

toronto

becoming animated

by Jaan Pill



Key animator in the Calgary Ale commercials was Manolo Corvera: MS Art



Shooting animation at MS Services

According to Manolo Corvera, who runs MS Art Services in Toronto, there are eight to 15 animators working full time in television commercials and the like in Canada, at around \$500 a week.

In Toronto, there is little in the way of animated industrial films of the kind which keep animators busy for extended periods in, say, London or Los Angeles. In Canada that area is pre-empted by the National Film Board.

Extended animation projects such as Al Guest's *Rocket Robin Hood* have not occurred for many years.

The work available to Toronto production houses through the Ontario Educational Communications Authority offers few returns because of high costs in the former and low budgets in the latter.

And then there's the Quebec law banning animation in commercials directed at children under 13, which has cut out animation in this category across the country.

The five representative studios discussed below show a range of the possible responses to the self-evident challenge of surviving in animation in Toronto.

MS Art Services Ltd, 410 Adelaide West, was started in the late '60s by

*Jaan Pill is a graduate in psychology from Simon Fraser University where he also edited the student newspaper and worked as a summer student at the Vancouver National Film Board production office. He is currently working on a film project, **Holes and Wholes**, an animated film based on figure-ground transformations in the class of optical illusions known as "ambiguous figures."*

Manolo Corvera as an art house in conjunction with its parent company Film Opticals of Canada, an optical house.

The studio does animation, audio-visual productions, and stages large industrial shows with singers and dancers. Its animation facilities include two 35 mm Mitchell cameras for "stop-action" animation technique (using three-dimensional objects instead of art work for animation).

Corvera began as an illustrator for the Disney organization in Spain, later worked for Crawley Films, Ottawa, then went to Al Guest Animation in Toronto. When the latter company folded, Corvera started MS Art.

According to Corvera, his staff of 20 includes "three or four people doing animation, but not on a regular basis. We've never developed more," he explains, "because there's not much animation going on in Canada."

Cinera Production Ltd, 439 Wellington West, was started in the late '60s by Vladimir Goetzelman. It does commercials "for just about every major advertiser in the country." Also educational work, and work for the United States.

Goetzelman, trained in art schools in Europe and Canada, is experienced in film graphics, film design, animation and special effects. He had worked, along with Corvera, for Al Guest Animation and started Cinera after the latter folded.

He speaks of Cinera's consistent history: "I guess we are, in terms of staff and involvement, probably the last large continuous production house in Canada," he explains.

Cinera recently completed two series of animated films on American history for the U.S. Bicentennial. The first deals with the American Revolution, the second with the next 100 years after it. There are 104 4½-minute films in each series. Over 100 American stations have signed up for the series, as part of a syndicated program.

"We've found ourselves in the position," says Goetzelman, "where we know that if we don't get at least half of our business out of the United States, sooner or later we're going to be in financial trouble."

Videoart Production Ltd, 18 Temperance St., was started in 1959 by graphic designer Jack Kuper and commercial producer Bill Campbell, as a side venture to their work at CBC. In 1960 they sold it to graphics designer Bob Kane, who now has a full staff of six or seven, and one to eight freelancers.

Half the company's work is animation, half slide production. The animation include public service spots, and also educational films for OECA (Ontario Educational Communications Authority, Channel 19).

"We've found OECA very helpful," says Kane. "We probably wouldn't in the animation business if it weren't for OECA."

