
the toronto maple leach cartoon platoon

...a zany name for an equally zany film company. But it means business. Funny business! And these innovative animators are betting on success.

by gerry flahive

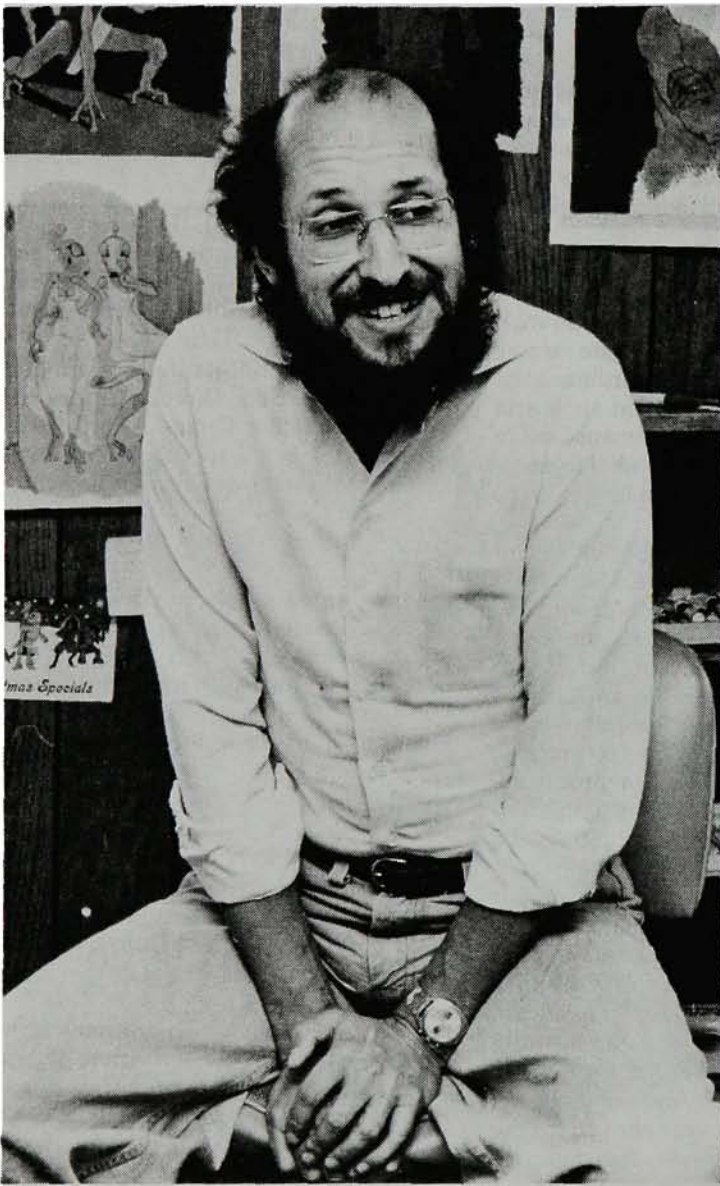


photo: Jan Van Home

The film has no real plot. The characters' names are Goodly, Malicious, Nicely, and Rotten. Production has taken nine months. And if the film isn't sold, the company will go out of business.

All in all, a precarious situation. But John Leach, chief creator of **Let's Play Grownups**, a half-hour animated film for adults, is an optimistic, determined, experienced chance-taker.

In 1974, Leach, with his wife and partner Jean Rankin, made **The Gift Of Winter**, "a kind of amateurish and off-the-wall" cartoon, featuring the voices of Dan Aykroyd and Gilda Radner. For what was basically a made-in-the-living-room first effort, it was an offbeat success on both Canadian and American television.

After doing some animation segments in French and Spanish for *Sesame Street*, Leach-Rankin Productions made **Witch's Night Out**, a Halloween cartoon recently seen on NBC in the States, and by almost a million and a half viewers on the CBC.

