
Entertainment XIV

“Be Yourself” by Eric Larson

"Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport"

Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau, a man who experienced great difficulty in really "finding himself," trying many and varied ways to gain a living, must have deeply felt the truth in his words.

Working at a job we didn't like would indeed be most frustrating. Yet, many people do just that because, in the course of living, survival is quite important.

Considering our work as a "sport" would add spirit to our animation. Looking back, do you remember things you've created - things for which you've experienced an explosive enthusiasm - things you've done because you've wanted to do them? And do you remember the pleasing results? And didn't your input have a positive spontaneity?

Such is Thoreau's message: In our animation we need a positive approach - an explosive enthusiasm - a spontaneity - a sense of enjoyment - a feeling of accomplishment. The "sport" of which he speaks is an "open sesame" to our creative thinking and doing. So why not enter "the door" and reap the rewards? Success can't be instantaneous, but a big step toward it will have been taken and the goals we seek will be closer - if we enter that door.

One goal we seek is entertainment within the Disney tradition. That doesn't mean things have to be done in repetitive ways. It does mean they have to be done with appeal and sincerity.

Entertainment doesn't come through imitation, it comes from within each of us personally. We might well ask ourselves, just how much of ourselves have we put into our work? Have we too often relied on imitation to see us through? The painter who puts his years and energies into copying the techniques and color senses of great painters of the past can produce only mediocrity. His own emotions and convictions, if he has any, find no outlet. He is sterile. His painting says nothing about himself; it says only that he copies well.

It might be fitting for those of us now shouldering the responsibility for carrying on the Disney tradition, to review the words of Constantin Stanislavsky, addressed to the new generation upon which the mantle of acting would fall. "Again," he wrote, "there have appeared new people with new ideals, dreams, demands, criticisms, impatience, self-conceit. New geniuses are born and write their new laws in interdependence with the new conditions of life. All actors, without exception, must receive food according to the laws of nature, must treasure what they receive in their intellectual and emotional memory, must rework the material in their artistic imagination, according to the well known laws that are incumbent upon all, must give birth to the image and life of the human spirit, and having lived them over, incarnify them naturally."

Isn't Stanislavsky saying that a creative person, to be at his best, must be aware of and attentive to all that goes on around him or her every day? Isn't he saying that the things we see, feel, hear or read about and our interpretation of them, will measure our inspiration quotient? And doesn't that inspiration determine the degree of our enthusiasm and creativity?

Let's consider again this "sport" Thoreau writes about and the observations of Stanislavsky that "all actors must give birth to the image and life of the human spirit." One says: "Enjoy your work, master it, don't let it master you." The other charges us, as creative people, to be alert, curious, observant analytical and entertaining.

As we concern ourselves with the entertainment opportunities in our animation we should feel that it must be an expression of ourselves, not an imitation of the thinking and work of the animators of the "Golden Years." It isn't a case of trying to determine how "so and so" would do the action at hand but rather how are we, being ourselves, going to do it, keeping in mind the basics and purpose of our animation - to entertain with taste and believability.

Our hopes, our successes, our failures shape our thinking and our goals. The experiences and accomplishments of others will have a profound teaching impact on us and leave a positive impression with us. Their legacy is a very important part of our learning process. They have left a living fountain from which we can constantly gain knowledge and understanding, a fountain to which we should return again and again for inspiration but not for hard and fast rules as to why and how we must do things. As we go about being ourselves we must remember the fact that the animators of the "Golden Years" set a tradition and quality in Disney animation and that it is up to us, in our own way, to equal, yes even surpass, that which has been done.

That Walt found his "sport" in the animated film was evident from his earliest beginnings in it. Animation was fascinating - almost mysteriously so. Drawings moved around, came to life and did things. The early shorts were fun and were held together by a sequence of gags giving a continuity to a very simple story line. With the introduction of sound in 1928 sight and sound were blended together and Walt's animated cartoons made a great leap forward. In 1929 with THE SKELETON DANCE, music and the "beat" took over. With FLOWERS AND TREES in 1932 color burst forth and by 1933, with the THREE LITTLE PIGS oneness of story and personality began to show. In SNOW WHITE, story and the personality of characters in design, mannerisms and dialogue reached out dramatically to the audience while at the same time the values and perfection of "EFFECTS" in our pictures were being searched out and proven in THE OLD MILL. We are all aware of the great contributions in pictorial and emotional values "EFFECTS" have made to our pictures through the years.

We should not try to determine how much a character will or can move on the screen until we know positively who he is and how he thinks, what he is doing and why he is doing it. Scenes must suggest a mood and have a message for the audience, but we, as animators, have to know what that mood and message is and how to present it. Before we animate we "must give birth to the image and life - and having lived them over," get it on the screen!

It has been said of Buster Keaton that "he never made a conscious effort to be brilliant, but he simply did his best to help his screen character express himself."

Great actors have always "PUT" themselves, physically and emotionally, into their roles. They were the characters. The best animators have done the same. Bill Tytla was always himself and the vigor and truth that filled his own life found expression in the characters he animated. So it was with Norm Ferguson, Fred Moore, Ham Luske, Bill Roberts and the many others who followed them and made positive contributions to the art. They gave a sincerity and life, drama and humor to linear drawings, as they moved on the screen. They, the animators, were, in their own minds, deeply involved with the characters they animated and their animation and the story it told were emotional outlets and experiences for them. So our animation should be for us. It should be our "sport."

Walt Disney's enthusiasm for the creative adventure and his ability to inspire the people around him in the accomplishment of it never waned, even in those times when the financial going was tough. He was always climbing upward - new ideas, new excitement, new hope. He ascended a stairway that, throughout his life, seemed to never end. He had a "sport" within himself that never dulled.

Each of us, as our capabilities will allow, should strive to keep our creative adventure alive and boiling. If we do, that area in which our talents are nourished will keep expanding and expanding and expanding. Isn't this the best way to go?

Eric Larson