Creating Animated Cartoons

with Character

A Guide to Developing and
Producing Your Own Series
for TV, the Web,
and Short Film

JOE MURRAY
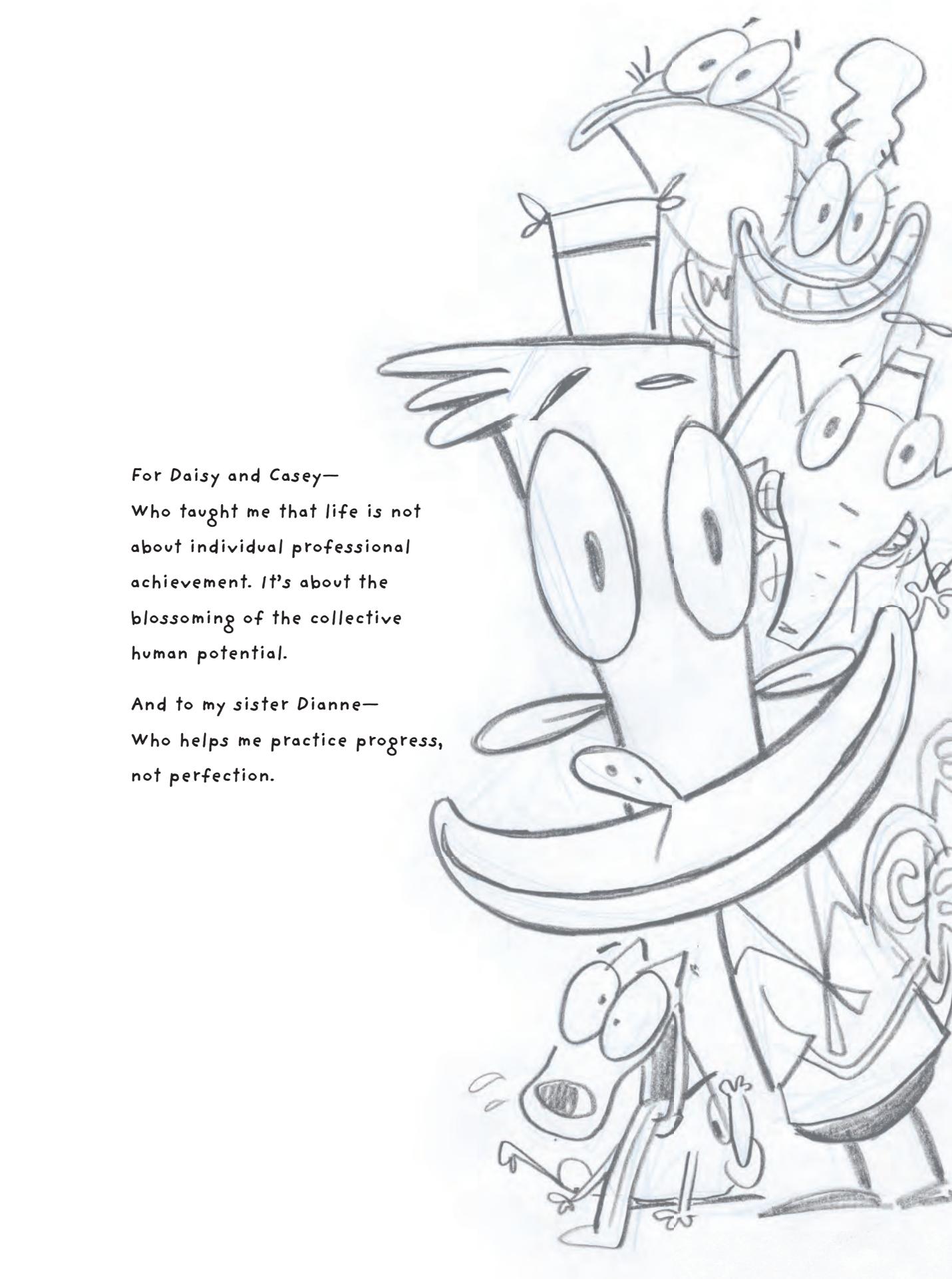
For Daisy and Casey—
Who taught me that life is not
about individual professional
achievement. It's about the
blossoming of the collective
human potential.

And to my sister Dianne—
Who helps me practice progress,
not perfection.

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Foreword
by Linda Simensky

I vividly remember the day I received Joe Murray's pitch for *Rocko's Modern Life*. It was the early 1990s, and I was in charge of animation development at Nickelodeon. We had three series in production: *Rugrats*, *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, and *Doug*. For our next series, I was hoping to find a creator who could develop a show that was part Looney Tunes and part National Film Board of Canada cartoon. After seeing his film *My Dog Zero*, I thought Joe Murray might be the one to do it, and I had high hopes.

I remember nervously opening the envelope and seeing Rocko in all his bright yellow (at the time) splendor. I quickly read through Murray's proposal, looking at all the other characters, but what I mostly remember was seeing the pitch and thinking, "This is our next series!" What this was going to turn into, as people from the network and production sides poked and prodded it, I could not be sure of, but I did know right at that moment that this would be our next show.

I called my boss, Vanessa Coffey, who was head of the animation department at Nickelodeon. It was a Friday during the summer, and she was working at home. I told her I had just received a great pitch that I wanted to show her. She gave me the complicated directions to her house, so I hopped on the subway and headed to the Village to drop off the pitch. I am not a person who gets excited about all that much, but this time I couldn't seem to wait until Monday to show her. She liked it too, so *Rocko's Modern Life* started on its way through the standard gut-wrenching development process. Generally, through this lengthy process, characters are added or eliminated, designs are changed where necessary, questions are answered, and stories are considered and fleshed out. I don't recall that many changes being made to this series, as it seemed so well thought out, although I vaguely recall a Rhino character going away. Eventually we met Joe face to face, deals were made, and we commissioned a pilot.

At that time, animated series for kids were not previewed, so it seemed almost radical to do a pilot. Making the *Rocko* pilot was fun, and it felt much more like Joe getting to make a funny and colorful animated film for us than about creating a sample for highly calibrated scientific focus-group testing. The premise of the pilot was simple and witty: Rocko had to get the garbage out in time for the garbage man to pick it up. Rocko was woefully behind in collecting his trash. The gags were nonstop, and we all thought it hilarious and that Rocko was cute.

For me, I was still relatively new at my job, and what I was learning at that time was mostly how to call and give someone news they weren't particularly going to like. Such calls went something like this: "Hi, Joe, it's Linda. . . . Can you change Rocko's color? They think he looks too much like another yellow character." Or, "Hi Joe, it's Linda . . . Can you transfer the pilot from video to film? It's simple! It will just involve going to LA to oversee the color correction, or something like that. . . ." And of course, "Hi Joe, it's Linda. Nick is thinking about starting up a studio in LA. How would you feel about moving there for the production?" Joe would pause and think for a few seconds, and I'd worry, and then he'd give me the answer I needed and everything would be fine.

Back when Joe was making *Rocko's Modern Life*, in 1993, it was a very different time for the animation industry. It may be hard for newcomers to the business to understand what it was like then, what a great time it was, when a creator simply needed a big idea and the fortitude to pitch it. Amazing things were happening in the industry in terms of the number of productions, the types of new designs that were being tried out, and the technological innovations that were appearing. And yet no cable network executives believed they were experts on anything. It was all new and exciting, and therefore the poking and prodding of a creative idea was relatively minimal. TVPaint Animation was just getting started (in version 2.0), and not many rules were in place other than at Nickelodeon, where it all had to be done differently than during the last twenty years. There was no studio at Nickelodeon, no sort of organized formula for making a show other than a list of jobs that needed to be filled. No team of experienced artists were waiting to be hired from a series across the hall that was winding down. While the industry was not new, we were still figuring out the creator-driven process we wanted to use, and still writing the rules. The industry was small enough that you could know practically everyone. On the other hand, chances were that you would be hiring a group of untested artists who were amazingly talented but thoroughly inexperienced when it came to animated series. On top of that, you had a sense that the fate of animation on cable television rested with the success of your next series.
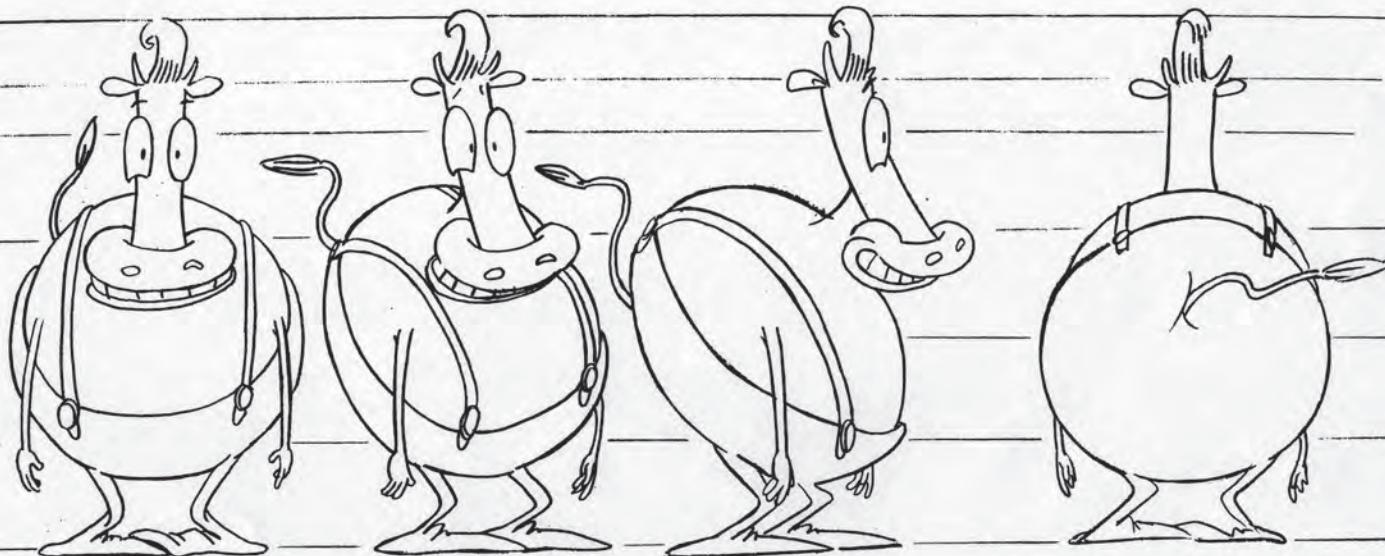
Joe and I bonded in these early years—it was animation grad school for us. We both showed up for *Rocko* young and idealistic and full of notions about how we would change the world; we came through it experienced and a lot more knowledgeable. We went into *Camp Lazlo* (the next cartoon we worked on together) slightly more seasoned but possibly more idealistic. This time, we reasoned, we knew what could go wrong, we knew what we wanted to do differently, and this time it would be exactly the way Joe wanted things to be, and it all would be great. Actually, *Camp Lazlo*, in my opinion, was one of the funniest and most artistic cartoons I had seen in

a long time. I should note that as I type this, my daughter is sitting on the floor of my study playing with a set of *Camp Lazlo* bobbleheads.