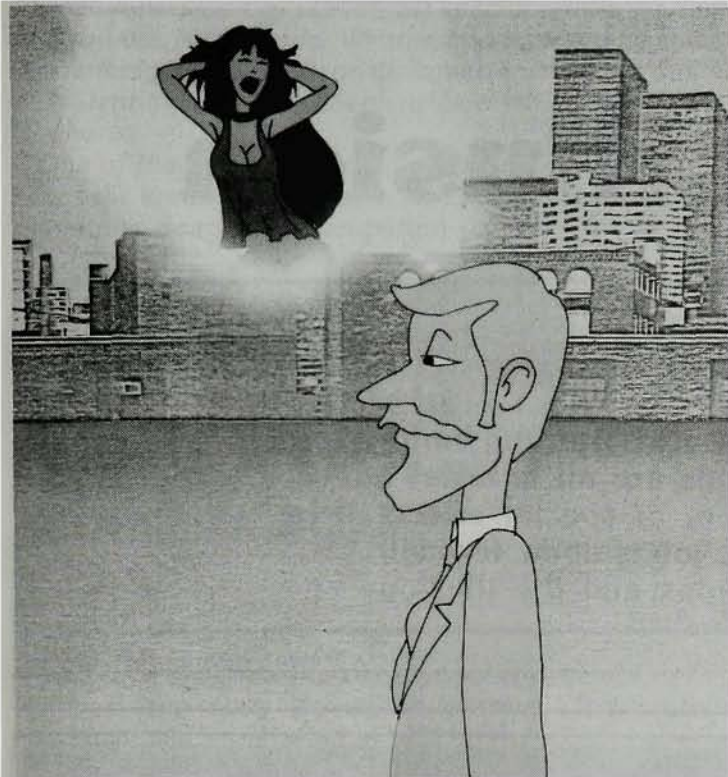
Let's Play Grownups is a departure from Leach's previous seasonal specials, and from the barely animated and subliterate cartoons often seen on television. One television booking agent, after seeing some early rushes of the film, called it "dangerously original." But, says Leach, this is from a man who still programs *I Love Lucy* re-runs.

Grownups uses four symbolic adults to satirically examine current male-female relationships. The storyline will be episodic and fluid, and, from brief glimpses, it appears that it may be a sort of comic, new wave, soap opera. Jayne Eastwood, Fiona Reid, Gerry Salsberg, and John Leach himself provided the voices for Malicious, Nicely, Rotten, and Goodly, respectively.

A staff of twenty-four free-lancers has been working on the film in an office on 'warehouse' Mercer Street, near Toronto's C.N. Tower. As well as writing the script with Jean Rankin, Leach made the drawings — which set the visual style — and oversees the production, as director.

Gerry Flahive is a free-lance writer in Toronto.

John Leach — playing grownup!



"If you could read my mind, love/What a tale my thoughts would tell..."

Because of a lack of experienced production managers for animated films, he also attends to logistical matters. Rankin, who is no longer formally associated with the company, serves as a friendly critic.

Gord Brewster, Scott Collie, David Ross, and Dale Schott — the "fab four" — are the main animators responsible for the "look, feel and power" of **Let's Play Grownups**. "They're going to make animation history," claims Leach.

Occasionally, "in-betweeners" on staff — those who do the drawings which come between the 'key' ones drawn by the main animators — are given sequences to animate themselves. Leach seems happy to give new talent a chance, and his production method makes this feasible.

On most animated films the various positions are quite specialized. A Disney production, for example, is highly organized and precisely designed. In-house guidebooks are consulted for the correct animation of, say, Mickey Mouse's walk. Drawings are first done on paper, then transferred to acetate 'cels' by tracing, or using special Xerox machines. Leach has eliminated the paper phase, and has his crew work directly on the cels, which are immediately put under the camera for filming; this allows for an immediacy which he compares to working with actors. There is a higher shooting ratio — perhaps three or four to one — under this system than is usual, as it permits large and quick changes in a film. After hearing a song written for the film by Toronto singer Carole Pope, and synthesizer musician David McLey, Leach was able to re-design two scenes to better exploit it.

