

DISNEY AND DON BLUTH GO HEAD-TO-HEAD

Animation's major studios keep the magic alive

Animation: the liberator of the imagination; a world in which normal rules don't apply. Anything can happen, and just about everything does. Personalities can loom so large that characters take on more life than a real living actor ever could. Think of Jaq and Gus, Cinderella's two mice friends, who are faced with the monumental task of carrying a key twice their size up thousands of steps to Cinderella so that she can try on that glass slipper. All their energy, every single mite of it, is given to the job.

Think of the seven dwarfs as they race from their diamond mine to try and save Snow from the clutches of the Wicked Queen. Such moments are as dramatically compelling as anything seen in live-action films. And as for humor, what can be more unashamedly anarchic than a Warner Bros. short?

Alas, all that is in the past. They just don't make 'em like they used to. Or, more correctly, they just don't make 'em at all.

Or do they? Animation may never again reach the dizzy heights of its 1940s heyday, but there's an inkling of a renaissance in the realm of feature animation, particularly in the form of renewed commitment to the medium from the company that had originally

been the artform's biggest player. Which, surprising as it may seem, is quite a turnaround. At the beginning of the decade, Disney animation aficionados were justifiably looking down in the mouth as the company created fewer animated films that were not as good to boot. The artform that made Disney's name was a mere reflection of its former self. 1985's *The Black Cauldron*, made at a cost of \$30 million, was the first animation film of Disney's ever to flop at the box office.

But it wasn't as though the rest of Disney's output was faring any better. Far from being the successful technical innovator of its early years, Walt Disney Productions was becoming a little more than a merchant of nostalgia. It was making more from its re-releases than from anything new. The company's attempts to reach above the children's market and compete with such trendsetting films as *Star Wars* and *E.T.* produced nothing but failure. Mickey and Minnie had to fight off takeover after

takeover. But then the fairy godmother arrived, in the form of Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg, the production wizards who were behind such megahits as *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Flashdance*. With the summary creation of Touchstone Pictures, an umbrella under which Disney could successfully enter the adult market, a box-office bonanza quickly ensued, with such films as *Ruthless People*, *Three Men and a Cradle* and *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

Success has also come from the home video market. Released in stores just two months ago, *Bambi*, Disney's 1942 classic, has already sold \$10.5 million cassettes at the \$26.99 asking price. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* has sold eight million at \$22.99 since its Oct. 12 release.

Much of the money is being poured back into animation. When Eisner and Katzenberg arrived at Disney, they saw the economic importance of putting the animation division in order. The incredible cost of animated features had to be brought down to a more reasonable \$10 million per film, and not only that, they wanted an animated film every year, not every three.

They may not have

got the budgeting right yet — *Little Mermaid* cost an estimated \$20 million — but the schedule is on track. Arriving next year is *The Rescuers Down Under* (a sequel to the 1977 film), with *Beauty and the Beast*, *An Arabian Night* and *Swan Lake* to follow. A second *Roger Rabbit* short

sleeping bags and raincoats. And that's not all.

In fact, there are two campaigns, one for the kiddies, one for the adults. Clothing items for the grown-ups include Andy Warhol-style multiple image T-shirts. The poster for adults, currently placed in such magazines

director, walked out of the studio on September 13, 1979, his 41st birthday, and took a good deal of the department with him. The reason? Bluth and his deserters felt that classical animation had lost its way with the company. Bluth still charges that nothing was being done without the question being asked, "What would Walt have done?"

"Trying to guess for a dead man wasn't productive," Bluth said in a recent interview for the *Los Angeles Times*. So he left with the dream of setting up a rival studio where he and his compatriots could do things their way.

Since then, Bluth has gone bankrupt (twice) and has seen two of his productions halted in midstream. But now, thanks to the aid of financier Morris Sullivan, who moved the company to Dublin, Ireland, to take advantage of lower labor costs, and the executive help of Steven Spielberg and Amblin Entertainment, their dreams have come true. They are now seen as major pretenders to the Disney throne.

Spielberg executive produced both of Bluth's most successful films: *An American Tail* in 1986, and last year's dinosaur romp *The Land Before Time*. The latter film went head to head with Disney's *Oliver and Co.* and was going buck for buck until the Disney film pulled away at the last, beating Bluth by \$5 million. Since its release on home video, *The Land Before Time* has sold seven million copies.

This year, for fear of becoming the animation wing of Amblin, Sullivan Bluth Studios Ireland Ltd., as they now call themselves, are going into the fray alone. *All Dogs Go to Heaven* is their fourth feature, made almost entirely at their studio in Dublin. They may not have Disney's vast resources, but Bluth claims that making the film abroad saved them



an estimated \$7 million.

So, as with Disney, the marketing of the film will be crucial. *All Dogs* will be competing with *Mermaid* at the burger bars, with figurines being given away with every Kid's Meal at Wendy's. The closing credit ballad "Love Survives," sung by Irene Cara and Freddie Jackson, is currently in release, and there will be pet food offers at participating supermarkets.