Ultimately, much of what Joe writes about in this book is about optimism. Optimism is what gets us through the process of pitching a series, no matter which side we're on. The artists must believe they are pitching the next great cartoon, and we on the other side of the desk must begin every day believing that today is the day we will receive the pitch for the next great life-changing series. Optimism is probably the most crucial ingredient for anyone working on an animated series at any step of the process.

If I were about to create a series, Joe is the person I would go to for advice. Joe has shown that it is possible to hang on to your vision and your integrity while working in television. He is proof that you can create and produce two series and still be just as upbeat and idealistic about the animation industry as ever—maybe more so. And he is generous enough to want to share his experience and his knowledge. There are myriad other reasons to take Joe's advice: The *Rocko* and *Camp Lazlo* series bibles were two of the best I have ever seen. The *Rocko* production team remains one of the best teams I have ever worked with. In my small file folder of "favorite drawings ever" is a still-funny panel from an early *Rocko* storyboard showing a character flying out of a truck and about to land in a junkyard that says, "Old utensil graveyard. Please bury your utensils pointy end up." I still find myself humming "R-E-C-Y-C-L-E, recycle!" from *Rocko*'s musical episode "Zanzibar." And I am thankful I was able to work on series that have been so well liked and memorable.

As someone who still vets series pitches every week for my job, this is a book to which I know I will be referring people. The future of television animation remains a cause for optimism indeed.

Introduction

Q: *"You've been in TV animation since 1993.*
             How do you feel it's changed since then?"

A: *"The kids that were watching the stuff we made in '93 are now*
             the new generation of show creators."

—STEVE HILLENBURG, CREATOR OF *SpongeBob SquarePants*

With newly emerging Internet media opportunities and countless cable channels, the dream of creating your own animated cartoon series has never been more in reach. If making cartoons is a significant part of your own personal journey, I would love to help you get there. More important, I want to help you get there with your vision and your soul intact.

I have often witnessed highly talented people with big dreams come into this sometimes intimidating business without enough preparation for what they are about to experience. I have seen their great ideas stumble and fail in situations where a few pointers may have helped. After receiving many letters asking me for advice, I decided to write this book. It is merely my advice . . . my approach . . . what I have learned from creating and producing my two shows. You should seek other advice as well.

Pursuing your vision is not just about making a cartoon, however. I have no interest in helping you create your own animated series that will get lost in the clutter of mundane media. Instead, I want you to create something that inspires, stands out, breaks ground, and invokes conversation or debate; a series that is your own artistic expression but that can also earn a great income for

you—as the title states, a cartoon with *character*. I mean this in the sense of great characters, but also in the sense of you the creator having integrity and character while producing it. If you can accept this challenge, then I believe you can find the inspiration to embark on this path.

Cartoons are sometimes looked upon as just zany craziness that constantly flies in the opposite direction of structure or that lacks process. This could not be further from the truth. It's like assuming that the troupe Monty Python must have been on drugs to create their comedy, when in reality it was extremely hard work that couldn't possibly have been done under the influence of any mind-altering substance. (And they have said as much repeatedly.) I've also been accused of being on drugs or in the throes of insanity while writing and producing some of my stuff. I can tell you for a fact that the first one is not true, while the second one is open to interpretation. . . .

My main goal in this book is to guide you in defining a process whereby you can find your level of self-expression and pursue your craft with honesty and do so in the belly of the beast called "the commerce of entertainment." In other words, enable you to bridge the gap between your unique artistic vision and producing a commercial cartoon. Sound like a difficult task? Challenging, yes; impossible, no.

Let me say this up front as well: This book is more for the "auteur" approach to an animated cartoon. In this approach, more of the creator goes into each episode, and it is one that takes risks and takes full advantage of the whacked-out world of the animation medium.

While writing this book, I have tried to give you my honest, no-holds-barred perspective on my experiences in the industry. It is my hope that in conveying the stories to the best of my recollection, I have not offended or caused grief of any kind. I am merely putting my experiences out there so that someone who aspires to be part of this world can learn from both my mistakes and my victories.

I had learned many lessons from making animated independent films, but when I came into a series environment, there were all new lessons to be learned. Most of these were taught by veterans of *The Simpsons* and other shows coming over to my show and helping me learn the ropes. (Yes, I constantly learn from people I manage.) Sometimes I challenged the ways things were done, and always fought for a better way. Often I was flying by the seat of my pants and being surrounded by the best talent and minds in the business. I have been fortunate to include interviews with some of these great minds in this book. Some are able to cast a rare illumination into the dark corners of making a series.

As well as having created and produced more than fifty hours of television, I also bring marketing and design expertise from my time working in advertising; experience from running my own studio and working with clients; twenty years of managing others in a creative environment; and my adventures in writing and illustrating children's books with recurring characters. My background in design and marketing has helped me develop the materials I needed to

successfully pitch two shows. This book is a way of sharing what I know about telling your own stories and creating characters that live and breathe in an animated series environment, whether on TV, the Web, or in film. (In film? you ask. Yes. For example, *Wallace & Gromit* started as a short animated film, became a successful, though short-lived, television series, and went on to become a successful feature film.)

I don't claim to have invented any of the methods I describe in this book. Rather, I've assembled all of the lessons I've learned and formulated them into preferred methods, which helped ensure that the vision of my two animated series arrived safely on your screen, on schedule and on budget. Perhaps you can learn from this book and formulate your own methods in order to meet your goals. I sincerely hope so.

How to Use This Book

You can either read this book from start to finish or tailor the information to your situation. If you want more insight into developing characters for your various projects or books, chapter 4 will be very helpful. If you want to create your own series idea but don't want to sell it to a network (which I totally understand), skip the pitch proposal part and move on to chapter 8. If you are developing a show that you hope will become a series for a network or studio, it's beneficial to read chapter 8, "Series Production," before starting development, because the knowledge of how a story line fits into a volume context, rather than a single episode, will be very helpful while you are designing your show and characters. This chapter will also be valuable if you are looking for work in animation, seeking to get your foot in the door, because it offers insight into all of the various jobs that go into making a cartoon. For instance, a particular job may scream out at you as the perfect place for you to hone your skills while you develop your own show. The main thing is to have fun with your endeavors, and again, to keep your vision, your integrity, and your sense of expression while maneuvering successfully through the market-driven world of entertainment.

We all have the characters and stories in our heads. How do we successfully transfer them to a series and develop the story to where it starts to take on a life of its own? How can we continue to raise the art form to a place where it inspires as well as entertains? That's where I hope I can help, in sharing what I have learned.

I want to end this introduction with the open letter to the *Rocko's Modern Life* staff that I posted at the beginning of the show's bible (you will find out more about what a show bible is in chapter 7). I think it exemplifies what we were trying to do and, even if we didn't entirely hit our mark, what was then, and still is, possible.

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OPEN LETTER TO ROCKO'S STAFF 1993

When Nickelodeon approached me to conceive an idea for a television animated series, it was important to me to do something very different. I wanted to do something with bite, warped sophistication, and the feel of an independent film. Nickelodeon supported this vision, and I developed ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE.
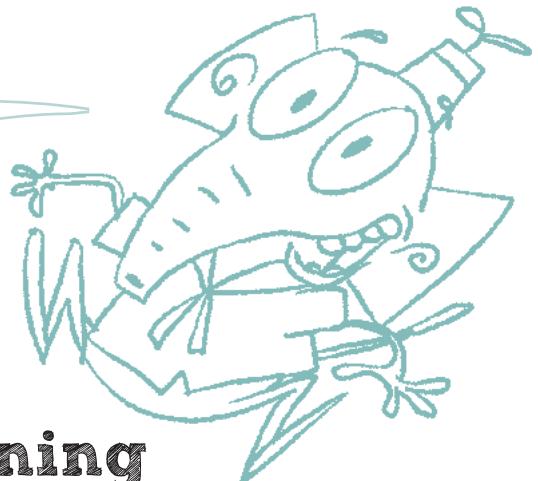
It is almost a necessity to "UNLEARN" old ways when approaching a style such as this. The style lends itself to a "Why can't we try it this way" approach. Because the show is highly character driven, every quirk and subtlety must come through, uncrowded by flash. Rocko's world was designed to make someone stumbling on it feel slightly off-kilter. The "bend and squash" of every prop and background focuses on the unstable world Rocko has found himself in. Although the style is different, you will find some methods and processes that borrow from the old. In some cases, we have coupled the successful methods from a prior era with new methods more adapted to today's environment.

We have put together this guide in an effort to communicate my vision of "Rocko." Although it took a while to create, it may never be complete. I hope the characters keep surprising us in the places they will go, and that we continue to polish the process of producing a series such as this.

Thank you for your commitment to this challenge. I hope you have fun with it.

Joe Murray
Creator/Producer

A Brief History: My Path to Cartooning and the Dawn of TV Animation

"The Artist must create a spark before he can make a fire, and before art is born. The Artist must then be ready to be consumed by the fire of his own creation."

—Auguste Rodin

It was the fall of 1993. I was sitting in a Los Angeles eatery awaiting the prime-time premiere of my own Nickelodeon animated series *Rocko's Modern Life* with both nervousness and shock. My crew of fifty (the ones who had survived the previous nine months) were with me, also eager to see whether my challenge would come true—the challenge that I had laid out at the beginning of the journey, of creating a show we would all be proud to watch and that would thoroughly entertain us. It was, after all, television animation, one of the roughest canvases any artist could ever work on.

As the sometimes-grumpy producer and director of this amazing crew in LA (and a crew of two hundred in Korea), I had never experienced a year in which I felt so creatively energized, engulfed, pushed to the limit, and proud of the artists working side-by-side with me. In short, up to that point in my life, I had never felt so totally alive. While we were waiting, I began to think, how did I get here—an independent animated filmmaker with no TV experience, producing and directing my own show on a well-known cable network?

My Path to Animation and Television

A TV fell on my head when I was five. No harm done physically, but it may explain the slightly dislodged view my brain later had of the world. I grew up in the turbulent 1960s, and from our cookie-cutter tracked house—nestled safely in an agricultural valley in Northern California—I watched the world change. We lived on a small slab of suburbia plopped in the middle of an oasis of apricot and prune orchards in San Jose, a suburb that grew like a weed until there was no oasis left, except in the eyes of developers.

