

'Toons Forever

Wild Side says cartoons aren't just for kids anymore

By RANDY BASINGER

Staff Writer

The Omni folks told me they wanted something on cartoons...animation...drawings. I said to myself — self, this is where you belong. A world of imagination where a coyote can have an anvil dropped on his head from a cliff-edge, be splatted pancake flat and crawl off, only to reappear in the next scene in tip-top shape with a new set of ACME gadgets.

These were the sculptors of my childhood mind. Bugs Bunny, Daffy, Goofy, Micky, Donald — they are all my mentors. They made it possible for me to crush people like watermelons without really hurting them, because violence doesn't hurt in cartoons or in columns. GET THE PICTURE?

If you aren't younger than six, at least inside your mind, please don't read any further. This stuff will warp your brain into moldy jello. Here goes...

Let's return to those wonderful days of yesteryear — the '70s. We're all tiny tots, and it's Saturday morning, the only day you want to get out of bed at 6:30 a.m. and watch TV. (Let's face it, as kids we were pretty stupid. I would kill to get back the sleep I gave up. Nahh, then my brain wouldn't be as enlightened as it is.)

Let's look at the T.V. schedule (if we could read):

7 a.m. — Those Seals and Kroft goofballs gave us cartoons with people. Yeah, these are the guys who created the sublime idea of putting Ruth Buzby and Jim Nabors on a spaceship together to wreak havoc on the universe. Made me laugh as a kid and I'm not ashamed to say it — I LIKED IT. In addition, there was *Dr. Shrinker*, *Shazam*, *Wonder Bug* and *The Space Nuts* (the show that put Gilligan in space because he pushed launch when his "Skipper" said lunch).

8 a.m. — It's time for *Mighty Mouse* (not the new beefed-up one) or *Underdog*, depending on whether or not you have cable. *Mighty Mouse* won out at my house since we didn't. This mild-mannered supermouse could pick up an elephant with his pinky finger. But *Underdog* was my favorite, when we could get the show, because I could relate to him. Here you have an underdog super-hero with a great logo: "Have no fear, Underdog is here." As kids we changed it to "Have no fear, Underwear is here." Snicker, snicker.

9 a.m. — The Hanna-Barbera hour. Hong Kong Phooey and his cheshire-cat smile, Snagglepuss, Huckleberry Hound, Yogi Bear and Boo Boo. These are the only guys in the cartoon business who haven't sold out to 'toon babies. Phooey made me

laugh the hardest, and I begged my mom for days to let me take karate lessons. Hi-yah!

10 a.m. — Now the strangeness hour begins. For a while this time-slot had *Looney Toons*, but someone thought this was sophisticated humor and moved it to 11 a.m. I still don't see anything sophisticated in Daffy getting his bill blown backwards, but I'm not a Hollywood exec. So Bugs and Tweety moved, and in came the replacements: the Shmoo, or Plastic Man and his bouncing baby boy. What about *Godzilla* and *Godzuki*? These were short-lived, but exciting and fun-filled cartoons. I spent many a morning munching Captain Crunch while *Godzilla* fried bad guys.

11 a.m. — *Looney Times* currently holds this spot, but another Hanna-Barbera bigwig held it when I was a tyke — *Scooby Doo*. Who could ever forget Shaggy, the scared hippy, who had to have done whole boxes of psychedelic Scooby Snacks before filming these little gems?

"Hey Scoob, pass the snacks, man. It's that Abominable radioactive ghost of the logger's mill come to eat us and kill us and maim us."

"Rall right, Raggy. Rears ra rox."

They were perpetually stoned on Scooby Snacks, and that was the reason they lasted so long. They even did a smash-up job when they moved to celebrity-filled shows with the likes

of the Harlem Globetrotters and the Addams Family. Spooky.

All this, together with nerd Thelma, sorority babe Daphne and jock/hunk Freddy. Let's not forget this was the first show to do the baby 'toon thing — *Scrappy Doo*. And there was *Scooby Dumb*. And the list goes on and on.

Noon. This is when Dad comes in to make me go outside so he could watch *Cowboy Theater*. On rainy days I would watch too, but these guys fought about as well as professional rasslers and didn't talk junk about each other or pick up chairs and smash them over people's heads. Kinda boring.

I miss those days, but they went quickly once the Smurfs came on the scene. Let's face it folks, the Smurfs stunk even when they did teach us some valuable lessons (none as valuable as those taught by *Schoolhouse Rock*). Personally, I would've liked to have seen Gargamel chomp some Smurf head after the first season.