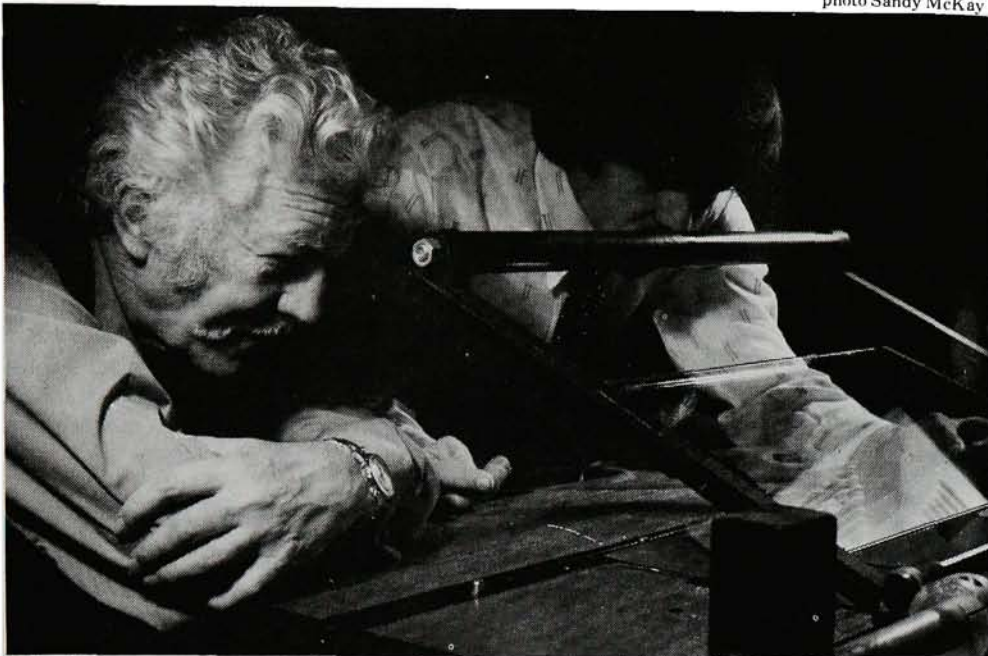
"Our top animator here," he adds, "would not make the money that the top animator at Cinera would make, because he hasn't the experience." (Cinera does very little work for OECA these days, because of the latter's tight budgets.)

Certified Canadian Content Productions, 22 Geneva Street, was recently formed by freelancers Dennis Pike and Ivan Goricanec in connection with a series of animated inserts for live-action sequences on Haida, Hopi and other Indian legends for Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The series is being produced in Hollywood, with plans to show it on Canadian television, which is why much of the production work is in Canada — which also explains the company's unique name.

Pike, an art school graduate, worked in England at Halas and Batchelor, Biographic Cartoons and Larkins. In Canada, he first worked in Winnipeg and then at Crawley's in Ottawa — followed by work at Expo, Ontario Place, and at MS Art (on its **Planet of Man** series for OECA).

Film Design Ltd, 4 New Street, was started by Jim McKay in 1955. McKay doesn't do as many commercials as he used to. "I don't say I try not to do them but I don't go out of my



Miguel Corvera and Jim McKay consult while shooting animated film on camera

way to get commercials," he explains. "We do, oh, some now and then but what I like doing best is stuff, I'd say, for children."

Stuff, he adds, "that expresses some sort of idea that has some importance to somebody."

For example, he made a film two years ago for Eastman Kodak in Rochester, N.Y., on how cameras work, for children. It wasn't high-budget, but it was fun to do: "I'd rather do that than sell soup or soap suds."

McKay, a graduate of the Ontario College of Art, began working with Norman McLaren at the Film Board when the animation department was first set up in Ottawa.

Seven years later he and George Dunning formed Graphic Associates in Toronto. It lasted five years, after which Dunning went to London, and McKay formed Film Design.

At Film Design, he decided to keep the company small. "The bigger you get, the more you start to take work you don't want to do. And after a while you're used to taking, you know, horrible work. And then you're in it for the money and that's it. Oh, I don't pretend to be any angel, or anything. I just decided, I suppose, to maintain a low profile."

Artwork for a *Sesame Street* spot by Ken Stephenson: Videoart Productions

Where Can You Sell and How?

"In Canada the government is obliged to have all its work done by the Film Board, and if you do get a government film to do you can be pretty damn sure that the Film Board is not interested in it. They put it out to tender and you know full well that it's a bitch."

Dennis Pike

"It's very hard for the Canadian industry to expand, because they (the NFB) do all the government jobs, which is very unfair. They don't put out too many tenders, and the tenders they put out... aren't good ones."