I wanted to be an artist from as far back as I can remember. My dad didn't like the idea. The region, which would eventually become known as "Silicon Valley," had its future in technology, and my dad didn't see any purpose or stability in a life of art. But I was a rebellious, tenacious kid. As I experimented with different forms of art, cartooning became a growing obsession. I worked to emulate every master cartoonist I could find, from Walt Kelly to Charles Schulz. I stole, borrowed, and copied ideas so that my cartoons began to look like theirs. I felt a career as a cartoonist was my calling, so from an early age I began sending off batches of my strips and political cartoons to newspapers and syndicates looking to be published, but there were no bites. My mother always encouraged my art, but she also focused on my code of conduct in the world. She taught me to value honesty above all else and to never sacrifice it to get ahead. I also learned a lot about business and a strong work ethic from my father, and I thank him for those lessons, which I continue to use in my career.

*"Every child is an artist.
The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."*

—Pablo Picasso

One of my cartoons from my high school newspaper, 1978.

I GUESS SANTA GOT LAID OFF OR SOM'TIN CAUSE MY MOM SEZ WE GET OUR PRESENTS FROM SOME GUY CALLED MASTER CHARGE

When I was eleven or twelve, Saratoga Cigarettes ran a cartoon contest in a magazine that was one of those "We supply the caption and you come up with the cartoon" challenges. The caption was their long-standing tagline, "Wait until I finish my Saratoga" (apparently touting how long you could smoke one). The cartoon I entered showed someone being revived after being cryogenically frozen for a hundred years, saying, "Wait until I finish my Saratoga." Well, to my great surprise, I won the contest, and the prize was a big cash award. However, I had to fill out a form stating that I was over eighteen in order to receive the award. After all, it was a cigarette ad. I brought
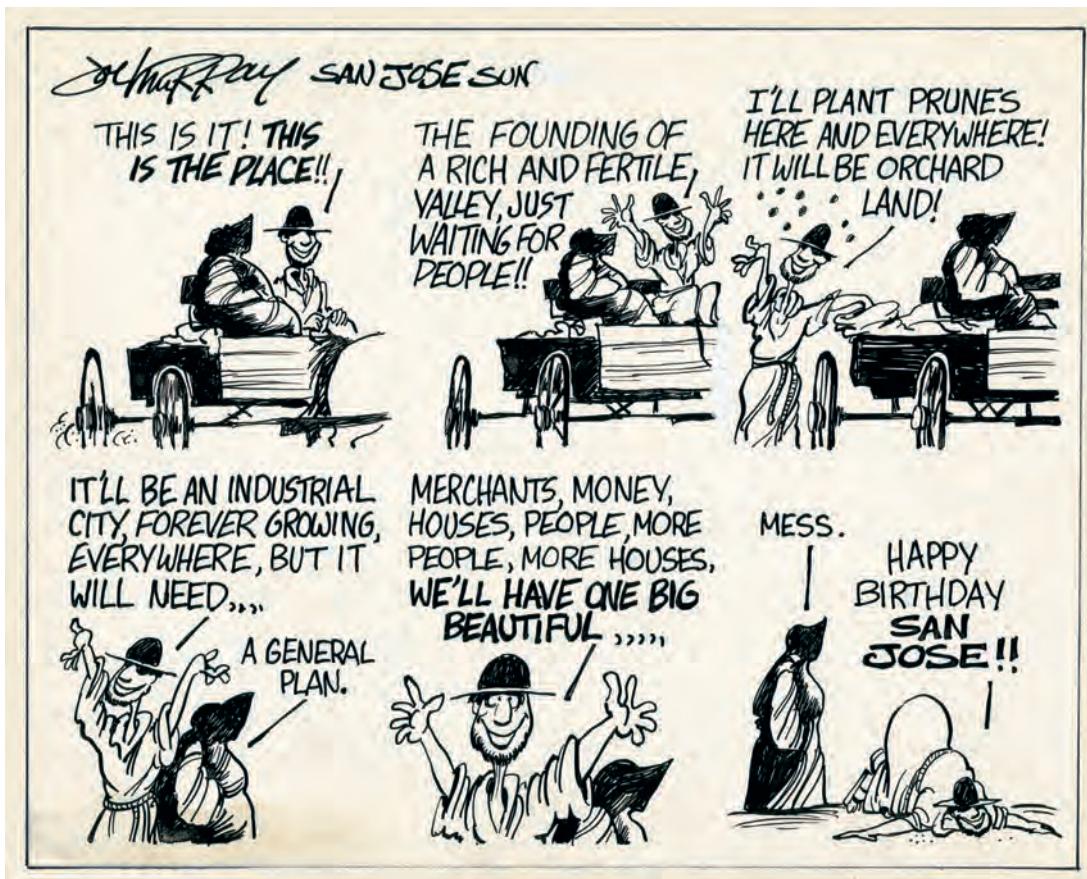
Jimmy Carter was one of my heroes, but also the subject of many of my more unflattering caricatures, this one from 1977.

the dilemma to my mother, saying all I had to do was say I was over eighteen and the money was mine. She left it up to me, but told me no accomplishment was worth anything if it was achieved dishonestly. Sadly, I put down on the form that I was only twelve, and of course I was disqualified. It was a hard but valuable lesson.

My eccentric, belly-dancing grandfather was also an enormous influence on me. He was anti-establishment and a prolific writer, and when he couldn't get anyone to buy his writing, he published his own newspaper and distributed it himself. He was the first to buy my cartoons for his paper when I was eleven and helped me to publish my own newspaper when I was twelve, called *Teen Vibes*. It gave me my own place to show off my cartoons and my weird writing, and I made a few bucks off it. I even finagled a field-and-dugout-access press pass from the San Francisco Giants baseball team by sending them a few issues and saying I was doing a story on them. You should have seen their faces when a kid showed up.

They say when you are on a determined path, unseen hands guide you along the way. For me, one of those "hands" was an art teacher named Mark Briggs, who mentored my early years and helped me earn a scholarship at a San Francisco art college when I was fourteen. Another was a teenage girl, who will probably never know how much she helped me on a fateful summer day in 1977. I had just turned sixteen and was finally able to work legally. My dad told me I needed to cut my

One of my political cartoons from *The San Jose Sun*, 1979.

The cover illustration to a book of my cartoons I published in my senior year of high school, entitled *Classless Clown*.

teeth (and my hair) on some real jobs, like fast-food joints and car washes. I applied in earnest at these places for summer work, but to no avail. Almost at the point of defeat, I saw an ad in the local paper for a caricature artist at a local amusement park called Frontier Village. Figuring it was a long shot, since I had never done such a thing before, I redrew some Mort Drucker caricatures out of *Mad Magazine* and sent them in. To my shock, I was hired.

I did my first caricature of a subject who actually sat for me on my first day of work at Frontier Village. It was so awful that the lady tore it up and refused to pay for it. As I looked for my supervisor to inform her that they'd hired a fraud and that I should leave, a cute girl my age walked up to my little gazebo booth to find an insecure artist cowering, trying not to make eye contact. She gave me a big smile, with her blond hair shimmering in the sun, and asked for a caricature. I explained my situation and offered to draw her for free. I was nervous, but her laugh put me at ease. I finished the cartoon and showed it to her, half expecting the same reaction as from the previous woman. But she liked it and paid for it; then I turned around to see that a line had formed for more caricatures. When I looked back, the girl had disappeared. I finished that day and spent a magical summer there employed as an artist.

That same summer, one of the editors of a local paper called *The San Jose Sun* got tired of my continuously flooding him with batches of political cartoons and finally hired me as their weekly cartoonist for their editorial page. Eventually that job veered into an offer from an advertising agency to do cartoons for car ads, which led to an after-school job, and later a full-time gig. My high-school years found me pumping out volumes of comic features for the weekly school paper, producing my weekly political cartoon for the *Sun,* and then driving to the ad agency straight from my last class to do a cartoon for a local car ad or bank.

I started wondering how my cartoons might look if they moved. Although Disney animation always fascinated me, it wasn't until the "alternatives," such as Ralph Bakshi's *Wizards* and Bruno Bozetto's *Allegro Non Troppo,* wandered into my line of sight that I really became intrigued by the medium of animation. I dabbled with the idea of turning my political cartoons into animated clips for TV news but

soon learned that the time element of animation would prove that impossible. Until then, I had always envisioned a life on the comic pages, so animation was going to have to wait. Heck, college was going to have to wait. I was going to be a millionaire comic-strip artist, and fast! Comic strips were going to save me from spending the rest of my life in corporate America selling cars and "hot 'n juicy" Wendy's hamburgers with my cartoons.
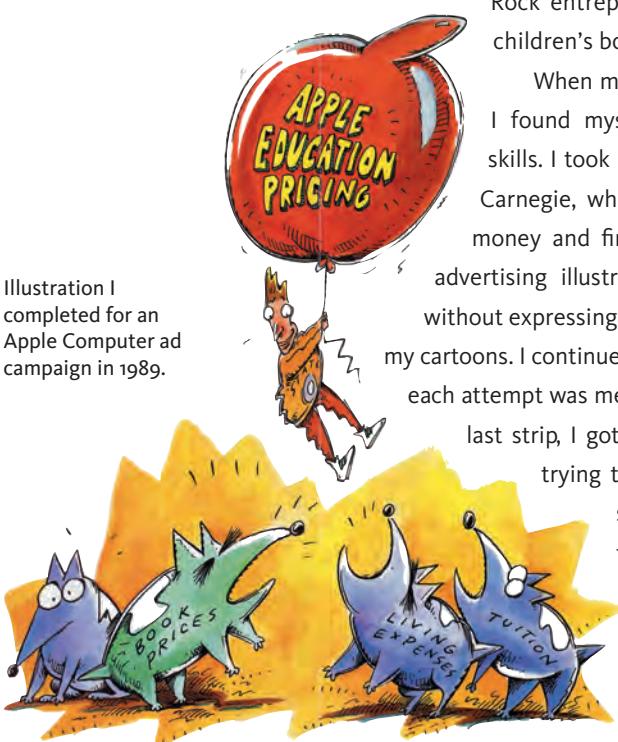
Reality burst my dream bubble, however, and I realized I needed money for rent and food while I created the next *Peanuts* comic strip. I figured out that I could sell my cartoons and illustrations directly to businesses and other ad agencies for a lot more than I was getting paid by the small firm I was working for, so at age twenty—full of blind bravado—I decided to start my own business. Without any confirmed clients, I rented a small studio space and hit the pavement with my portfolio. Soon I couldn't keep up with the rent on my apartment, so I ended up on a friend's couch for a year, subsisting on the leftovers from another friend's catering business. The newspaper for which I was cartooning stopped doing editorial work and became an advertising tabloid. I became the clichéd starving artist.

