

# SPOT LIGHT... ON

by Charlotte Hussey

## Eunice Macaulay and John Weldon



Celebrating their Academy Award triumph NFB animators John Weldon and Eunice Macaulay show off their pair of Oscars, fondly referred to as Salt and Pepper photo: John Goddard

Even in conversation, Oscar-award-winning National Film Board animators John Weldon and Eunice Macaulay work as a team. Criss-crossing back and forth in their shared explana-

tion of why their seven-minute comedy **Special Delivery** won in the best animated short category at the 1979 Academy Awards, pausing for one another to add the appropriate auto-

biographical nuance or to pick up the train of thought, both possess what it takes to be successful animators: a fine sense of timing that accompanies their differing and yet compatible

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senses of humor.

Eunice's humor is laconic and matter of fact in tone. "If everything goes right with a film, nobody notices me," is typical of her understated style. Speaking quietly and with a slight British accent, she is a shortish woman whose curly gray-brown hair softens her aquiline features and encircles her open and often bemused face. Her whole air is one of a quiet strength and that of a person who talks little about herself.

When asked "What are your most important assets as filmmakers," Eunice's immediate response was, "Everything John does is humorous and I hope it always will be. People need to be entertained." This was said, not in a self-effacing manner, but in one that showed her enthusiasm for and genuine interest in her colleague. Throughout the interview, Eunice would often respond to questions in terms of John Weldon, giving information about him or questioning him in such a way that he would start talking himself, all of which suggests that she has a genius for catalyzing others and facilitating the use of their gifts and capacities in the group efforts necessary to produce animated films.

When that roguish twinkle appears in his eyes, John Weldon is about to start on one of his many humorous anecdotes such as when, a few weeks ago, he fell asleep on the air during a CBC radio interview just after having received the Oscar. He goes on loquaciously to add that he plans to keep Oscar, whose build is impressive, hidden under his bed to be used on any burglar that might try to break into his home. Dressed casually in a plaid sports shirt slightly ruffled at the waist,

John has medium length, reddish brown hair that merges into his somewhat uneven beard of the same color. Puckish, slightly cynical, witty and quick, he has the ability to make people feel immediately at ease through his sense of humor. A humor which, when Eunice was asked to describe it, was hesitatingly defined by her as "intelligent." John fielded the question himself by way of a quick story about how the NFB recently tried to describe each of its animator's sense of humor by saving so-and-so's is "sweet," somebody else's is "goofy," and another's is "macabre," so that when a certain flavor is needed, it can be ordered up like Laura Secord ice cream. One is left, understandably, with the impression that John would prefer that the range of his humor not be reduced to the width of a single adjective.

Working as a team on *Special Delivery*, Weldon and Macaulay revel in the fact that they are both iconoclasts who share one and the same secret to success: neither formally studied art before becoming an animator. John says, "I attribute my success to never having been to art school and never having learned to draw." Thirty-three-year-old Montrealer Weldon took a degree in psychology from McGill and then went on to attend MacDonald College for teacher training. He spent one year as an actuarial trainee in the insurance business and then in 1969 quit to write and draw a comic book entitled "Pipkin Papers," a venture lasting only one issue. "I had been interested in still cartoons, and after the comic book I tried a small animated film. Then I went down to the Film Board to see if I could get

something, and they were hiring inkers and I got a job as a free-lancer." John moved from a free-lance to full-time member of the NFB's animation department where he has worked in various capacities on over 20 films. In 1977 his film *Spinolio* won an Etrog at the Canadian Film Awards for the best animation; and the Oscar winning *Special Delivery* was awarded first prize this year at the Zagreb International Animation Festival in Yugoslavia, a festival John loves because "the whole country is involved" and "animated shorts there are like hockey is here" — the national obsession.

John has just completed *The Log Driver's Waltz* for the NFB's Canadian Vignettes program. It is based on a folk song sung by the McGarrigle sisters. Liking the challenge of "something different each time," he is presently "doing a half-hour TV film with Robert Awad that has live action and animated segments."

NFB animation supervisor Macaulay has worn many hats; she served four years in the British navy and worked as both an analytical chemist and radio technician. She became an animator when she landed a job in 1947 at Gaumont British Animation "just by chance." When GBA closed, she worked as an embroidery designer and as an electrical design draftsman, and free-lanced in collaboration with her animator husband in the fields of film and TV, exhibition design, and visual aids. In 1961 they moved to New York and then in 1963 to Canada where for the next six years she brought up their two children and did occasional film work. "I worked as an animation supervisor for Potterton Productions, starting in 1969 in Montreal," adds Eunice who moved to the NFB in 1973 where she has participated in every animation production that the Board has done since that time. Here the fifty-five-year-old animator works on color designs and production, supervises the tracers and painters, does backgrounds and checks every frame for final approval.