Manolo Corvera

One result of the scarcity of animated industrial films in Toronto, according to Pike, is the almost exclusive concentration on TV commercials (with bits and pieces for OECA during down times), which means that most animation houses in town would find it hard to take on a project like the Indian Legend series for Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Another result is that, unlike in, say, London, where animators have extended periods to work on industrial films, senior Toronto animators have little time, in the midst of short, intensive productions, to train assistants. The Sheridan College animation program fulfills this need only partially, although the consensus among professionals is that the quality of the program is improving. How to absorb the graduates into the industry is an-

other problem. Many in the industry suggest they try elsewhere, such as the United States.

OECA

"With the overhead that we have, the kind of people that we have doing the work, we can't very often sell animation at very low prices, try as we might."

Mike Smith (MS Art)

On doing work for OECA: "Anybody that has to live on that work sooner or later is going to go broke."

Vladimir Goetzelman

Goetzelman says he guesses the average OECA budget is \$600 to \$700 a minute. "It's just sweatshop work. It's not leading anywhere."

One of Cinera's first projects as a company was a low-budget series for OECA on mathematics, which was well received. "Now, I don't think we could even touch their work," says Goetzelman. "We're always at least 500 bucks over budget whenever we quote."

He contrasts the OECA budget to work Cinera has done for the Children's Television Workshop in the U.S. (*Sesame Street*, *Electric Company*). The budgets are \$4,000 a minute. "They're not fat, but one can work within those budgets."

Maggie Stratton, assistant to the director of school programs at OECA, has a different estimate on average costs from Goetzelman's. "It's always very expensive. It can vary anywhere from \$1500 to \$4000 a minute."

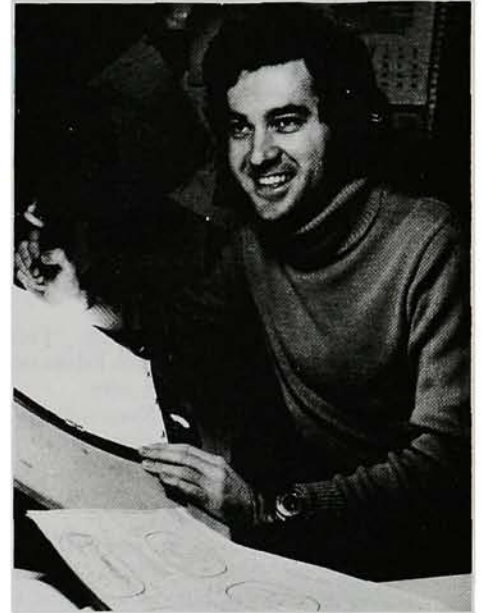
"In general, the amount of animation that we've used," she adds, "is extremely limited, because we simply cannot afford to pay those prices. And it's kind of a vicious circle. We can't afford to pay the price and the animation house cannot afford to bring the price down, because it has to survive."

Children of Quebec

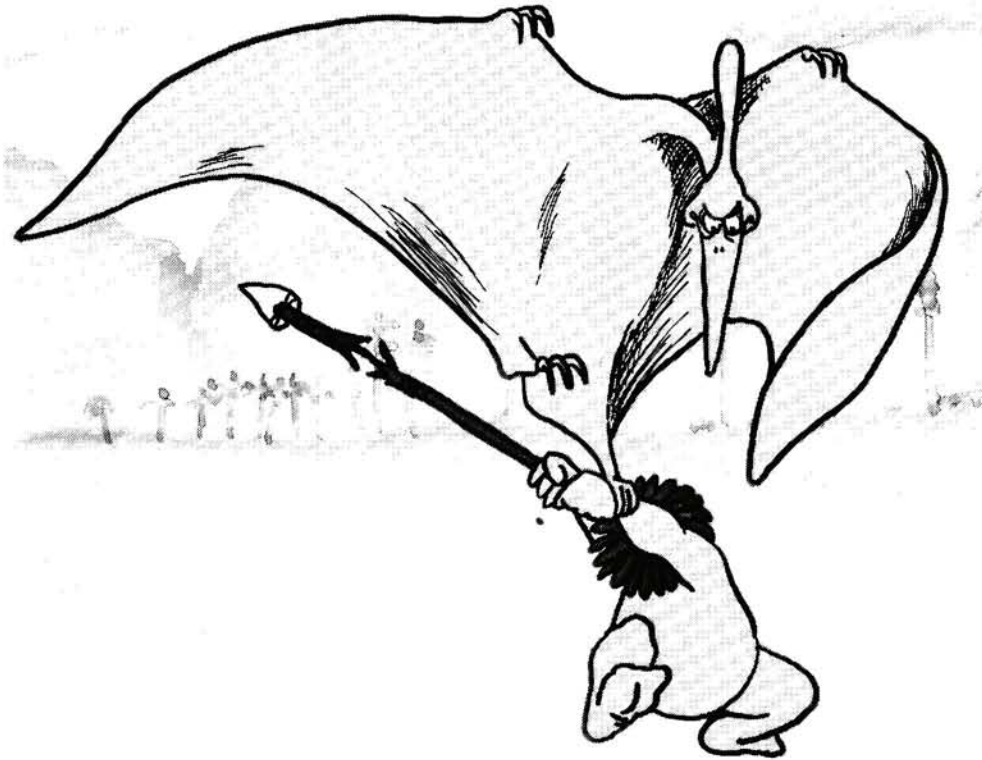
Around 1974, the effects of a Quebec law banning animation in commercials aimed at children under 13 devastated commercial animation in Toronto.