I soon realized that sustaining my own illustration business required much more than my ability to draw well, so I started direct-mail marketing and created a business plan. Business slowly started to pick up. The building boom in San Jose was fueling the local economy, and blossoming Silicon Valley became host to an array of new businesses. This was good timing for me: Apple Computer, IBM, Hewlett Packard, Tandem, Activision, and Hyatt Hotels all became clients, as well as the San Francisco Giants, *San Francisco Chronicle,* and many magazines, ad agencies, and design firms. I also did a line of greetings cards with Pet Rock entrepreneur Gary Dahl and illustrated a couple of children's books.

Illustration I completed for an Apple Computer ad campaign in 1989.

When my business expanded into a larger studio space, I found myself hiring a staff and learning management skills. I took business classes and public speaking from Dale Carnegie, while enrolling in investment classes to manage money and finance. Running my own studio, doing mostly advertising illustration work, was stable, but I felt unfulfilled without expressing my creative side or making someone laugh with my cartoons. I continued to pursue syndication for my comic strips, but each attempt was met with encouragement and no contract. On the last strip, I got a call from a syndicate editor who said I was trying to do too much with a small strip. "You always seem to run out of room," he said. "You try and tell stories that are too big for a comic strip. Have you ever considered animation?" "No," I grunted, and thanked him for yet another encouraging rejection. What I didn't know then was how prophetic he really was.

I had a bit of an epiphany when I realized I had to expand my file space to house all the rejection letters I was getting for my comic strips. Was a comic strip something I really loved doing? And, if I really loved it so much, wouldn't I be doing it anyway, even without a big syndicate signing me to a contract? I began to picture my life doing comic strips everyday, and I didn't know if I even liked the idea. Maybe my ego had sucked the inspiration out of my comic-strip work, and it was no longer about something I loved. I decided to stop chasing a dream I thought I was supposed to be doing and began looking for an art outlet I really enjoyed, without monetary gain or fame as a factor. My small illustration studio was doing fine paying the bills, so I thought that perhaps I could find something that would feed me artistically while I made money drawing advertising illustrations of dancing computers and singing tomatoes. I surrendered to the search for something inspirational. My new wife and I scraped together enough money to buy a small house, and together we lived a life of frugality and environmental advocacy. It was a nice, simple life, and I was grateful for that.

One night, I went to a touring animation festival with some friends. I sat in the theater mesmerized. Never before had I seen independent animated shorts before. (I believe *Bambi Meets Godzilla* by Marv Newland was a favorite that night.) A light went on in my head. I used to be fascinated by animation and the thought of making my characters move. What had happened to that? Maybe I could tell

The San Francisco Giants baseball team was a great client.

Creating Animated Cartoons with Character

The first appearance of "The Bigheads" in my regular feature *Rizzo the Art Director* for the Western Art Directors publication.

my stories with animation. Maybe that syndicate guy was right. After all, the medium offered a great combination of my love of gags and characters. Plus, I thought, it could be fun. I immediately enrolled in an introductory animation class at De Anza College in Cupertino, near my studio. Soon I was having a love affair with all of my assignments.

As a final assignment, I was supposed to create a character and make a short film bringing him in and bringing him out—a very simple concept. I illustrated it on typing paper with a felt pen and shot the whole minute-and-a-half on an old 16mm Bolex film camera without any registration. The short was about an old married guy who has trouble putting out his wife's very fat cat. One thing I'll always remember about doing that first film was that I lost all sense of time working on it. When I screened it in the basement of the college with a noisy projector, the small classroom laughed, and the instructor, Kim Tempest, told me I needed to add sound to the film and get it out on the festival circuit. "You've got to be kidding," I said. "It's a quickie assignment." She handed me an old reel-to-reel tape recorder and a microphone and said, "Go find the sounds."

So I recorded my lawn mower, the inside of my freezer, the sound my cat made when I squeezed her, and a San Francisco Giants baseball game off the TV (a major sin that you are warned about at the start of every baseball game when listening on the radio). With broken-down equipment on loan from the film department, I added sound to a now expanded two-and-a-half-minute black-and-white film and titled it *The Chore*. When my instructor saw the new sound edit, she said, "You need to enter this in student film competitions." It seemed like just another crazy thought, but I did, and about five months later, I received a call from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that my film had won a Student Academy Award for animation in an international competition. My little film went on to win a Focus Film Award, was picked up for distribution, and was selected for one of those very festivals where I had seen my first independent film a few years earlier.

When *The Chore* got picked up for distribution, I realized that I had used the recording of the baseball game without consent. I was terrified that the cost of getting the rights to use it could bankrupt the whole deal, so I called the San
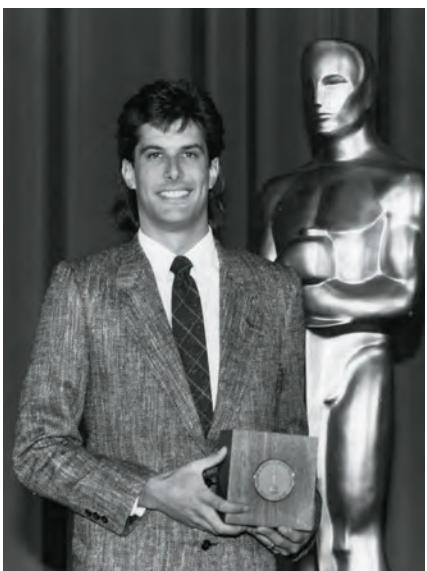
An editorial illustration of one of my least favorite presidents, 1986.

A still from my first film, *The Chore*, which was drawn on unregistered typing paper.

Winning my student Academy Award for my first animated film, *The Chore,* 1989.

Francisco Giants and told them my plight. I sent them a copy of the film, and a few days later they called to say they loved it and I could buy the rights for one dollar! So I dodged a major bullet and learned a big lesson. What really blew me away was that this little inspired piece of art done without the goal of earning money actually went on to earn what was quite a substantial amount for me at the time. I decided to reinvest the money in my new passion. I bought a video pencil-test system and was immediately hooked. I couldn't stop animating. I loved it! I started offering animation services through my studio and began doing some commercials as well as a few MTV ID spots. I knew that animation offered me a different form of narrative expression, but I really didn't want to fall into the same trap with animation that I had with illustration, where a majority of what I did was in the service of selling something.

I immediately began writing and animating my second film, *My Dog Zero*, about a lonely man who adopts a brain-dead dog from the pound and finds that the love of a pet exceeds his dog's ability to fetch the morning paper. Suddenly the advertising illustration and animation work I was doing in the studio became mostly a way to finance my films. I wanted this next film to be longer, with an actual story, and to be in color, with painted backgrounds. It took me close to a year to finish all the hand-drawn animation. I would work on two or three illustration jobs a month in order to pay the bills and then go back to working on the film. My pencil-test system became my animation teacher. I would do whole scenes and test them; if they didn't work, I would toss them out and start over.

When I finished the animation, I refilmed all the scenes on 16mm to create a rough work print. But now everything needed to be prepared to film it in color. I realized I was going to need some cash, because backgrounds needed to be painted. Cels had to be hand-inked and painted back then (this was before digital ink and paint). Next, everything needed to be shot on film, with long-pan cels, followed by adding the sound and postproduction. I wanted all aspects of the project to be significantly better than my first film. To drum up some funds to complete the film, I sent a work print of *Zero* to festivals and distributors to see if they would prepurchase the film or at least give me some money to finish it. They were not interested. "Couldn't you do one of those little quickie black-and-white films again?" they asked. "We like those." It would have been easier and more cost-effective to do a film the way I had the first one, but I needed more of a challenge. My interests were tending more toward what I could learn about animation and color, rather than just earning a buck. Plus, I loved pushing the humor to do whatever I wanted. At the time I thought the humor was cutting-edge and a bit risky, but it was nothing compared with what would come later in TV.

Determined to finish the film my way, I applied for grants and sent copies of the film to anyone who would take a look. I casually mentioned my need for cash to my New York accountant (whom I still have), and he suggested sending a copy of
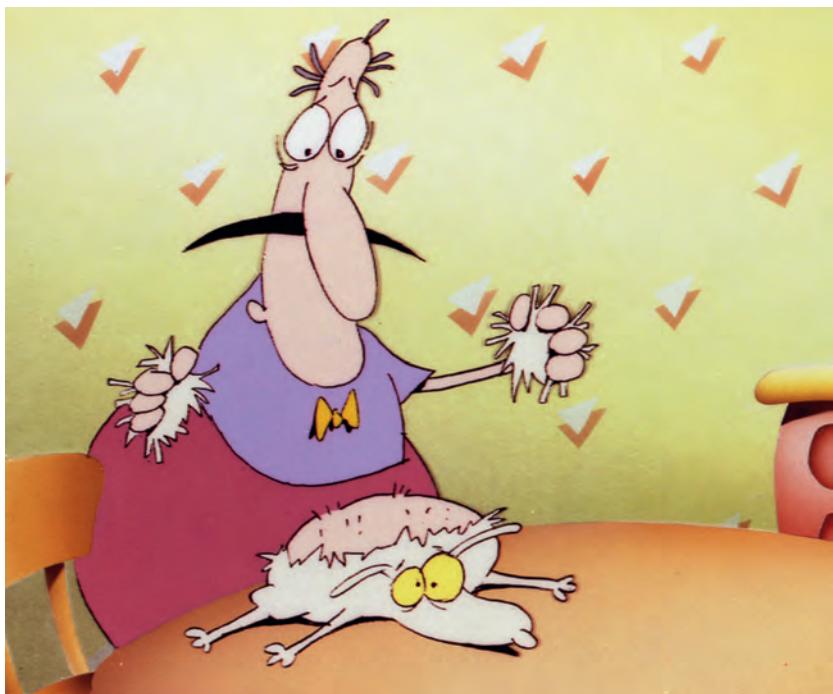
A still from my MTV ID spot produced in the 1980s with the help of Mark Millard, Rob Ripplinger, and Scott Shearer. This spot featured an early version of Heffer the cow.

A still from my second film, *My Dog Zero*.

the film to one of his clients who was an executive at a small cable channel for kids called Nickelodeon. So I did, adding it to the list of many copies that had already gone out. One day I got a call from a woman named Linda Simensky, who was in charge of developing original animated series for Nickelodeon. My film had been passed along to her, and she liked it. She asked whether I would be interested in developing *My Dog Zero* as a televised animated series. Now, keep in mind that the 1970s and '80s were not exactly the golden era of television animation, so I had no reason to think a new kids channel would be any different. I politely told Linda I wasn't interested in working in television animation. Lucky for me, Linda did not take no for an answer and told me they were looking for "smart cartoons," something with a different appeal. I agreed to think about it and left it at that.

