

Ed Hooks AN ANT PREPARES

An acting teacher trains Toonville's luminaries

If there were Oscars for Best Animated Actor and Actress, the competition would be heating up—especially now that professional acting coaches are giving cartoon stars that extra edge.

In 1996, Pacific Data Images, a Palo Alto, Calif.-based animation company doing preproduction on DreamWorks' animated feature film *Antz*, hired local acting teacher Ed Hooks to give lessons to the company's animators. Since then, the 55-year-old Hooks, a professional actor and teacher for 30 years, as well as a columnist for San Francisco's *Callboard* magazine, has developed a busy new sideline—teaching acting to animation professionals and students around the world.

Now, you might say that Mickey Mouse, Snow White and Bambi all got along just fine without acting lessons, so why the push for training in the cartoon world today? Well, Hooks has an answer. "Computer animation technology has developed rapidly," he says. "Audiences are much more sophisticated now when it comes to animation, and their expectations are higher than ever. Computer animators today cannot get by with the simple character analysis of early animation. In the feature-length movies being produced now, the complicated 3-D characters have to act. In the movie *Toy Story*, for example, the character of Woody had 600 points on him that could be manipulated. Computer animation allows an animator to look at characters from all directions. When characters can interact with each other in such a complex and nuanced way, you're developing a really sophisticated theatrical form."

In fact, Hooks notes, when Pixar Animation Studios prioritizes desirable skills for prospective animators, it lists "acting ability" as number two, and the ability to draw as number five. By comparison, back in 1932, drawing

By John Angell Grant

ability was number one for Disney. "Old school animators like Shamus Culhane, who drew Betty Boop, and Tex Avery, who drew Bugs Bunny, never studied acting," said Hooks. "They learned acting by the seat of their pants."

But the new generation of anima-



Motivate the moment: Ed Hooks in teaching mode.

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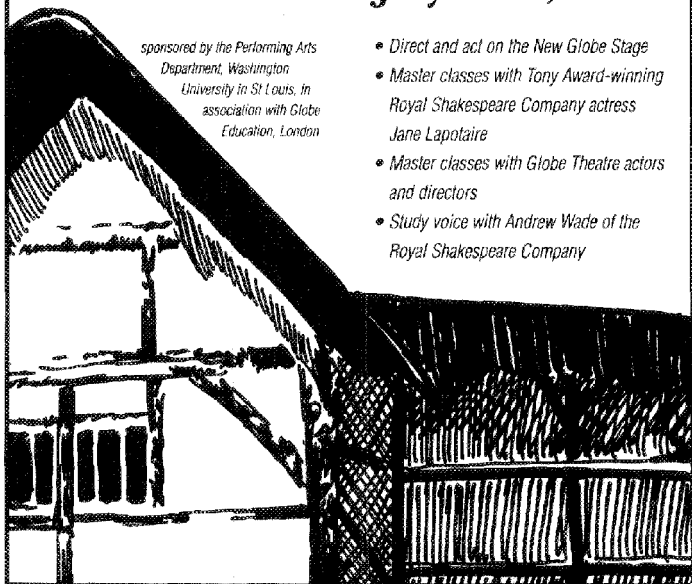
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tors, Hooks says, can profit from more formal training—particularly from an acting curriculum that helps them shift their focus from the external to the internal. “If you talk to an animator,” he remarks, “he or she is going to say, ‘Should I lift this eyebrow? Should this arm go up if the character’s excited? Should I open his mouth?’ Of course, when you teach acting to actors, that’s a no-no. Actors are taught not to focus on externals like that, but animators work backwards. They start with the external.”

Just as they require a different philosophical approach from budding thespians, so, too, do animators need different exercises and assignments. Most animators, after all, don’t have a strong desire to take the stage. “I

quickly learned they don’t want to do scenes, learn lines, get up and act,” Hooks says. “They’re not actors really, they’re more like puppet masters. Their characters do the acting.”

To sell his students on the material, Hooks kicks off his courses by relating the history of acting, which he traces back to ancient Greece and, before that, to shamanism. “Animators are fascinated by this,” says Hooks, “because many of them came out of comic books and computer games. I remind them of the tradition. Stage begot movies. Movies begot animation. At first animation was a novelty for audiences, making lines move on a screen. Then Walt Disney gave Mickey Mouse a brain, and we were off to the races. As soon as animated characters started

“As soon as
animated characters
had brains, they
became actors.”

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having brains, they became, in a way, actors."

After the historical introduction, his classes delve into a variety of acting principles and techniques, including Michael Chekhov's concept of the identity-defining "psychological gesture" (an example might be "reach inside and touch another's heart") and the principles of Hungarian dance pioneer Rudolf Laban (1879-1958), who analyzed body motion and fluidity. Hooks teaches his students that there are three kinds of conflict (with self, with situation, with



A sophisticated theatrical form: a frame from *Antz*.

other characters); that a scene is a negotiation; that characters need to be empathetic; that action defines the personality; and that characters have an arc of development.

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Along more practical lines, he encourages students to make an elaborate list of character details and shows them the benefit of quirky strategies like tapping out a character's inner rhythm on a table. Through improv and games, he helps them understand the connections between thinking and physical action, between thinking and emotion. In a recent San Francisco workshop, for example, he explained how the mental choice of a body's power center affects the way a character moves and behaves. An anxious character, he pointed out, might hold a power center high, and a confident character lower. When he asked two students to cross the room, holding power centers in different parts of their bodies, the class spotted the differences at once.

Hooks also ties the lessons to a medium the animators know more about—film. A scene from Michael

Keaton's movie *Multiplicity*, for example, provides an alternate means of explaining the power-center concept: When Keaton plays four versions of himself, the versions are all distinct, Hooks observes, "because you can see the power centers shift." Going back a little further in time, he shows clips from Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin movies, for the contrast. "Keaton goes for the gag, which is what I don't want animators to do, and Chaplin plays to the humanity or empathy."

Above all, Hooks says, he tries to convince the students "how little they have to do for their characters to communicate. One of animators' biggest problems is that they over-animate. They want to bang the audience over the head. That's okay in Saturday morning car-

"Animators today can't get by with simple character analysis."

toons, but not okay in feature films."

In the final analysis, he feels that the animator's lot is more difficult than the actor's. "A computer animator sits there with

headphones at a computer screen, alone," he says, "with a small scene, or a piece of a scene, and listens to one line of prerecorded dialogue over and over. And every time they listen to it, they add another movement or bit. They're trying to make the character on the screen look like it's expressing the line already prerecorded. So from an acting perspective they have to remotivate the moment and the impulse again and again and again." **AT**

John Angeli Grant is a playwright and actor who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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