It's something the media like to play up, but there is little real animosity between the Disney and Bluth companies: they figure that if both products are good, then both studios will benefit. But there is a feeling, understandably, that reputations are at stake. Disney, with its past record, cannot be seen to fail. And Bluth Studios, while currently content with the runner-up position, have made it abundantly clear in a short period of time that their former employers are not the only company that can play the animation game.

With such competition, quality and quantity are key to each studio game plan. And that, for animation fans of all ages the world over, can only be a good thing.

—Richard Smith

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (8)	\$134.8
Bambi (7)	\$100.2
Cinderella (6)	\$92.1
The Lady and the Tramp (5)	\$87.6
101 Dalmatians (4)	\$84.1
The Jungle Book (3)	\$84.0

In millions of dollars as of summer 1989. Figures in parentheses indicate number of times released. Source: The Hollywood Reporter

will show with next summer's *Dick Tracy* film, and a prequel to *Roger Rabbit* itself is in the pipeline.

It is clear that Katzenberg is well aware of the potential benefits.

"For this company, animation has a value that is way beyond the specific profits that you measure for a film itself," Katzenberg said when he took over as chairman. "We create new characters, and these characters will come to life in our theme parks and in our merchandising, so they have a longevity and a value to many other aspects of this corporation that are unique."

He's not kidding either. The marketing campaign for *The Little Mermaid*, Disney's 28th full-length animated feature, is a production in itself. McDonald's restaurants are giving away *Little Mermaid* bath toys with every Happy Meal, or Christmas tree ornaments with a \$5 gift certificate. Macy's Department store and other Disney outlets will be chock-ful of dolls, music boxes, stationery, even

as Rolling Stone, is of the mermaid silhouette by the light of the moon underneath the inscription, "Somewhere under the sea and beyond your imagination is an adventure in fantasy." And why shouldn't adults be drawn to animation? There is a big nostalgia market out there: If Disney can produce cartoons as good as the classics remembered from childhood, maybe the adults will come. Millions were drawn to last year's tremendously successful *Roger Rabbit* enterprise, which was by no means kiddie fare. The studio may be set to cash in on a bigger audience than ever.

There's no question that animation is on the up and up at Disney. Last year's *Oliver and Co.* broke records by taking \$53 million, the most ever for an animated film on its initial release. The company can afford to back their old specialty to the hilt. They're doing it for the money and for the tradition. And to keep ahead of the competition.

Despite the industry's enthusiasm, Charles Solomon, author of "Enchanted Drawings," a history of the art, is skeptical: "It seems to me the same thing was said last year with the release of *Oliver and Co.* and *The Land Before Time.*"

While Solomon is critical of the Bluth Studio's storytelling abilities, he praises the developments at Disney. "What excites me is that the new, young animators, who have been in the shadows of the (so-called) Nine Old Men who made the Disney classics, are now trying to do their own thing," he said. "They're beginning to emerge as artists, developing their own styles and approaches. They're not only influenced by Disney, but by Tex Avery, Chuck Jones and other Warner Bros. and MGM animators."

—Associated Press

Golden Age or flash in the pan?

Animation may be thriving, but the upsurge isn't reflected at the Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Guild. Business agent Steve Hulett reports that it has 750 members, compared to 2,800 a decade ago.

"Then we were hit by runaway production," he said. "Hanna-Barbera moved its ink-and-paint department and some animation abroad, and other studios followed."

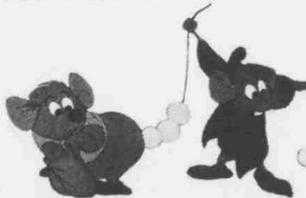
Production first moved to Japan, then to South Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere as countries become more expensive. Some inking and painting of *The Little Mermaid* was done in China. *All Dogs Go to Heaven* was made almost entirely in Ireland.

Despite the flight of jobs, Hulett still sees hope. "More (animated) pictures in the marketplace brings

more production into the marketplace," he said. "I like to think that good wages and good animation can go hand-in-hand despite producers' attempts to seek cheaper work

and *The Little Mermaid*, and is expected to do more in the future.

"Computers may eliminate the entire function of ink and paint in the future," said one Disney anima-



tor. "But the job of animation hasn't changed; it still has to be done the same way: by hand, 24 frames a second. So far no computer has been able to produce an animated character."

A new cost-saving element is computerization. Disney used computers for portions of *Oliver and Co.*



'It's better down where it's wetter — take it from me'

RICHARD SMITH
film

So, what's the verdict? Actually, it's hardly a competition. In many ways, Disney's *The Little Mermaid* is the funniest, most charming, most captivating film of the year, and is without doubt the best animation feature from the studio in decades. Like their great-est films, *Mermaid* is a good story well told. And it's their first fairy tale in 30 years (*Sleeping Beauty* was the last in 1959). In this respect, the studio has returned to its roots.

But that's only the half of it. Rather than take the past as its cue, the film has its senses in the here and now. The script has taken its inspiration from the seven featured songs of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken (the team behind *Little Shop of Horrors*). It may have all happened a long, long time ago, but *Mermaid* has a hip sensibility that is thoroughly modern.