With the Oscar winning *Special Delivery*, "each frame had to be drawn" and this involved some 5,000 individual drawings. John and Eunice worked with a story line that sprang from what John claims was a "subconscious association" that he made between his own unshoveled sidewalk and that of his parent's which he had neglected to shovel when he was 17. Staring at his own front steps buried under weeks of drifting snow, he began to daydream and remembered that his family had received a stern letter from the Post



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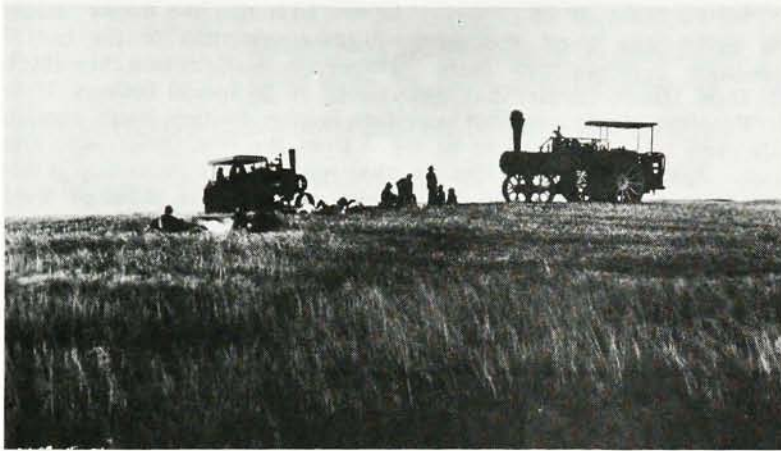
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Office warning them of all the terrible things that could happen if they didn't shovel off their sidewalk. "I began telling Eunice about this, thinking about what could happen, and she started adding more horrible twists." Originally they thought they had a short story on their hands but soon realized that it was growing into a film idea, and so they "took it down to the program committee." "And," adds Eunice, "they received it with great delight."

The story line tells how a gentle homeowner is asked by his wife — as she leaves for her evening karate class — to shovel off the sidewalk. He goes out himself and then returns to find the body of a mailman who has broken his neck on the icy front steps. There are many surprising developments in the film's short 7-minutes as the panicked homeowner struggles to conceal the body of the defunct mailman who was, unbeknownst to him, his wife's lover.

Once they had the plot, "it didn't evolve that much during the year it took to produce the film, but what did evolve was "the technical conception" from a plan to "do cut-outs and animation" to animation with hand-drawn backgrounds. This resulted in pastel gray backgrounds that are as fluid as the characters, allowing the audience to rapidly move from inside houses and structures to outside spaces and back again with hardly a break. Flipping through sheets of paper, each containing a carefully drawn cell, John made a blue figure run around a corner to demonstrate how such fluidity was achieved with the drawings themselves and not by changing camera angles.

While in Los Angeles for the Academy Awards, the two filmmakers had a chance to visit the Disney Studios. Both chuckled at the ironic name of Disney's animation head, Donald Duckwald, who treated the two Oscar winners like royalty spending the whole day showing them around the clinically antiseptic studios where "each room looks alike." They "didn't see any people around" and, as Eunice observed, there was "one pencil laid at right angles to each desk." John added, "I wish somebody would clean up my office like that!" Everything on the Disney walls "is framed" in contrast to an NFB bulletin board on a wall directly behind John and Eunice that is bursting with a rich clutter of clipped cartoons, notices and multi-colored film announcements.

Many of the Disney animators that John and Eunice talked with "wondered why they couldn't do animated shorts" such as **Special Delivery** but instead

are confined to doing longer films that involve large group efforts. Individuals have little to say about the film's direction. John said that "It looks like the 27-minute, animated film for television will overwhelm the shorter cartoon, and this is sad. It takes animation beyond the range of just using a few individuals, where it is a really personal thing, and forces you to use 20 to 30 people." This is too bad for in such films there is a "loss of the individual spark" that was possible on a 1-3 person film such as **Special Delivery**.

When asked why they thought **Special Delivery** beat out two longer animated films for the Oscar, Eunice replied, "People were looking for a laugh this year. People still like to be entertained. Apart from the film's merits as a hand-drawn film, it did entertain people." Both feel that with the state of affairs at present in the world, people desperately need to laugh and not take themselves so seriously.

John continued, "We were asked a lot of serious questions in Zagreb about whether the film had a message... What we did was to make messages up after the film was done."

If anyone is to find a message in their film, it might be a postman. But John and Eunice have not as yet arranged a special screening of **Special Delivery** for mailmen. John, a past recipient of severe communiques from the Post Office, says that "I keep waiting for a nasty letter from them accusing us of maligning mailmen." Eunice adds that she thinks "mailmen will take exception to the fact that mailmen have affairs with their clients," as they do in **Special Delivery**. If John does receive another harsh communiqué from the Post Office, who knows what subconscious association it might evoke or what the team of Weldon and Macaulay would come up with then? Perhaps yet another pair of Oscars to add to their present pair that are fondly called Salt and Pepper? □

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