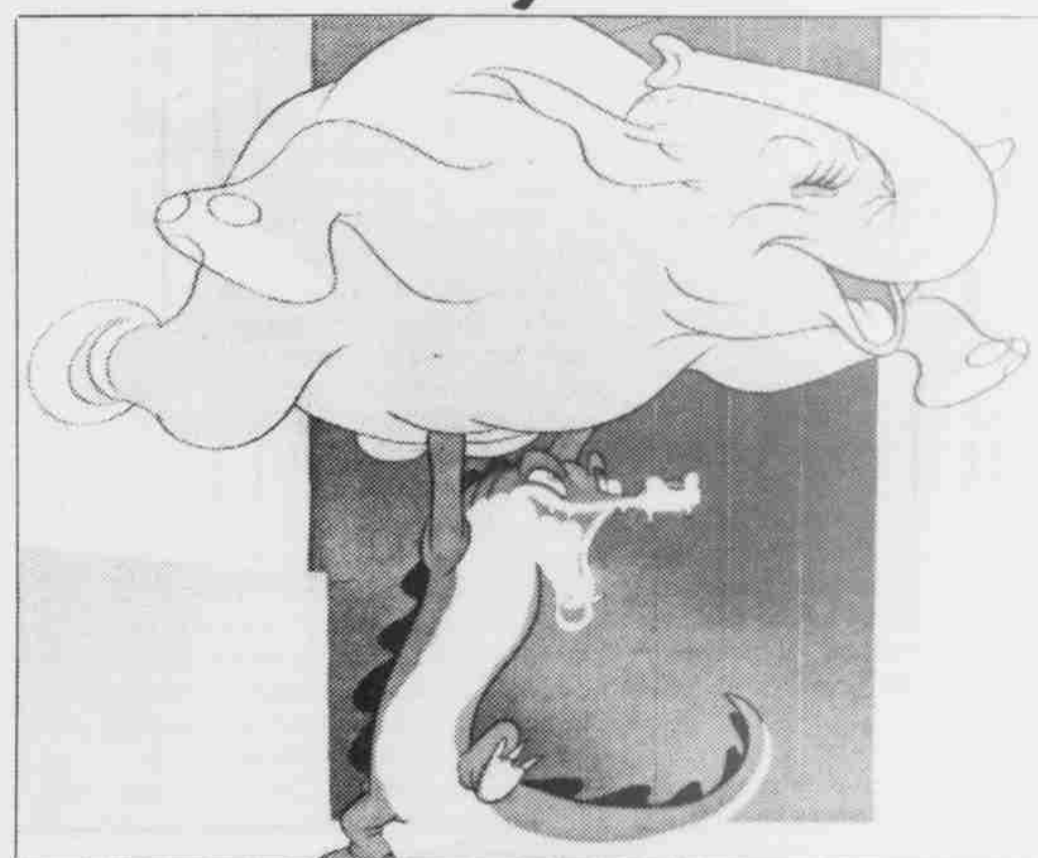
Now (returning to the present) everyone tells me that cartoons are on the comeback trail. Afternoons have heated up with *Tailspins*, *Duck Tales* and *Chip 'n Dale's Rescue Rangers*. Disney is rolling over in money in his grave. They even have Nintendo games for *Duck Tales* and *Chip 'n Dale*. Commercial sellout or not — you make the call.

The kids are happy after school, but they don't know what they're missing. Back in my pre-pubescent years, we had great shows on afterschool TV (when they didn't put on one of those stupid Afterschool specials that my mother always made me watch so I wouldn't turn into a drug fiend). We had *Star Blazers* and *Battle of the Planets*, two of my favorite shows. *Star Blazers* was a series of shows about a space battleship trying to save earth in only 365 days. It went down to the wire, but in the end the battleship's Wave Motion gun kicked hiney. And who could ever forget *G-Force of Planets* fame?

I will have to admit that kids of the late '80s had a good afternoon lineup. *G.I. Joe* and *The Transformers* were nothing short of excellent in their prime, but then they went into new generations and fell into the abyss. There is no justice.

Animation on the big-screen is still alive and Disney is still in sole possession of the top. Three reasons: *Fantasia*, *Snow White* and *Bambi*. More recently *The Little Mermaid*. 'Nuff said.

However, Spielberg has been jumping into the scene with *An American Tail* and *The Land Before Time*. Look out Disney, the E.T. man wants a shot at the little kids' hearts through animation, too. I mean, he is the one who got this Tiny Toons thing off the ground.



A prancing pachyderm and a graceful 'gator strut their stuff in 'Fantasia'

Cartoons are our life, our soul, our spirit as kids. May they never die.

So, until they run out of ink in their pens and the boulders stop drop-

ping on coyotes, you'll find me glued to the TV in the prime of my youth.

Twenty-one and a cartoon fan for life.

Director fathers coyote

Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist

by Chuck Jones

published by AvonBooks

\$12.95

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From 1933 to 1963, Chuck Jones either created or had a hand in creating some of the best-loved characters in America: the Warner Brothers stable of animated actors.

Actors indeed. As Jones admits in his vivid autobiography, *Chuck Amuck*, Bugs Bunny and friends had lives of their own. In his own words:

We (Bugs and I) had a happy life together, but, as the six-year-old boy protested when I was introduced to him as the man who draws Bugs Bunny, "He does not! He draws pictures of Bugs Bunny."

He was absolutely right, and I can think of no happier career than as a man who drew pictures of such a fabulous character.

Gloriously, *Chuck Amuck* is just as lively as the Road Runner/Coyote shorts Jones began directing in 1949. He writes candidly and amusingly about their creation, as well as the early days of the Warner Bros. studios and his colleagues within them. Dry "I was born in..." facts are left to the

appendix; Jones just wants to tell some very funny stories.