The Quebec law made advertisers across Canada turn to live-action rather than make two commercials, one for Quebec, one for elsewhere, in commercials directed at children.

NORM DREW PRODUCTIONS



Born in Kenora Ontario, Mr. Drew is a graduate of both the fine and applied arts courses at the University of Alberta. Drew began his art and film career in 1963, when he joined Crawley Films in Ottawa to work on the NBC feature cartoon "Return to Oz". He freelanced for a large Toronto daily as illustrator on the internationally syndicated feature "The Giants", from 1964 until 1967 when he joined T.V.C. in London England, where he worked on "The Beatles' Yellow Submarine". Other well known features to his credit include "The Jackson Five" (ABC TV); "The Osmond Brothers" (ABC TV); cartoon series and animated films for "The Electric Company", New York. Drew returned to Canada in 1972, where he was creative director of a Toronto animation studio. In 1973 he came to Vancouver to help direct "Wait 'til Your Father Gets Home" (CBS TV), an animated series produced at Canawest Film Productions. He opened his own studio—Norm Drew Productions, in 1974 and since then has done films for "Sesame Street", TV commercials, the animated titles for "The Irish Rovers" TV variety show and is currently producing the series "Chika's Magic Sketch Book" which appears on the CBC TV national network.



Artwork for a 30-second Ministry of Culture and Recreation spot by Ken Stephenson: Video-art Productions

"It killed that part of the business," explains Vladimir Goetzelman, "which was always a reliable source of income to the industry."

Involved were such accounts as children's breakfast foods, chocolate bars, and other aggressively advertised processed foods. Also, the ban applied to any commercial appearing in a children's time slot — no animation was allowed.

"In general," says Goetzelman, "it kind of made the whole business less healthy. It's not healthy to begin with, and that just kind of pulled the rug out from under it."

He adds, however, that Cinera had been doing more adult commercials anyway. "It didn't affect us that much."

MS Art lost "something like eight or ten commercials" a year with the new law — including Kelloggs' Tony the Tiger, and its Corn Flakes ad with Yogi. Manolo Corvera notes, however, that Kelloggs is testing the ruling: recently they've tried using puppets.

In Quebec, meanwhile, legislation has been introduced which, if passed, would bar all advertising directed at children under 13.

"Every couple of years somebody goes broke. That doesn't reflect on the quality of the company. It reflects on the total state of the art in Canada."

Vladimir Goetzelman



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TIDBITS ABOUT ANIMATORS

First, we present **Willy Ashworth**, who used to be Bill Reed, but found everybody was called Bill Reed, so now he's Willy Ashworth.

The story begins with the "French Fiasco." OECA - Ontario Educational Communication Authority - was starting a big-budget French-language series, asked quotes from local production houses. Didn't like prices, went to Los Angeles. Local animators found out, started agitating.

OECA, trying to do right thing, decided from now on it'll take bids on absolutely everything - and what they decided to tender at that point was a contract already awarded verbally to a freelancer - Willy Ashworth - who had just finished several weeks' preparation for a new "Readalong" series, which he'd also worked on last year.