At the same time, the progress of my indie film was almost as brain dead as the lead character. A fellow student at De Anza College, a great filmmaker and artist named Nick Jennings, took an interest in my project and offered to paint backgrounds. But he was to turn into more than a background artist. There was never any aspect of the film he wasn't willing to jump in and help out with. Nick later ended up playing a big role in the success of *Rocko's Modern Life* as well as Steve Hillenburg's monster achievement, *SpongeBob SquarePants,* acting as art director on both. Nick's positive attitude frequently helped me through a lot of rough spots. I'll always be indebted to him.

My thoughts continued to wander back to my conversation with Linda from Nickelodeon. I went to the library and started researching the new network to find out what they were about. Geraldine Laybourne, then the president of the network, wanted to change the face of children's television to reflect a cooler,

hipper identity. It didn't seem like she wanted to do the cheapo, quickie Saturday morning stuff that was so common on the networks then. She gave kids credit for intelligence, and I liked that. The late 1980s was a time when animation as a medium was starting to break open. The industry was starting to take risks and try cool new techniques. Since Nickelodeon was owned by MTV/Viacom, I thought maybe they would be cool too. I was protective of my films as self-expression, but I also felt that I had something to say with them. If I could transfer that attitude to a series for television, maybe that would work. I loved making a point with an exaggerated view, as I did with my political cartoons. Maybe I could make a comment about "modern life" and how the littlest things had become huge dramas for us. Maybe the main character would be experiencing day-to-day life, as in taking out the garbage. Since he was new to the adult world, maybe it could become exaggerated, a caricature. . . . Maybe he could encounter anthropomorphic animals. . . . Maybe I could make certain types of animals to match the personalities this character had to deal with. . . . I started to get excited about the possibilities. Maybe through this creative narrative I could make a small contribution to television animation. Maybe, maybe, maybe. . . .

   Out of my sketch pads, I pulled a character that I had created for a comic strip: It was a wallaby named Travis. I had seen these tiny kangaroos at the zoo called wallabies, which seemed oblivious to the noisy elephants and chimpanzees nearby, and I thought one would make a great character set within the eye of a hurricane called life. (Read more about this in chapter 4.) I figured, as long as I
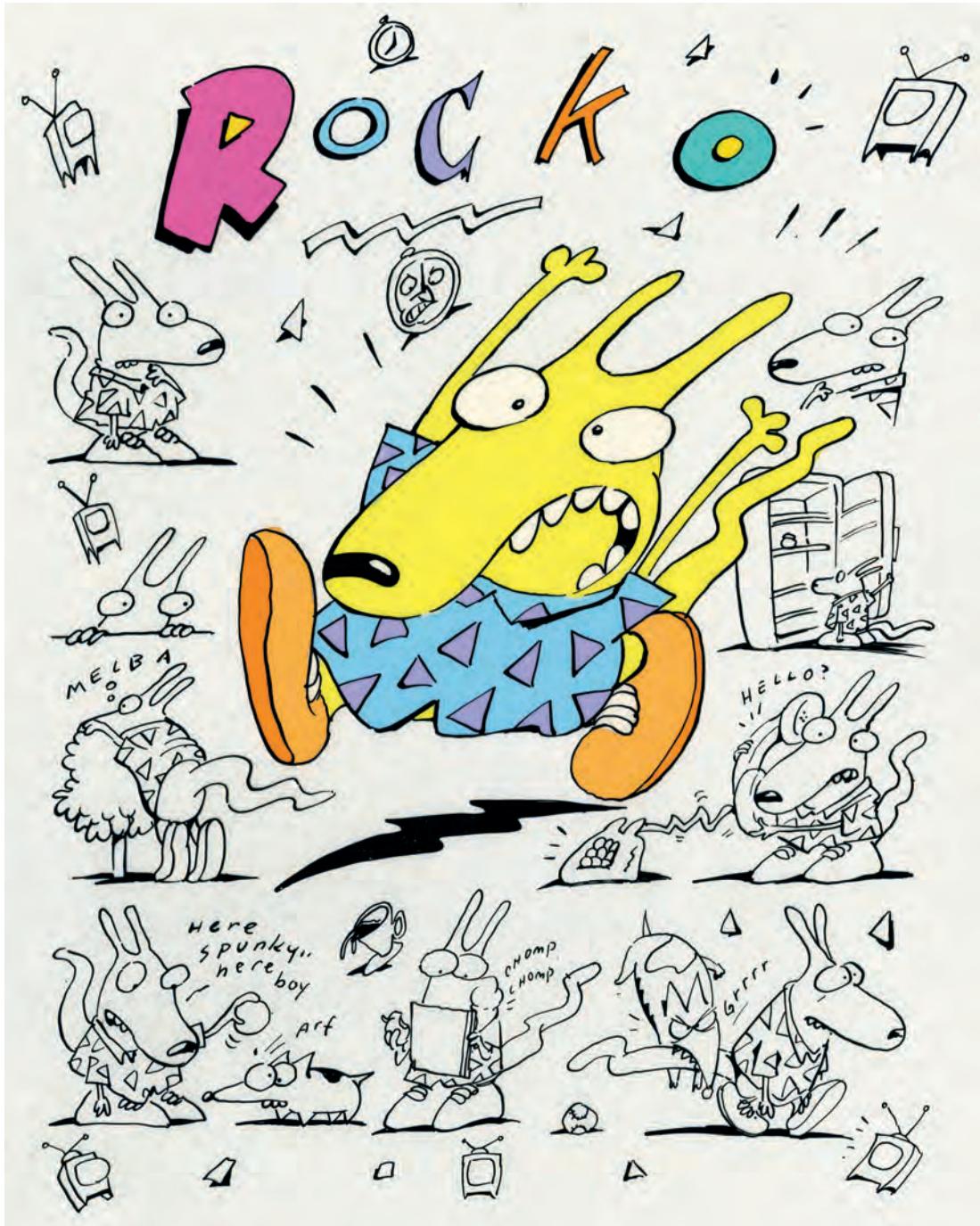
Travis the wallaby, shown here in yet another comic strip attempt, was the inspiration for *Rocko*.
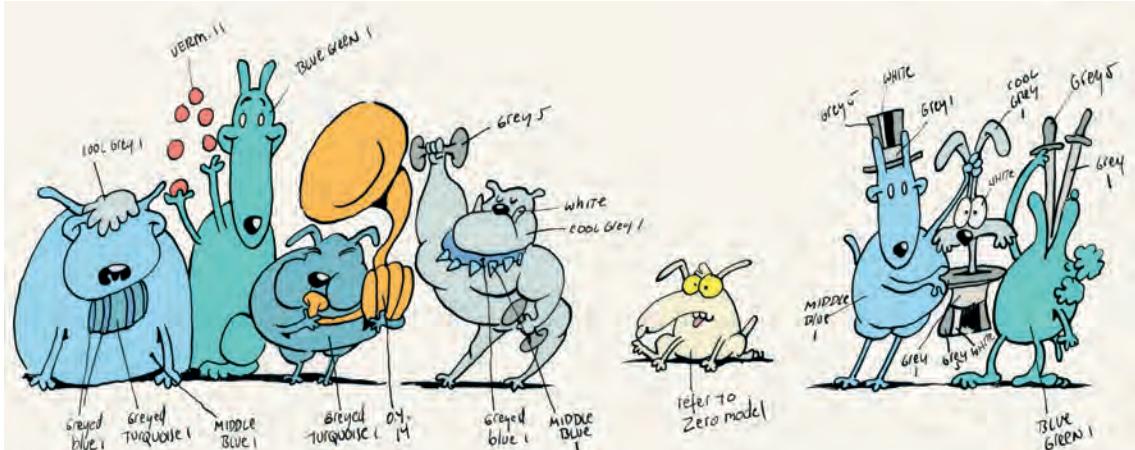
The first Rocko from the proposal I sent to Linda Simensky at Nickelodeon in 1991.

proposed exactly the kind of show I wanted to do and didn't stray from my vision, what could it hurt? If they didn't like it, I would be totally cool with that. In fact, I really doubted that a show as warped, weird, and edgy as this one would ever make it onto television. I changed the wallaby's name to "Rocko" because he sounded more like a fighter. I added a cow named Heffer, some cane-toad neighbors called "The Bigheads," and a brain-dead dog (maybe a cousin of Zero) named Spunky. I went to a local copy service to type up a presentation on one of those fancy

new Apple computers that had the latest graphic capabilities. I hand-painted some cels with the designs and colors of the characters and sent off a package to Linda at Nickelodeon. Maybe I'd get some development money out of it, and that could help me finish my film, I thought. Who knew? I also started to realize that all my previous experience in doing comic strips, graphic design, marketing and advertising, writing, running my own studio and business, and, of course, animation, was coming together in helping me to polish this proposal. Even the life-drawing lessons from art college were not going to waste!

After the package went off, my attention returned to my film, as I had secured a small grant from the Film Arts Foundation to complete the background painting. I asked around to find out what kind of painting service I could afford with this meager amount of money and soon realized it wasn't enough to achieve the level of quality I hoped for. Nick Jennings stepped in and said what he would repeat many more times in the course of our working together: "Why don't we do it ourselves?"

We went back to the college where I had done *The Chore* and asked students to come on weekends to paint my film in exchange for free breakfast, lunch, and dinner (if need be), plus all the soft drinks and coffee they could consume. I showed the pencil footage I had of the film and, to our surprise, got some students to agree to it. We ended up painting for twelve weekends in a row, using the grant money to fund the food, drinks, cels, and paint. We usually had a good crowd show up each weekend, and I was able to personally supervise each cel (only the beginning of what a control freak I turned into!). The painters dubbed themselves the "Earneck Division" (inspired by the constant jokes about the lead character, Mildo, growing ears out of his neck). It was from that

My second independent film, *My Dog Zero*, 1991.

A publicity still from *My Dog Zero*, 1991.

Rocko's Modern Life pilot storyboard. Linda Simensky had to educate me about what the standard television animation storyboard was supposed to look like.

Prod: ROCKO PILOT   Episode: TRASH-
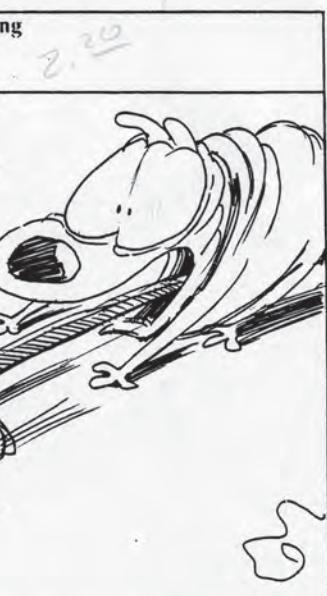
| Scene | | Timing |
| C | | 1.15 |

Action: SPUNKY... CURIOUS ABOUT THE VACUUM... LICKS IT.