Such as the origin of Daffy Duck's voice. Jones, veteran director Tex Avery and legendary voice artist Mel Blanc modeled Daffy after their similarly avaricious producer Leon Schlesinger. Then they realized Schlesinger would, of course, have to see and hear the short.

In order to save ourselves the embarrassment of being fired, all of us were careful to write out our resignations before that fateful day.... Then the lights went on and Leon leaped to his feet, glared around: "Jeethus Christh, that's a funny voithe! Where'd you get that voithe?"

Jones spends a fair portion of the book eloquently slamming his old animation producers, reserving special attention for Schlesinger and his replacement, Eddie Selzer who, "like the people in charge of network television today, hated and feared anything he had never seen before." According to Jones, their shortsightedness provided excellent creative motivation. Jones reserves special commentary for Selzer, who allegedly told Jones there was nothing amusing about a French-speaking skunk (Pepé Le Pew) in the Oscar-winning "For Scent-imental Reasons," (1949) or bullfighting gags ("Bully for Bugs," 1953).

Thankfully, there's more to *Chuck Amuck* than boss-bashing. Jones spends a lot more time emphasizing how critical his colleagues' work was to the success of the Warner shorts. Most people have never heard of Mike Maltese or Maurice Noble before, but

Motorcycle punks meet psychic children

By CHIP SUDDERTH

Staff Writer

You won't find any charming, wide-eyed, lovable fuzzy animals in the latest animated film to hit the Triangle area. The apocalyptic science-fiction tale *Akira*, the first Japanese animated feature to receive any substantial exposure on American silver screens, arrives at the Rialto next week. *Akira* offers a rare opportunity for film and animation lovers to see another culture's approach to the medium.

"It's the most expensive animated film Japan ever made," said Rick McGee, manager of the Foundation's Edge bookstore in Raleigh. "It's won several awards around the world."

McGee said that of all the people he'd talked to who had already seen *Akira*, he hadn't heard a single negative evaluation. "I've heard ranging from 'pretty good' to the best animated film they'd ever seen," he said.

McGee, who saw the film in Washington, D.C. earlier this year, called it "certainly one of the best translated to English."

If you've ever seen *Star Blazers*, *Battle of the Planets*, or *Robotech*, then you've seen Japanese television animation. Like those weekday-afternoon fantasies, *Akira* has a futuristic design and pays meticulous attention

to detail.

Of course, the feature film *Akira* had a larger budget and could therefore add greater emphasis to the smoothness and color range of the animation.

More than 300 different colors were used in the animation cels, contributing to the rich shading and greater depth of the primary characters. Vehicle headlights leave an afterglow as they rush past, and motorcycles lean into turns as though gravity really is dragging them down. While the film is slightly Westernized, the Japanese style is evident in the exaggerated facial expressions, and slightly oversized eyes further display the characters' emotions.

"It's gorgeous," said Kevin Maroney, assistant manager of Chapel Hill's Second Foundation Bookstore, another person who saw *Akira* in Washington. "The only thing that compares to it is *Fantasia*. There are scenes... that are incredibly conceived and impeccably executed."

Violence is also more graphic than in American animation. "The Japanese don't shy away from it," said McGee. "It's a matter of cultural perspective. There's no way I'd want a kid to see it."

Based on the manga, or graphic novels, of Katsuhiro Otomo, *Akira* is set in the middle of the 21st century,

after World War III. The city of Neo-Tokyo has been built around Tokyo's remains. When a gang of juvenile delinquents takes a joy-ride into the old city, they encounter a strange child with psychic powers who gravely injures one of their number, named Tetsuo. The gang leader, Kaneda, finds himself caught between the mysterious Colonel who controls several of these psychic children and the anti-government rebels who want to liberate them.

Tetsuo, meanwhile, begins to develop destructive powers that dwarf those of the children. He challenges the Colonel and the rebels, but learns that someone or something threatens his designs for control of Neo-Tokyo: *Akira*.

According to McGee, the redubbing of dialogue over the original Japanese went smoothly. But the casting of the Colonel's voice annoyed him a bit. "It's the same guy who does the 'McGruff the Crime Dog' commercials. I kept expecting the Colonel to say, 'Tetsuo's gonna take a bite outta' Neo-Tokyo.'"

Maroney said: "The movie isn't perfect. It doesn't develop any of its themes as well as it wants to." He added that memorable characters and "a good, solid story" more than made up for it, however.

John Munson, co-owner and man-



Japanese comic book anti-hero, Kaneda, with a really big gun

ager of the Rialto, said that a lot of animation and comic-book aficionados had requested *Akira*. "The phone's been really ringing," Munson said. "It's been out for a while now. In the cities where it has played it has done very well."

"We've got something a lot of people want to see."

Akira will open at the Rialto Theatre, 1620 Glenwood Avenue, in Raleigh on Nov. 19. Show times are at 9 p.m. from Monday, Nov. 19 to Thursday, Nov. 22, and at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. from Friday, Nov. 23 to Thursday, Nov. 29. Weekend matinees are at 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. For more information call (919) 856-8683.