At June 1 meeting with OECA, other production houses find out Willy had a handshake agreement already, and refuse to bid. Willy, along with Patsy Crudden (who also worked on the project last year), gets the job.

And that's also how the Canadian Animation Producers Association (tentative title) had its start. It consists of Toronto animation producers, with Montreal and Ottawa representatives so far, and aims to be Canada-wide.

"I've only been in the industry five years now," Willy says, "and I've never known anything quite like it. It was encouraging. I think it's good for the industry. I think we can help each other."

Encouraged by the result of sitting down together and dealing with OECA as a united group, the producers are now looking to other areas.

"We generally are overlooked in all negotiations between guild and craft people and other professional organizations," as **Al Guest** of Rainbow Productions explains. "Even the Council of Canadian Filmmakers, in their dealings with the federal and provincial governments, forget about the animators. Because they consider us to be filmmakers like them - which to some extent is true, but we have special problems, which they don't know because they're not in our business."

Got some interesting comments from **Scott Didlake** at the Ontario College of Art about the super-8 festival in Toronto in April. The best of the animation is now on videotape, for anyone who wants to see it. Some of the best was done by 12-year-olds (there were no age categories). He also mentioned Eugene Federenko, who taught animation to children during the recent animation festival at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

While on the topic - **Peter Jones** of the Film Board office in Vancouver mentions an NFB film made there with children as animators - with NFB animators "hovering around and being helpful but not interfering with the creative process."



Dennis Pike
drawing Jaan Pill

The Cape Dorset project out of the same office, with workshops set up for young Eskimo filmmakers, also comes to mind. Really excellent work - a purity of vision, a clarity. One of the shorts won a prize at Zagreb in 1974.

With his Indian legend animation series for a producer in L.A. just about wrapped up, Toronto freelancer **Dennis Pike** is working on two live-action film projects. One involves Canadian history. With the American bicentennial celebrations comes a heavy media onslaught promoting the popular American version of the history of the North American continent:

"If we're not careful we're going to find the history of the period 200 years ago crystallize into the mold that it's been forced into this year.

"Quebec as we see it today is a product of the American war for independence. All the problems that are built into Quebec are there as a direct result of the war and the Loyalist migration northward."

Also in the works is a live-action Pike film about Eskimo and Inuit land claims in northern Canada.

Interesting to talk to freelancer Pike about the Film Board. Norman McLaren, he comments, is a national

monument. That's good, he says. On the other hand, work in industry has been the same or almost the same as what he's done, but one never gets the two years to polish it: "In fact they're just ordinary people with a lot of time and a lot of money to polish the hell out of stuff. And of course you haven't got that commercially." (You'd accept second or third rough and use it. At Board you'd keep on refining till happy.)

That's where their reputation is, says Pike: the polish. Great people. "But it's like the protection you get from being in a monastery.

"After a while the big wheels who develop through the Film Board hierarchy appear to the rest of the world almost as cardinals. They've all got red robes."

Seems the February 1976 issue of **Millimeter** really has become a collector's item ... **Cine Books** reports that its original stock sold out completely. They reordered and that's all sold out too. "Anything on animation goes very quickly."

Another treat is the article on Oskar Fischinger by William Moritz in **Film Culture**, Nos. 58-60, 1974. Fischinger, whose free-flowing synchrony of music and visual imagery in a short set to Brahms's Hungarian Dance No. 5 had a significant influence on the development of Norman McLaren as an animator, was fascinated with natural medicine, experimented with diets, moon cycles, magnetic earth currents. His work on "synthetic sound" and "sounding images" in the '30s was a forerunner of what is now called concrete and electronic music. Few understood what he was getting at till he spoke about his concepts to Edgar Varese and John Cage in the '40s, and they were able to exploit them in their work. (And John Cage, you remember, said that "Everything we do is music. Everywhere is the best seat.")

And now a word from **Jim McKay** of Film Design. Tell me, Jim, what do you think about the way animation houses pop up and disappear over the years?

