



ROBERT S. MORROW

"The Kiwi is an ideal cartoon character"

IS Walt Disney's talent burning out? Has Hollywood's pioneer of the full-length cartoon film failed to live up to the high promise of *Snow White* and the *Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi*? Not in the opinion of Robert S. Morrow, a young Glasgow draughtsman who gave up a good job with Gaumont-British Animation, the Rank cartoon film organisation, to come to New Zealand in search of fresh opportunities, and who has taken a position with the National Film Unit at Miramar since his arrival here a few weeks ago.

"Walt Disney is often described as a declining force," he told *The Listener* in an interview last week. "*Fun and Fancy Free*, for instance, received adverse reviews from nearly all the critics. But what the public doesn't generally know is that Disney has three big new films in course of production. They are *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Wind in the Willows*. Those are three absolutely first-class subjects for him, and knowing what Disney can do we expect them to be wonderful films. When he was in Britain a while ago—he was supposed to be looking for Irish leprechauns—he got the cartoon rights to a lot of top-notch British stories, which rather annoyed some of the British animators in the Rank Studio, who would have liked them for themselves.

"But Disney still has to pay his artists while they are working on these new productions. It may be necessary to animate a big film two or three times before it is right, and all that takes time, and money—hence the not very good films interspersed with cartoon sequences, which have been appearing lately. The cartoon sequences in these pictures are often sections edited out of earlier films. Thus, the opening sequence of *Fun and Fancy Free* was

SCOT WITH AN ODD JOB

New Zealand Acquires a Film Animator

one originally drawn for *Pinocchio* and then discarded, while the Beanstalk sequence was one done by John Reed, who was responsible for the animation of the 'Bold Mountain' sequence in *Fantasia*, without any idea that it was to be used as it was."

"Disney is salvaging unused scraps of old films to tide him over?"

"Yes."

"So, strictly speaking, full-length animated films don't pay?"

"They definitely do pay."

"But if he has to put out these pot-boilers while his main productions are being made, isn't he doing himself an injury?"

"I suppose so, although it's his brother Roy who should probably be blamed. He handles the business side of things. Disney himself is not a financial expert."

British Cartoon Films

"What can you tell us about cartoon-film production in England?"

"The Rank group has been going for four years now. When I was there we were working on a *Mother Nature* series, making cartoons about the cuckoo, the cat, the lion, the ostrich, and the platypus—which was my particular speciality. Some of these are completed, but they will be held until the whole series of eight or nine is ready. There is also a Gaumont-British instructional series. The one they made on Atomic Physics may have been shown here to specialist groups.

"But generally speaking, what I didn't like about the cartoon-film set-up in England was the fact that although David Hand, Disney's former studio director, had come over to reorganise British cartoon-film making for J. Arthur Rank, the result was too much like an annex of Disney. Everything was very American—even the cartoon characters we drew were like Disney's characters."

"Was there any financial connection with Disney?"

"No. Our organisation was called Gaumont-British Animation, and we were quite independent. But the staff were mainly from Disney studios. There was John Reed, who incidentally trained me in special effects, and Raye Patterson, who made his name with the character Little Mouse in *Anchors Aweigh*. You can see how very easy it was for these men to retain their American outlook."

"Are any of the British animators trying to break away from the Disney tradition?"

"Well, the answer is a sad story. Believe it or not, I was one of the oldest persons there—some stayed only six to nine months—and eventually I decided to strike off on a tangent to New Zealand."

"Are cartoon films being developed seriously on the Continent?"

"They are to a certain extent. At a recent cartoon festival in London showing films from every studio in the world, I saw a Russian film, *Song of Joy*, that was absolutely startling compared with the others. The main French studio, L'Image, which has a small staff of only five animators, put out an impressive film with a kind of surrealist treatment and in rather stark colouring, and the Czechs showed a puppet film in black and white. But I thought the Russians capped the whole thing with *Song of Joy*. Their colouring was excellent. The restraint with which they used it, amounting at times almost to a lack of colour, was especially praiseworthy.

"I noticed with some interest that several critics were hard on *Song of Joy*, because they thought it a 'pinch' on Disney. The characterisation of the heroine—a variant of the folk-tale Snow Queen—was very like Disney's Snow-white, while there was a bear, and a rabbit rather like Thumper—the one in *Bambi*.

