwagon" to succeed. He always led; others followed. He was not, nor should we now be, pulled down by the mediocrity of entertainment dictated by some television and movie producers.

In the Disney spirit, our imagination and our ability to graphically put down on paper and "bring to life" that which we imagine will determine our success. If we make a good picture the viewers will take it to their hearts and never let go! We must search and re-search our story material, do and re-do the content and continuity until it becomes a positive story, unfolding properly and running the gamut of emotional and physical feelings and actions. We want and must have characters brimming with personality so that our audience can readily relate to them and think of them as people they know and can care for or hate. We must know reality and how to caricature it with taste and showmanship. We want to entertain our audience - draw it into our world of fantasy. That's goal number one!

The student of animation, like the student of the theater, finds his "study" to be an on-going activity, not confined to an eight hour day. Everything he sees in his waking hours, and often in his dreams might, at one time or another, be an inspiration for a character's action or attitude in a scene he's animating. An animator, like an actor, "must learn to think on any theme. He must observe people (and animals) and their behavior - try to understand their mentality."

Goals are realized through good "work habits." To know reality should be a goal for each of us, and to know it we must be observant - even a bit curious. And to keep our curiosity alive and our observation whet up we form a habit of becoming dedicated observers. We're aware of things going on around us, wherever we may be. We're analytical of how and why things work and happen. We read. We study good pictures. We listen. We discuss freely. We dream a little - all in an effort to know reality.

Another goal we may well strive for is to be more imaginative in our ideas - in our drawings - in our analysis, planning and execution of our animation. The goal again may be achieved through habit. Doesn't a total involvement in the demands our art makes on us come through a willingness and desire to discipline ourselves - to seek a constant improvement in the way we think and in the way we work?

Let's get into the habit of knowing. We wouldn't begin to build a room in a house without knowing the plan of the house - how the room must fit into the overall structure and of what use the room might be. In the same thought, why should we animate a scene or scenes, without knowing why, where and how the scene, or scenes, fit into a sequence. And how, why and where that sequence fits into the picture?

So why not make a habit of fully understanding our scenes before we begin to animate - to know the reason for the scene, or scenes, being in a sequence - to check every possibility for entertainment - to be sure we're "getting in with both feet, not just getting our toes wet."

Dave Hand, our Supervising Director on SNOW WHITE and BAMBI, constantly admonished, yes, pleaded with us, to spend half our time studying and getting to know our scene's content and purpose and the other half animating it. He wanted us to develop the habit of knowing. In this vein someone once said: "When the scene is finished, if you have placed too much stress on unimportant things or not enough on important things, you have not planned the scene properly."

We constantly feel the need for such an approach and the quality of our work will be commensurate with the careful thought we give the scenes. Remember, "if we can't see it, we can't draw it." It's been said that all tedious research is worth one inspired moment. We all want that inspired moment, our inspired moment, to find it's place upon that screen in a Walt Disney animated picture!

Some animators like to have everything worked out for them - to be told what to do and how to do it - to have every "frame" on the exposure sheet "identified" with a part of an action. That may well minimize the effort to be put forth in their animation, but it will limit their learning processes. It will not strengthen their sense of responsibility. It will contribute little to the building of their creative abilities. It will not inspire a feeling of accomplishment. It will limit their total involvement, expression and contribution.

Why not sit back for a moment and review our "goals" and "work habits." Each day presents hours available for constructive thinking and doing. We might look at ourselves as much for the Studio's gain as for our own and check on how we are doing. Are our "habits" constructive? Are we approaching our responsibilities and opportunities with purpose? Is our animation as creative and entertaining as it could be?

We have discussed some basic "work habits" we should develop to get our best results on the screen. Our aim is entertainment and putting those "habits" into practice is vital to our success.

Two important thoughts haven't been mentioned though one, our interest, was suggested as we talked about attitude. Considering this further, we could each ask ourselves just how interested we are in the art of animation. Is it the best and most rewarding expression for our creative desires and ambitions? If we find it unexciting, lacking in challenge and only a means to a weekly pay check, then it, animation, will be only a day to day, unexpressive journey through a maze of mediocrity. As we go about our animation we cannot have our minds on many other subjects and expect success.

Last, but not least, is a concern about our footage output. Good planning and understanding of our scene's business and the most effective way to do it, knowing what the scene must say before we try to say it, will expedite our work, assuring more spontaneity and very probably an improved footage output.

Being artists we may find a little un-easiness in the words "attitude" and "footage count." We may consider them an encroachment upon "creativity", but they are not. They play a critical role in the act of getting our entertainment on the screen with an eye to the success of the picture. Our concern about "footage" shouldn't shackle our creative efforts to meet the demands of our scenes because when interest and spirit dominate the planning and performance in our work, things move more smoothly and our "footage" out-put can't do anything but improve. That fact has been proven again and again by many animators through the years.

When we know (and there's that word again) all about our scene - when we have planned well and are really excited about the action and the characters in it - when we are really a part of it and look to its entertainment possibilities - our footage out-put can't be anything but good. Try it, you'll like it!

We need to be flexible - not indecisive - but able to adjust - to be willing to view things in their true relationship to other things - to give and take as necessary - to respect the thoughts and contributions of others. As we do we gain more and more knowledge and understanding of our art. Too, we probably will discover an added enthusiasm within ourselves for the values and uses of the animated film.

Eric Larson