Dialogue: "SPLITTT"

| Camera | | Background |
| | | C4 |

| Notes | | Drawing |
| | | 70 |

| Scene | | Timing |
| C | | |

Action: SUDDENLY.. TH. ON... SUCKING I TONGUE

Dialogue: "WHRRR R

Camera

Notes

Property of The Joe Murray Str

experience that I met George Maestri, who became one of my writers on *Rocko*.

After I had finally shot and added music and sound to *Zero,* I started sending it off to animation festivals. One of the distributors who had originally passed on the film in its work-print form was in San Francisco with one of their touring festivals. I showed up at the Palace of Fine Arts with my film in a can under my arm and attempted to convince his group that they should show it to their audience that night to see how funny it was. They hemmed and hawed but finally agreed. They screened the film first. I sat there with some of the people who had helped on it and watched it with an audience for the first time. My relief was immense

Scene	Timing
C	3.25

Action	THEN STRETCHING HIS EYEBALLS...

Dialogue	"WHEEEEEEEE!"

Camera		Background
		C4

Notes		Drawing
		72

(left partial panel:)

ng	2.20

E VACUUM COMES
N SPUNKY'S

RREE!"

	Background
	C4

	Drawing
	71
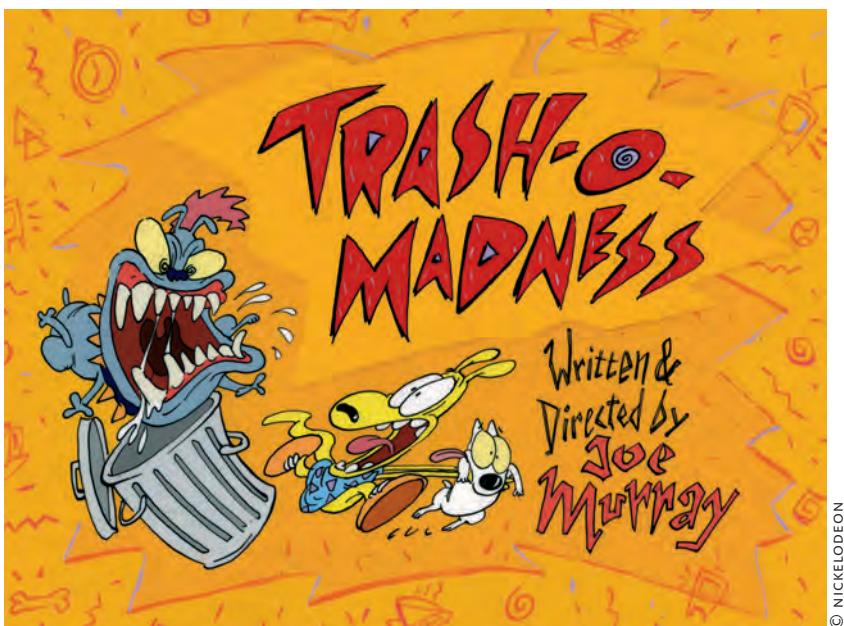
when people started to laugh. Based on the positive response from that night, the distributors admitted they had been wrong initially and now wanted to add the film to their festival.

Meanwhile, a few months had passed since I had sent my *Rocko* proposal to Nickelodeon. From all my experience of trying to get a comic strip syndicated, I was used to getting rejected after a long wait, so I had pretty much forgotten about it. But one day I returned from lunch to find a message from Linda Simensky that they wanted to put *Rocko* into development. I was shocked—and elated! I went through two lawyers to negotiate with the network a deal that I was happy with, and the

Original title card from the *Rocko* pilot.

© NICKELODEON

whole time I dared not tell anyone (except my close colleague Nick Jennings). Who would have believed that a network was considering doing a television series with an independent filmmaker with no prior TV experience? I waited until they agreed to fund a pilot through my studio before I told anyone else about it, and then I started developing the project further, creating a storyboard for the pilot.

I expanded my studio to include more offices in the funky building in Saratoga where I worked. I brought on co-producer Marty McNamara and started scouring the Bay area for talent, snagging the likes of George Maestri, Robert Scull, Tim Bjorklund, Sean Murday, and many other extremely gifted animators and artists to work on the pilot. We animated it all in-house using freelancers. We shot much of the footage in the studio on a hastily built camera stand with a 35mm Mitchell camera. ("Why don't we shoot it ourselves?" said Nick once again, which translated to, "Why don't we shoot ourselves?") So we would shoot all night, drive to San Francisco in the morning to drop the film at the lab, watch dailies of what we shot the day before, and drive back to continue animating and shooting. I eventually rented a room at a motel down the street so we could have a place to shower and sleep if we needed (the couch in the studio was getting particularly grungy).

Just after we finished the pilot, I flew off to Canada, to the Ottawa International Animation Festival, where *My Dog Zero* was showing. It was there that I found out that Nickelodeon loved the pilot and that we were moving forward with the series. I remember having lunch with Linda Simensky on the trip, where she said, "You know, your life is going to change, big time." I didn't know how right she was. But first things first: How was I going to take on the huge endeavor of producing a series in my small studio? I knew I was going to need more people, so while at the festival, I made the quick decision to scout talent for my animated television

series. At one of the screenings, George Maestri, Nick Jennings, and I saw a film called *Wormholes* by a Cal Arts student named Steve Hillenburg. We all agreed that this was the type of animator we needed, so I approached Steve about this new cool show we were going to do. He agreed to come to my studio in San Jose to discuss it. (As you may know, following *Rocko's Modern Life*, Steve went on to create and produce a little-known cartoon called *SpongeBob SquarePants*.)

Ottawa was in September, and Nickelodeon wanted to start production in January. Thus began a mad rush to put a crew together in earnest. We soon realized that we would need another crew in Los Angeles to supplement our studio in Northern California, so we hired more directors for the Southern California unit and made plans for me to shuttle back and forth from San Jose to Burbank to oversee production. I even negotiated to take over an entire building in Saratoga as the Joe Murray Studio Production offices. Everything was coming together.

Then, that November, a horrible personal tragedy struck that changed my life forever—the death of my wife. I won't go into detail about it but will say that I felt that if I could survive it, I could probably get through anything. After such a blow, one of the first decisions I made was to get out of San Jose: There was just too much pain there. So I closed up the studio and convinced a lot of my crew to relocate to Los Angeles so the Northern and Southern California units could all be together. In early January, still in shock from my loss, I walked into a rented office on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City and turned on the lights. A chapter of my life had closed, and production of *Rocko's Modern Life* had begun.

With the crew from Northern California, along with seasoned animators who came over from *The Simpsons,* Ralph Bakshi's *Cool World*, and Richard Williams's crew on *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, we proceeded to boldly move forward. I was a little intimidated by this group of talent, but it taught me an early lesson: Surround yourself with people you can learn from. It was like the Wild West, with all of us shooting from the hip, blazing new frontiers, and falling on our faces, only to get up again and climb back on our horses.

Which leads me back to that day when I was waiting for the premiere of the

Cels from the *Rocko's Modern Life* pilot, shot in my studio in the middle of the night.

first episode and questioning how I got there. But the real question is, How did television animation ever get to the point of allowing this to happen? I know, I know. You're probably saying, "Do I really need to know this background? Can't we just start making cartoons?" Trust me—it will help you. I'm no animation historian, but I'll do my best. So, let's rewind to. . . . Huckleberry Hound? No, farther.

The Dawn of Television Animation

In the beginning, there was light. No, not *that* light, but the flicker of Felix the Cat's face on the first-ever television transmission in 1928. It may have been a precursor to today's animated cartoons, but it would take a long while for cartoon producers to see television as anything more than a novelty. Theatrical cartoon shorts featuring the antics of Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny, and Woody Woodpecker were the order of the day, and remained strong into the 1940s and early 1950s. It wasn't until the cinema double feature rang the death knell for these cartoon shorts that television became a viable and respectable medium for cartoons. At the very least, the owners of these animated properties respected the dollar that could be made from TV. After all, what else were they going to do with all of their animated film stars once they were cut from the movie houses? It soon became commonplace for studios to bundle packages of previous theatrical shorts in an early version of syndicated cartoon blocks to fill the vast emptiness of television air time.

"Let the TV party begin!"

—Heffer, from *Rocko's Modern Life* episode "Boob Tubed"
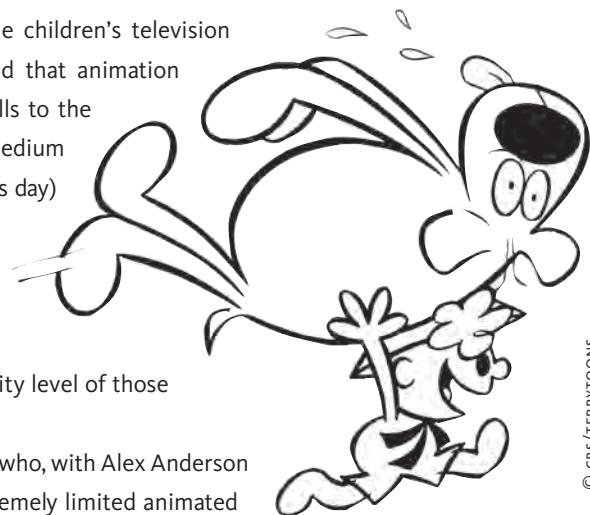
Jay Ward's *Crusader Rabbit* leads the way!

It became apparent in the late 1940s that the children's television market could attract a multitude of sponsors, and that animation would do a good job of gluing those young eyeballs to the screen. However, the first difficult reality of this medium (that television animation still struggles with to this day) reared its ugly head: TV eats up product fast; it's a beast that must continuously be fed in order to thrive. Surely the supply of theatrical shorts would someday run dry. The revenue from TV also made it financially prohibitive to duplicate the quality level of those old fluid and fully realized theatrical cartoons.

Tom Terrific from Terrytoons and CBS.

Enter a young real estate man named Jay Ward, who, with Alex Anderson (nephew of Terrytoons' Paul Terry), created an extremely limited animated series called *Crusader Rabbit*. The year was 1949, and each half-hour episode cost a bargain-basement price of $2,500. The result was very jerky, limited animated characters stumbling through serialized story lines. But the audience, entranced with the newness of the static visual medium of television, bought the crudeness. The older theatricals were still getting sold to TV, but the new model of fast and cheap television animation, or "Short Cut Animation," as it was called, was beginning to grow lungs and walk on land.