"But that attitude was again due to lack of knowledge of the cartoon-film process. When Disney wants to make a cartoon rabbit, he has a special department to break it down into its simplest possible lines. He has to convey the impression of a rabbit with as few pencil strokes as possible. When you consider that even a little thing like an eyelash has to be drawn thousands of times in making the film, you can see why he has to get down to the bare minimum. All cartoonists are faced with this problem, and that's what I think happened with *Song of Joy*. We had the same problem in Britain, where we often had to add an extra feature so that our characters would look a little different from Disney's."

"Is it impossible to present the human figure, and human movements, successfully in cartoons?"

"Well, whenever a Disney fan brings that question up, it usually turns out that he's been to see *Snow-white*, where you had an extremely bad example of characterisation in the Prince. But there is an explanation for that, and to understand it you must understand how Disney's organisation began. He started off in a shack with only an idea, or an ideal before him, and the thing soon became unmanageable. They rented buildings and studio-space wherever they could, and were even doing their animating in places like bathrooms. Yet in spite of difficulties of that kind they made tremendous advances in technique. For the Prince drawings in *Snow-white* they filmed a person dressed up as the cartoon figure and going through the same actions as the Prince would in the animated film. That technique, as it turned out, wasn't satisfactory. They realised afterwards that a cartoon is essentially a caricature which exaggerates various aspects of a human figure, and that in motion it must be exaggerated even more. Thus if you want to animate a boy throwing a ball you have to exaggerate his arm to three times its actual length to show the swing of the throw and get an effect which looks natural to the audience. The essence of film cartoon work is that you are simply animating a caricature."

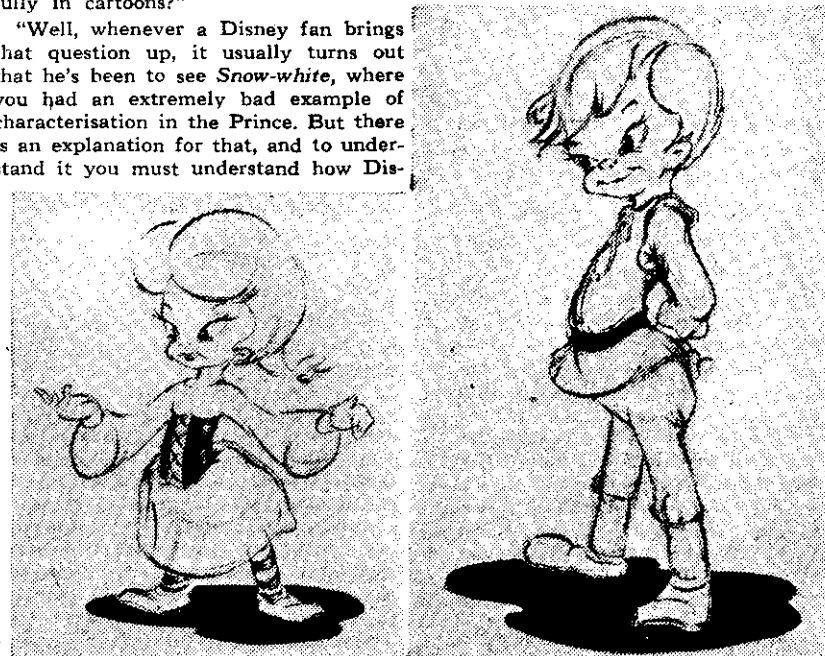
"Do you think there is any future in the puppet film?"

"Well, the French have been experimenting with these, but there is nothing being done on a big scale yet, and there are limits to what can be done. Production difficulties are greater, because with the puppet film you are getting back almost to real-life action, which imposes greater limitations than animation, where the sky's the limit to what you can do."

"What of the American tendency to make cartoons of pulp fiction characters like Superman?"

"There seem to be two or three main types of American cartoon. M.G.M. cartoons specialise in producing one gag after another in rapid succession so that the audience is kept roaring with laughter all through the film. Disney tries

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HANSEL AND GRETEL, as the film animator sees them—two sketches made for *The Listener* by Robert Morrow