

IN THE WORLD OF THE MOVING PICTURES

By Dimitar Todorov-Jarava

In 1927-30 in our cinemas with a great success were shown prior to the main films, also the cartoon films by Walt Disney. The great mastership of the plastic grotesque, the richness of the expressive means and the typical characters of those films impressed me and I decided to try and make such cartoon films in Bulgaria.

I began making an apparatus, similar to a child toy, with drawn figures in motion. But my attempt was not successful. The apparatus smeared the motions of the pictures....

Several years later- already as a collaborator to the magazines “Firefly” and “Child World” , I came back to this idea, but in a modified version: to create an apparatus for showing pictures in motion , printed on a paper reel. They had to be appendices tot hose two magazines, from which the children themselves would make small paper films. I managed to get a patent for a “new cinematographic paper reel”, as the editors of those magazines- Alexander Spasov and Dobromir Chilingirov had previously approved my idea. But things took another turn. The WW 2 began, which left a print on the whole life in the country and it was not the time for such experiments. Right after the war ended, in parallel to my public duties I got back to work. With my modest savings and loans I managed to buy a filming camera, I made myself a filming table, I bought lamps and a magnifier. In the improvised “obscura” I started studying- sequence by sequence- extracts from the Walt Disney films. This was very useful as I managed to understand some fine points about the drawing of the phase sequences.

By that time I learned that a group of young people were also working in this field. In a workshop at “Klement Gotvald” blvd. I found the artist Alexander Denkov, 2 students and 3-4 technicians. They told me that they had created an experimental cartoon film entitled “The little thief”. Later I had the chance to see it. I was impressed by the good prospects, the cameraman’s work, but the character of the film-a crow- was rather unpersuasive as an image; besides it was moving so quickly on the screen that it could hardly be seen. It was clear that the authors of the film had been aiming at achieving effects by the set-scenes and cameraman’s work- important components, indeed – but they had easily ignored the main component- the movement. In my work I was concentrating on shooting the movement of a doll, the multiplication of which is much easier that making pictures. The copying of the doll movements, transformed into pictures in order to be modified and made to look more plastic , could serve as a basis for the future cartoon film.

Later in my work at the newly found Department for cartoon films at the Bulgarian Cinematography it was not necessary to use dolls. This was due to the fact that I had as collaborators painters with an academic education and a certain experience, which allowed me to proceed to the classical way of cartoon film-making- cast, phasing, animation, lining, filling in, etc. Still, the work that I did at home was not unnoticed. The “Zemlyak” newspaper dedicated a whole page in its 100th number from 1946 to my activities and attempts to create a cartoon film.

The setting up of the Department for cartoon films at the Bulgarian Cinematography was accompanied by a lot of difficulties. The then management (of the Cinematography) energetically opposed such a proposal. I had submitted some of my works- without set scenes, and of course, performed with low-quality cameraman’s work, but the movements of the characters showed my knowledge of the animation technique. Despite that, my proposal for establishing a department for cartoon films was left without a result.

It was some time before the idea of the expediency and necessity of the animation received approval and the Bulgaria, too, could start the production of cartoon films.

The question was referred to high governmental and party institutions for discussion and a decision.

It was late autumn in 1948. The newly-appointed “Art and production” manager Slav Slavov informed me that there was a decision that all of the people, working in the domain of the cartoon film should be invited and given working space and necessary equipment, so that they can start their experimental work. But even after that, things did not advance. I was still a teacher in drawing and I still did not receive an appointment at the Bulgarian Cinematography. It was only my official dismissal from the 20th secondary school “P. Slaveykov” and my appointment at the Cinematography, that I could begin working.

The people that I started with , were almost the same ones that I met in the workshop at “Kl. Gotvald” blvd. : Alexander Denkov, Boyan Bonchev, Sobadjiev, L. Yuroukov, Hadjiev and some others. From them only Denkov was a painter and that practically made impossible initiating any experiments. We had to find and recruit painters. But finding male painters was very difficult. The free-practice work was more profitable.....we had to find female painters. So we hired Boyka Mavrodieva, Jivka Encheva, Magdalena Gorova, Magda Gedova, Vessela Gaytandjieva, Zdrava Prahova, and later also Radka Bachvarova , Zdenka Doycheva, Lubomir Chakalov and the cameraman Dimitar Hadjiev. Unfortunately Alexander Denkov left for the army to do his military service.