The packaging of the old shorts continued through the 1950s, burning through the backlog of Disney gems, Looney Tunes, Popeye, and Heckle and Jeckle. It was a cartoon party for the baby boomers, who were embracing television and its window onto an endless stream of animated mayhem. Merchandising was a significant part of the theatrical cartoon, and television was able to link product and character together like no other medium could. Commercials for the likes of Kellogg's, Hasbro, and Mattel became as much a part of the experience as the cartoon itself. But in 1957, networks could see the writing on the wall and the limits of the current animation methods. Therefore, they tried to find ways to design around the challenges of nonfluid movement.

While NBC was airing the clay-animated *Gumby* by Art Clokey, CBS asked the small cartoon firm United Productions of America (UPA) whether they would be interested in turning a 1951 Academy Award–winning animated short, *Gerald McBoing-Boing,* into a television series. The film itself, written by Dr. Seuss and produced by Phil Eastman, Bill Scott, and John Hubley, was already designed and animated as a departure from the Disneyesque fluid animation. Its simple style lent itself to the medium of more limited animation. UPA accepted, committing to a short run of *McBoing-Boing* episodes, but UPA took it as an artistic challenge rather than an economic burden. The *McBoing-Boing* series expanded into *The Gerald McBoing-Boing Show,* which was also able to serve up UPA's cartoons *Dusty of the Circus, Punch and Judy,* and the *Twirlinger Twins*. Although limited in its approach, the cost was still too high, and the series was canceled after three months. These episodes still stand the test of time, and the Cartoon Network

UPA's *Gerald McBoing-Boing*.

recently revived the series with new episodes for the short-lived "Tickle-U" block of young programming. Another series of note to debut in 1957 was *Tom Terrific* from Terrytoons (which aired on CBS during *Captain Kangaroo*), which carried a similar, pared-down style and was done on a "TV" budget.

Meanwhile, around this time on the MGM lot, a couple of artists/writers named William Hanna and Joseph Barbera were being shown the door because MGM felt it no longer needed new *Tom & Jerry* or *Droopy* cartoons. The newly unemployed creative team decided to open up their own shop—Hanna-Barbera Enterprises, later renamed Hanna-Barbera Productions. With the premiere of *The Ruff and Reddy Show* in 1957 on NBC, Hanna-Barbera became the first truly dedicated content provider of television animated properties, and the first factory of truly "limited" animated fare. HB followed in 1958 with the syndicated series *The Huckleberry Hound Show*, which introduced a picnic basket–stealing bear named Yogi and his little sidekick, Boo Boo. *The Huckleberry Hound Show* became the first animated cartoon show to be honored with an Emmy Award and is credited with putting Hanna-Barbera on the map.

In 1960, a prime-time cartoon premiered on ABC, hurtling a prehistoric *Honeymooner*-type family named *The Flintstones* into animation history. Not only did this show air during the 8:30 P.M. time slot (traditionally seen as the cutoff point for child viewers), but it also featured commercials depicting characters Fred and Barney happily puffing on the sponsors' Winston cigarettes. Television animation was beginning to hit its stride as a crossover medium. Soon all the networks were following suit, filling prime-time slots with Jay Ward's *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, Warner Bros.' *Bugs Bunny Show,* and Ross Bagdasarian's *The Alvin Show*, which gave

Huckleberry Hound with Pixie, Dixie, and Mr. Jinks the Cat.

birth to *Alvin and the Chipmunks.*

Jay Ward's *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.*

The early sixties also marked another milestone. Since all the major studios were closing down their film animation divisions, the migrating herds of highly talented animators began making their way to the only oasis on the horizon— television. But with the seasoned animation staffers came the cartoonist union, demanding well-deserved pay for their members' skills and experience. True to form, American businesses responded with the all too familiar "sucking sound." As a result, Jay Ward was the first to truck his animation process across the border to Mexico, beginning what would become the common practice of outsourcing labor to reduce costs. With the popularity of Japanese animation, as of *Astro Boy* and *Speed Racer*, and the Asian animation labor pool, Japanese-style limited animation was beginning to look attractive as well.

By 1965–1966, the passion for the television cartoon business was beginning to weaken. *The Flintstones* was canceled, and the Hanna-Barbera factory output began to look uninspired. Since the prime-time glut had been played out by then, cartoons were once again ordered to the sandbox. Several factors caused the malaise that infected the animation industry during this time. Economic realities led to more and more outsourcing of animation, and new and dangerous creatures lurked in the lagoon with the dangling legs of cartoons in their sights: The National Association of Better Broadcasting (NABB) and Action for Children's Television (ACT).

There had long been debates over the responsibility of television to regulate

its violence on the airwaves. As the real-life street violence and assassinations of the sixties began to escalate, action groups began to look for places to point fingers—and classic cartoon violence was in their crosshairs. What started as mere editing of old classics turned into outright censorship: the dictation of content of new cartoons and the approving of storyboards. These crusaders demanded that educational content and public service information be injected into children's cartoons. During the late sixties and seventies, the animation industry struggled to find a balance between creating programs kids would watch and those that would get by the regulators. Larry White, head of NBC's daytime programming, was quoted saying, "We shall be applauded by many, and watched by no one."

Thus blossomed the highly inaccurate, unfortunate attitude that was to plague cartoon animation for the next twenty years: "Kids don't seem to care what the cartoon looks like. They'll watch anything." It's more than a little ironic that Flintstone vitamins were a big sponsor of Saturday morning cartoon blocks at the time, because that's what the shows amounted to—something good for kids that's shaped like a favorite character and laced with sugar to help it go down. A writer for *Variety* magazine called the cartoons of the 1970s "Almost unanimously witless, heartless, charmless, tasteless and artless." Even the action groups, who were blamed by many for straightjacketing the industry into mediocrity, criticized the lack of substance. It was a classic case of the chicken and the egg. The final burst of fluff came in the early 1980s, when *The Smurfs* were transplanted from Europe to prance around the airwaves along with *My Little Pony, The Care Bears,* and *Rainbow Brite*. The 1980s may have been called "Morning in America" by some political pundits, but if the animation of the '70s and early '80s was a bad dream, TV animation was about to wake up to some strong coffee.

First, the Reagan Administration extended its hands-off, big-business platform to the Federal Communications Commission (the FCC), relaxing most of the regulations on television that had dictated content. Then, when home video invaded households, it allowed adults and kids alike to rediscover the old classic cartoons without the watchful eye of regulators. These trends, coupled with a new regime at Disney Studios, generated renewed interest in the old animated characters as well as a desire to create new animated features. In fact, home video was credited with making possible a movie like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, with its trip down cartoon memory lane.

A new interest in independent animation cropped up in the late 1980s—quite possibly as a result of the artless fare that was then on TV—along with touring festivals such as the Animation Celebration and Spike & Mike's Festival of Animation, which brought alternative cartoons and animation to average filmgoers everywhere. This time also marked the growth of a new outlet called cable television, the largest factor, in my opinion, in the rebirth of the medium. Niche channels such as MTV, HBO, and Showtime began to appear. Ironically, the media watchdogs thought this new move would allow for channels that would cater to the soft, responsible programming they were seeking. One such channel on which they pinned high hopes was a small station called Nickelodeon, whose

main content was commercial-free lively programming and puppet shows.

Soon cable channels began experimenting with new animation from elsewhere on the globe, and small Hollywood studios such as Klasky Csupo (founded by Hungarian-born animator Gabor Csupo and his American animator wife, Arlene Klasky) began producing cool animation in the form of commercials, shorts, and station ID for the American market. MTV began scouring the festival animation circuit for films to show on its new program, *Liquid Television*. Along with shorts from Colossal Pictures of San Francisco, *Liquid Television* would run independent shorts such as *Frog Baseball* by then little-known animator Mike Judge, starring two dim-witted teenagers named Beavis and Butt-head.

By 1987, animators were constantly calling each other with the latest, "Ya gotta see this!" One such moment was in February 1987, when Ralph Bakshi (*Fritz the Cat, Wizards*) produced his own version of a Mighty Mouse animated series for CBS. Bakshi brought in a young talent named John Kricfalusi to supervise the production, leading to the highly controversial *Mighty Mouse: The New Adventures*. Although this show was short-lived (nineteen episodes), it launched a revolution and made shock waves that were felt throughout the industry. Why? Because it was a new animated show that actually looked like a cartoon! Finally, fresh, edgy, and smart entertainment was being offered that the cartooning world had not seen for decades. Plots were written in storyboard format rather than scripted. The artists had newfound freedom that had been suppressed for too long. Although a line was crossed, and the show got canned because of alleged "drug references," the ship had sailed, and there was no turning back.

From there, the party escalated. A young new network called Fox decided to make a go at prime-time animation for adults by pulling a series of shorts called "The Simpsons" from *The Tracy Ullman Show* and giving them their own half hour. Together with producer James Brooks (*Taxi, Terms of Endearment*), *Life in Hell* cartoonist and *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening pulled off a deal that would make others envious: No notes from the network. Fox agreed to it. The show, initially produced by Klasky Csupo, who did the shorts, and later by Film Roman, went on to make animated history.

Meanwhile, media conglomerates began buying the cable networks. Viacom bought MTV and Nickelodeon. Turner Broadcasting purchased Hanna-Barbera and its whole library of properties. (Later, in 1996, Turner would merge with Time Warner, turning Bugs Bunny and Scooby Doo into siblings.)

Dexter's Laboratory by Genndy Tartakovsky was one of the shining stars to emerge from Cartoon Network.

© CARTOON NETWORK

What emerged from the combination of relatively young cable channels with the deep pockets of big-daddy conglomerates was the ability to produce and *own* their animated shows.

Having a television network and its advertisers fund production was very commonplace, but not since *Tom Terrific* in the early sixties (owned by CBS) did a network actually "own" a series and its characters' copyrights after production was completed. With Viacom in the syndication business, this made good business sense. Vanessa Coffey and Linda Simensky embarked on a new strategy at Nickelodeon with the blessing of President Gerry Laybourne: Sign up breakout talent, let them produce their own shows, start an animation library, and make a big cartoon splash. In other words, have the networks become their own content providers. Nickelodeon commissioned Klasky Csupo to produce a show they created called *Rugrats,* John Kricfalusi (from *Mighty Mouse*) to produce the amazing *Ren & Stimpy*, and Jim Jenkins to produce his show *Doug*. They didn't make just a splash, but a tidal wave that pushed everything else out of the way.

The newly formed Cartoon Network moved forward with the hit shows *The Powerpuff Girls* by Craig McCracken, *Dexter's Laboratory* by Genndy Tartakovsky, *Cow and Chicken* by David Feiss, and *Courage the Cowardly Dog* by John Dilworth. These were all extremely well-designed and hilarious shows, which established Cartoon Network as the place for smart, progressive animated mayhem. Nickelodeon continued to churn out their animation output. After their animation production arm "Games Animation" merged with my studio to produce *Rocko's Modern Life*, they solidified into Nicktoons Studio and put out *Hey Arnold* by Craig Bartlett and

Steve Hillenburg and Nickelodeon hit the mother lode with *SpongeBob SquarePants.*

another show that was a bit of an experiment, called *CatDog* by Peter Hannan.