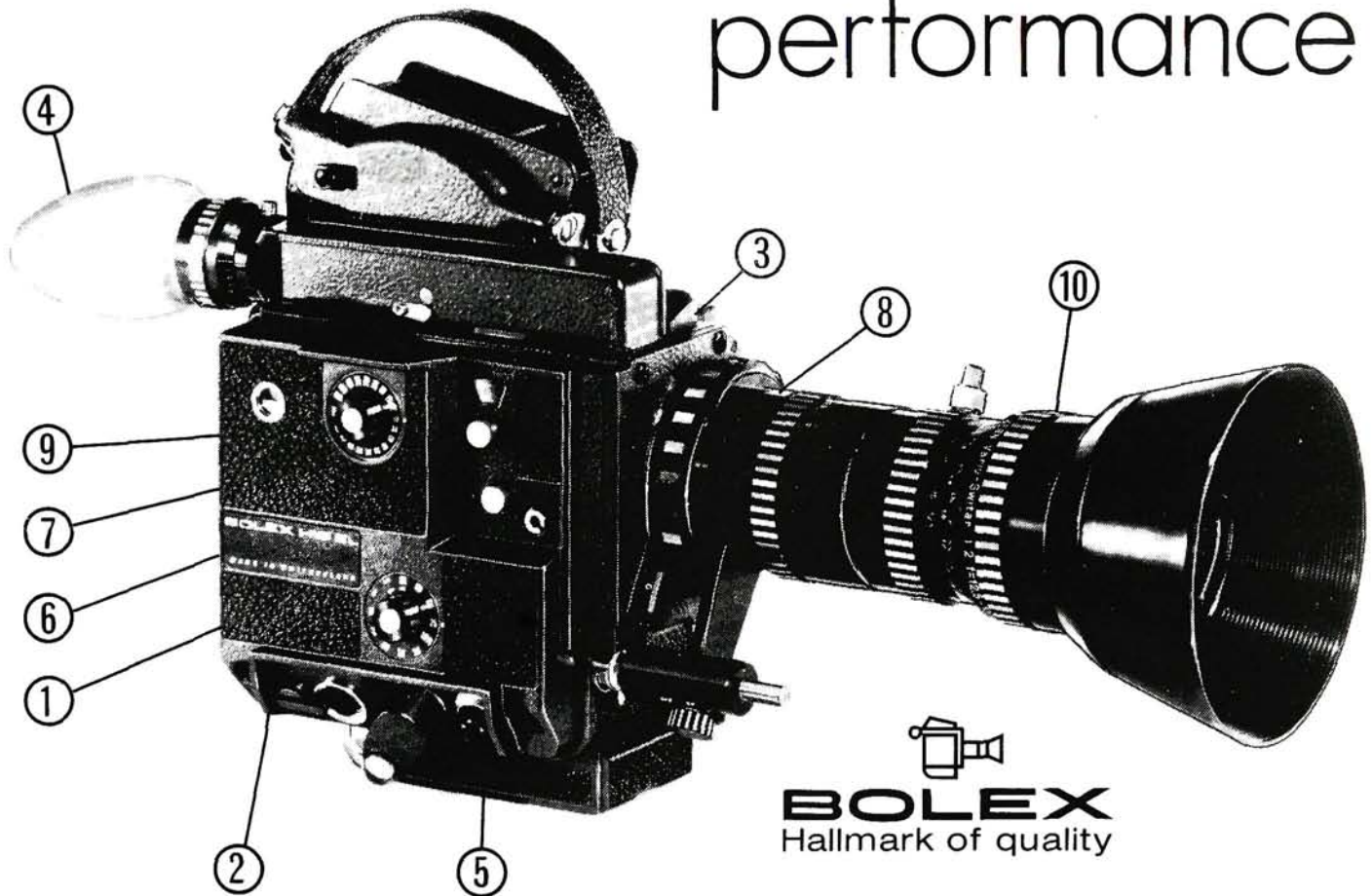
"Well, my impression is that animators are like migrant fruit pickers. They go where the action is.

"I was always amazed when I would go to New York and meet people, and find out where they worked and for what studios they worked, and then I'd go back a year or two later to find out half the studios didn't exist anymore. But the people were still there, working under different names and in different combinations. It all sounds like animation is insecure - but then I'm suspicious of security as an end.

"I guess I like the challenge. To be able to adapt and change to a situation is what makes life interesting."

Jaan Pill

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