The rushes can be a mix of black-and-white and colour footage, with some sections not fully animated, and without complete soundtracks. In December, the story and visuals were set, but there remained the work of preparing

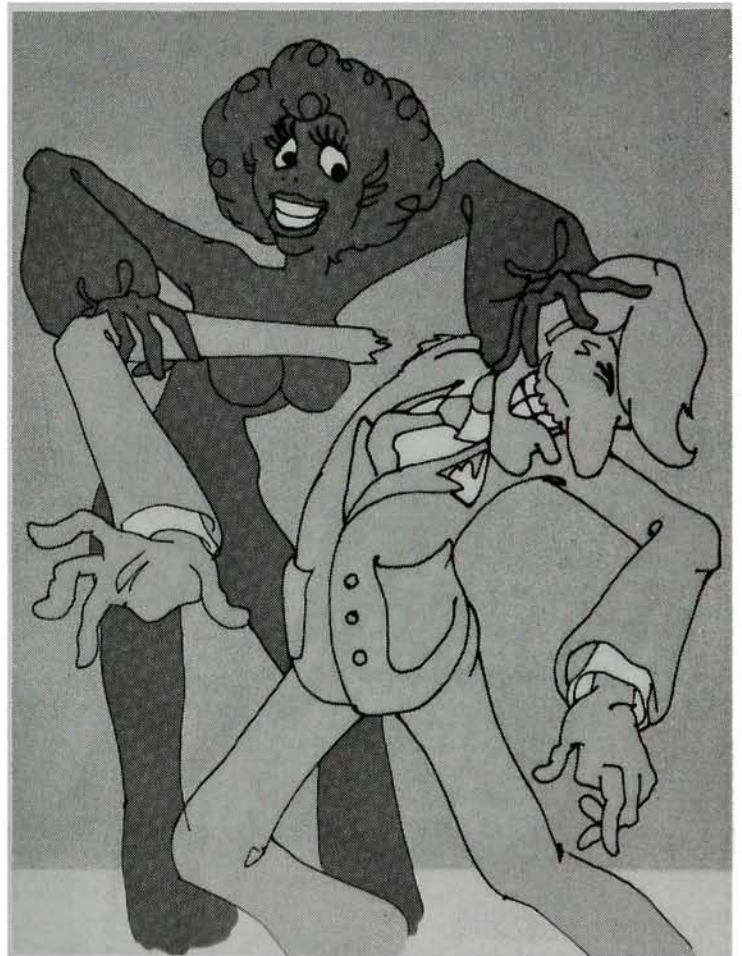
many of the cels for final shooting — twelve of which are needed for each second of screen time.

Over a third of the budget of \$300,000 goes to salaries, while materials account for a mere \$10,000. Because of private investment, the production schedule had to take into consideration the impending end of the tax year.

Leach felt that it would be late January before he could effectively attempt to sell the film, since uncompleted animation doesn't impress buyers — they can't always visualize the finished product. The CBC provided some seed money at the scripting stage, and NBC has shown some interest, but nothing is settled. He's hoping for a ten p.m. time slot because of the sophistication of the material, believing that it will appeal to the same people who watch *Saturday Night Live* and *All In The Family*.

In the past, the CBC has been inconsistent in its attention, according to Leach. After waiting ten months for a response to the **Witch's Night Out** proposal, he went to New York and got \$150,000 for it almost immediately from NBC. Nevertheless, he calls the CBC "the bravest network in the world," and intends to keep making films in Canada despite what he sees as a lack of promotional chutzpah and appreciation of talent.

To this end, Leach-Rankin, soon to be renamed The Toronto Maple Leach Cartoon Platoon, is proceeding with plans to make an animated feature, confident that **Let's Play Grownups** will be a success. □



All's fair in love and war and **Let's Play Grownups**