Too much has been said and written about the notorious workshop at “Lege” street . Indeed this was the most inconvenient place for such an activity, but back in those days in 1948, when the demolition of the buildings from the bombing had not been repaired yet and the housing shortage was quite acute,

we could not insist on anything better. The important was to start work. And we started literally from the zero. I had to bring tables and chairs from my own house as the new painters had nothing to sit on. The cameraman Dimitar Hadjiev- one of the most enthused ones, started making by his own initiative panels for the necessary lighting, which had to be used instead of the special tables. For that purpose, though, we needed glass, and we could not find it on the market.

Once, as I was walking down “Rakovski” street, I saw that one of the walls of a shop in a semi-ruined building had exactly the type of glass that we needed for the panels. Together with Hadjiev and Chakalov we waited for the right moment and we took down the glass and replaced it with plywood, and this is how we found the necessary glass. Later I learned that the police had been asking around for me, but it seems that the shop owners were pleased by our work and the plywood, since no one ever looked for me again.

The team of painters took the work to heart . I distributed among them the pictures that I had done- the general cast of characters, taken from the children story by Angel Karaliichev “It Serves Him Right” and after the preliminary instruction, the preparation of the intermediate pictures began. We seriously discussed the temper and behavior of each of the characters. We had to define their way of walking, flying , etc.- for each of the images in the film. We had to draw hundreds of pictures –key moments in the movements; changing some of the pictures by the colleagues, checking every drawn leg, arm, head....This required a lot of efforts and pressure. In order to make it easier for the painters, I allowed each of them to work out his pictures in whatever scale they found suitable. Eventually, one and the same character appeared in the pictures of two painters in two different sizes. Such pictures were practically unusable, but the painters got used to working out intermediate pictures in the respective phases. We were still in a period of implementing a technology of draing that was new to us, but the results were encouraging. Periodically we were discussing the drawn material, by showing it on screen. I used to say that in that period we were still “learning the alphabet and the pronunciation”.

One day they phoned me from the Cinematography and they told me the order by the director Strashimir Rashev for preparing everything that we had worked out by that moment, in order to show it to the management. This made me worried. Our pictures were still at the experimental stage – like in any training work. I called comrade Rashev trying to explain how the things were. But the answer was categorical: “Irrespective of the fact that they are only training pictures – they must me assembled in some kind of order and must be shown.”

We were all troubled. The failure was inevitable. Then the idea occurred to me to equalize the pictures by reducing or enlarging their sizes with the help of the camera. We made a new panel- around 1,40m high, we put the filming camera under it and we put a frosted glass for the pictures on top. By

moving the filming camera, we enlarged and reduced the size of the pictures- until they became completely equal. We worked out the necessary prospectus, we arranged logically our training pictures and we showed them in that order before the committee. The result was satisfactory and the committee assigned the composer the task to write the music to our first work. Later, already sounded and with music, the film “It Serves Him Right” was shown also before party- and government officials and was also approved. This was our big exam, which we successful passed.

With joy and enthusiasm, with some experience and knowledge in the picture animation, we started work on our second cartoon film-“Wood and Lamb”. And so our small team laid the beginning of the first cartoon films. Eventually we were supplied also multiplication tables and special celluloid plates, proper paints; new people were recruited. Our team grew and became stronger. We had a group of experienced painters, there was a good organization at the work. Those were the conditions also at the making of the film “Woodland”, and the painter Todor Dinov successfully made the cartoon film “Marko the Hero”, which was also his diploma work.

The production of the Bulgarian cartoon film became possible thanks to the understanding, that this idea met from the part- and government officials, thanks to the assistance that our government offered to the youngest branch of the young socialistic cinema art.

During the last 25 years the films by our talented painters-animators won the recognition of the Bulgarian and foreign audience, they won big international prizes and they gave grounds for talking about a Bulgarian school of animation.

Those ,who laid the modest start of the Bulgarian animation are watching closely, with joy and pride its successes in Bulgaria and abroad with the deep satisfaction that one pioneer work gave such good results