It's based, loosely as ever, on Hans Christian Andersen's tale of a mermaid, Ariel, who is fascinated by all things human. Her father, Triton, king of the seaworld, thinks this to be an unhealthy fixation, and puts his confidante Sebastian (a crab with a tremendous gift for calypso) to the task of showing the young Ariel the error of her ways. The little crustacean does his best by delivering the showstopping song "Under the Sea" — "the seaweed is always greener in somebody else's lake," he bops. "Darlin' it's better down where it's wetter, take it from me." But it's not enough: Ariel has already fallen in love with the human Prince Eric.

Understandably, when Triton gets wind of this, he's furious and takes out his considerable wrath on the mermaid. Which is where the bad guys come in. Ursula, a hybrid octopus sea witch, has long planned to take over Triton's role, and she sees just the opportunity she needs in Ariel's situation. Employing her beloved one-eyed eels Flotsam and Jetsam to reel in the downcast mermaid, Ursula forces Ariel into signing a deal that will rob her of her beautiful voice in exchange for three days with legs: three days in which she must receive from Eric the kiss of true love to stay human, or else return to the evil Ursula's clutches. And since it was Ariel's voice that made the prince fall in love with her in the first place, it's not going to be an easy task.

It's a delicious dilemma, and one that the Disney craftsmen have milked for all it's worth. They have created a marvellous array of personalities to propel the enchanting narrative along its merry way. It's a

beautifully tight script: every cookie character has an important role to play. From Scuttle, the seagull with a skewed perspective on the human world (he encourages Ariel to comb her hair with a fork), to Louis, the poisson-loving chef, they all have their parts in the musical comedy-drama.

There are echoes from Disney's illustrious archives, but echoes are all they are. Sebastian, the film's undeniable scene-stealer, takes the role of a Caribbean Jiminy Cricket. But the resemblance is minimal: the

The Little Mermaid

with the voices of Jodi Benson, Buddy Hackett, Samuel E. Wright
directed by John Musker and Ron Clements

South Square
493-3502

All Dogs Go to Heaven

with the voices of Burt Reynolds, Dom DeLuise, Loni Anderson

directed by Don Bluth
Plaza, Willowdale
967-4737, 477-4681

●● 1/2

crab's as sharp as a razor (and given his artistic egoism, probably wouldn't be seen dead singing "When You Wish Upon a Star"). Ursula is a villainess in the classic Disney tradition, right up there with the Wicked Queen and Cruella de Ville. But she's a thoroughly original, and, modeled as she is on the late, great Divine, a thoroughly modern creation. Even Ariel looks more contemporary than previous Disney heroines.

No, *The Little Mermaid* has a flavor quite different from the Disney of the past. This ain't no cutesy, sentimental stuff strictly for the kids — *The Little Mermaid* jams. Disney has never been so hot. Watch especially for the sequence in which the entire amphibian world unites in the task of getting Ariel and Eric to kiss: it's the funniest single scene of the year. Go see *The Little Mermaid*. Twice.

All Dogs Go to Heaven, meanwhile, has been described by one critic as "very much like going to hell." Now this is wordplay, and particularly vicious wordplay at that. But when all is said and done, it's true that *All Dogs* just hasn't got it. Featuring the "voice talents" of Burt Reynolds and Dom DeLuise, it's a classic case of the voices doing all the characterizing, leaving the animation to look quite dull and uninspired. Indeed, the characters seem oddly out of place in relation to their background: the two never mesh. *All Dogs* doesn't have the lush, naturalistic look of the traditional Disney film, but neither has it successfully developed its own more graphic style. And as for Burt and Dom, it might as well be a cartoon *Cannonball Run*.

The story hasn't been crafted with much care. It concerns a sly German Shepherd who steals time from heaven in order to return to his larcenous life on earth and discover who murdered him and why. He has a sidekick, by the name of Itchy, to aid him in his task, which gets complicated by a horrendously cute little orphan girl, Anne-Marie.

As with *Mermaid*, *All Dogs* is a musical, but, unlike Disney's, the songs don't proceed naturally from the narrative. In *All Dogs*, everything comes to a halt while someone croons an unmemorable ditty. In a notably unnecessary moment, Charlie sings "The More You Give, the More You're Gonna Get" to instruct some young pups in sharing their pizza. He probably just stole it — he's that kind of "loveable" character.

There are flashes of inspiration. A cajun crocodile by name of King Gator emerges at one point, not to gobble our heroes as expected, but to lead Charlie off into song. It's a bizarre twist that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Yellow Submarine*. But the film has pretty much lost it by this stage.

Of course, Anne-Marie finally gets a home and manages to get Charlie to make something of a turnaround, but it's never clear where *All Dogs*' moral divide is. Since all dogs go to heaven, even Carface, the bulldog villain of the piece, ends up there at the close. Is this something to teach the kids?

In an early scene, during Charlie's brief visit to heaven, the Heavenly Whipper escorts the mutt past dozens of clocks hanging in the air: one is a Mickey Mouse wristwatch. Homage, or derision from the former Disney employees? Either way, catching a glimpse of the famous rodent only serves to emphasize that *All Dogs* is second-rate entertainment.

Uncle Walt'd be chuffed.