There were two reasons why *CatDog* was experimental. First, as far as I know, all the creator-driven cartoons up to this point had been crafted by an artist/writer with animation experience. Peter Hannan had some beautiful and funny illustrated books to his credit, but when Nickelodeon picked up *CatDog,* the Nicktoon Cartoon Factory merely placed Hannan, the outside creator, at the helm of the talented animation team they had already established. This move began to expand the pool for bringing in creators. The second part of the *CatDog* experiment, in my opinion, failed. By that time, Nickelodeon had begun "stripping" the shows that had been in production since the early '90s. "Stripping" means to run a different episode every day of the week (rather than once a week, which is the norm when a show is in production). This is possible when you have a good amount of episodes in the can, like 52 or 60. It also makes a good syndication block. So what did the powers at Nickelodeon decide was a good experiment? To start the show out by stripping; in other words, to create as many episodes as possible as quickly as possible and start out airing a new one every day of the week. Then it could move into syndication more quickly, which is a big moneymaker for Viacom. I know a lot of the artists who were on that team, and I think they are still scraping their brains off of the floor from that experience.

When former *Rocko's Modern Life* director Steve Hillenburg produced his pilot of a little yellow sponge named SpongeBob, he had seen the *CatDog* experiment at work and decided to convince Nickelodeon to slow down the pace of production. By the second season of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, this humble cartoon character was well on its way to being one of the most powerful, recognizable icons in the history of the medium. Of course, we went on to experience the continued output of Fox with *Family Guy* by Seth MacFarlane, and Comedy Central's monster hit *South Park* by Trey Parker and Matt Stone.
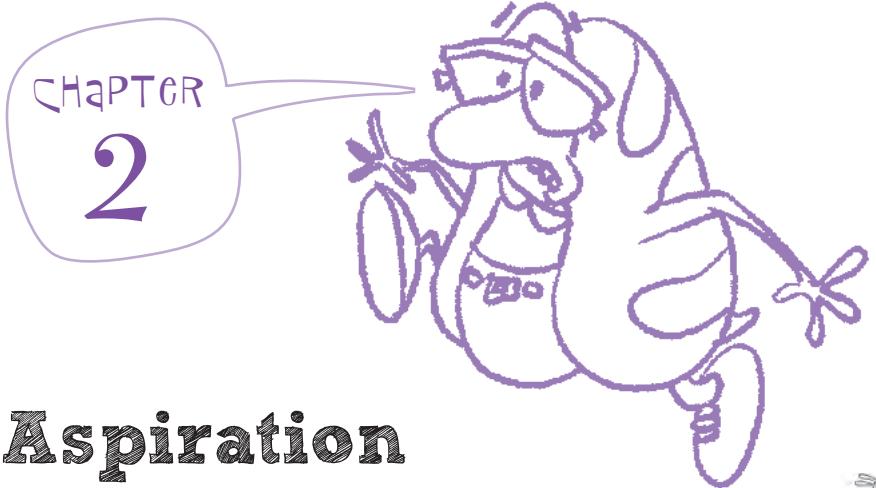
There is one other huge milestone in the journey of the animated cartoon series. Much like the transition from movies to television, the Internet began to play a new role in the history of the character-based animated series. At the beginning, little cartoons like "Doodie.com" amused the most juvenile of minds, and were not really taken seriously as any inroad into cartoon distribution. While the dot-com boom came and went, for the big-money media people with sites like Icebox.com, cartooning on the Internet went stealth and slowly began leeching away the lifeblood that had been sustaining the television cartoon business— viewers and advertising dollars. It wasn't done maliciously; it just unfolded by way of what we call technology and progress.

As of this writing, advertising revenue for television is shrinking, which is leading to more outside productions of cartoons and to a growing field of niche cartoons for the Internet, such as Seth MacFarlane's *Cavalcade of Cartoons*. These "webisodes" have opened up cartoon production to anyone with Flash animation and sound effects software.

Conclusion

Okay, that was a lot of history packed into a short timeline. But I'm sure what's on your mind now more than ever is, How do you arrive at the place where you are able to do your own show, especially if you are someone outside of the Hollywood animation circle? There are many different paths one could take on the road to creating an original series. And, although I personally never set out to work in television animation, sometimes your true path just unfolds in front of you. As Joseph Campbell says, "We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us." This was the one that was waiting for me. My path is only one of them. Maybe you've noticed in your own path that not having things go the way you expect them to isn't always bad. The disappointments can all be stepping-stones to something different, something greater. When it's a matter of creating your own cartoon, success all comes down to being the person with an idea and having the motivation to see it through.

I believe that what I've learned on my journey to TV, as well as my experience creating and producing more than one hundred episodes (that's fifty-six hours) of animation, has given me insights into the ways you can develop a show and its characters for the best chances of success. It's these lessons that I would like to share next.

Part of Aspiration Is Inspiration: Why Do YOU Want to Create a Series?
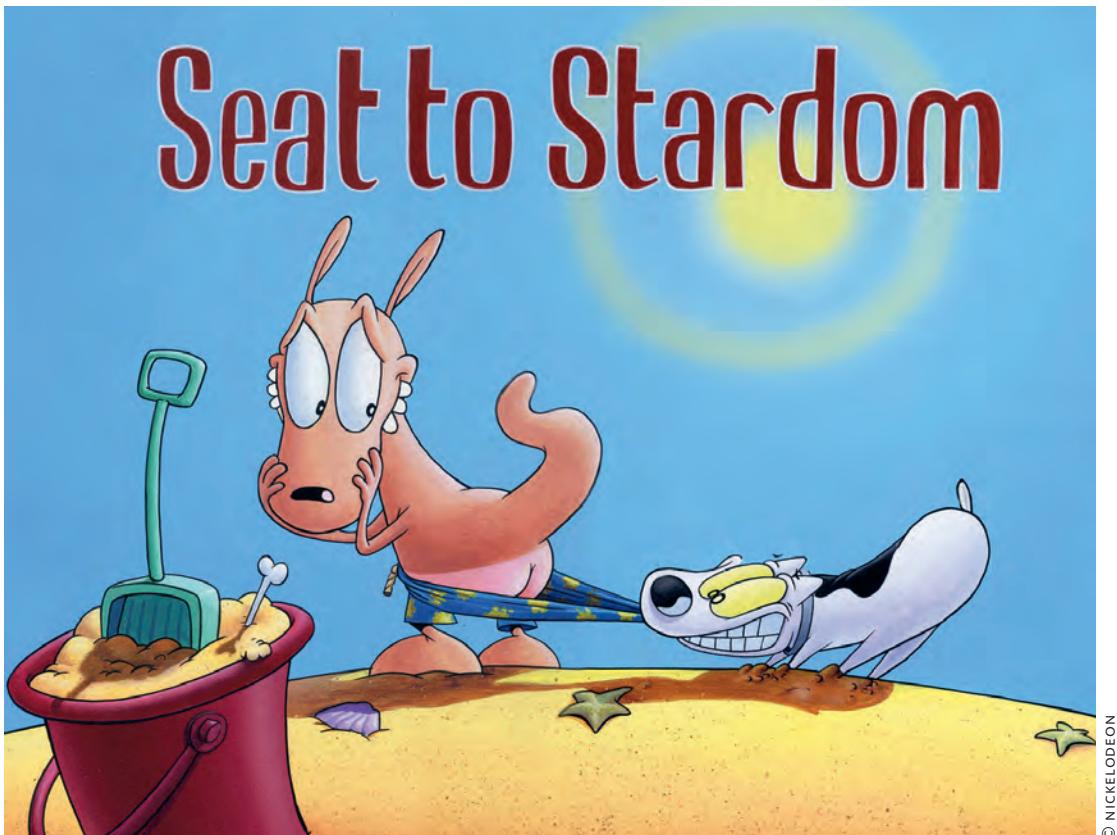
"Do you really want a series? Do you want to live with this thing nonstop for the next couple of years? Do you want to eat, sleep, and dream about it? Do you want to cry over it? To fight over it? There's very little real glory, and it's going to consume every moment of your life, so you had better be in love with this show."

—Rob Renzetti, creator of the Nickelodeon animated series My Life as a Teenage Robot

Every journey needs a motivational force to pull you through the challenges that lie ahead. Look at me as a guide whose job it is to lead you through a jungle to the treasure hidden within. I would be shirking my duties if I didn't inform you about the snakes, piranha, and gorges hung with booby-trapped bridges you may encounter on your adventure. I do so not to scare you but to prepare you. This chapter will help you pinpoint why you want to create your own cartoon, mostly so you can fall back on that reason when times are tough and know that it's strong enough to catch you. You will also need to know how to pack your bags in preparation for this expedition. If you are expecting a luxury cruise rather than a rough hike, you should probably bail out now. The luxury comes only after you survive the trek and discover the treasure stashed along the way.

Seat to Stardom

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Your Motivation

Most of you have positive and passionate reasons for wanting to do your own show. You love cartoons, and you would love making them—that's a given. But there are other reasons I've heard over the years that have set off some alarms, such as:

- "I want to be famous."
- "I want to make a lot of money. Money is the only thing that will make me happy." Or, "I want to make a lot of money to show others that I am better than they are."
- "I want to control everything." (I can relate to that one.)
- "I want to be in charge of a lot of people." Better yet, "I want to be able to fire the people who have screwed me in the past."
- "My [fill in blank: dad, wife, husband, peers] will never respect me unless I have my own show."
- "So-and-so has his/her own show, so if I don't get my own, that looks like he/she is better than me."
- "I don't know anything about animation or writing, but I know if I just come up with a cool character, I can sit at home and collect checks while everyone

else does the work."

- "I'm a sad, insecure artist, and the only way I will love myself is if I have my own show."
- "It's the only way I'll get a girlfriend/boyfriend."
- "I have an idea for a show based on a toy I created." (I have trouble speaking to this, as I'm not generally a fan of toy-based shows.)

Your reasons may not be any of these (or maybe you're telling yourself your reason is not listed here). Be honest with yourself. Some of these reasons involve a conflict with ego, a chip on your shoulder, or a deep resentment of some sort. I don't want to play armchair psychologist here, but you should probably take care of those issues before putting in all the work that goes into developing a show. Or, if you want to make a show based on extreme neuroses and insecurities, you may be able to use those issues to your advantage! Just get some clarity on your motivations first, for the best way to achieve your cartoon vision is to have a strong vision in the first place. As I said earlier, your reason for launching your show will keep you going through the hard times, when you will need to stick up for your vision many times down the road. Think of it as the strap you hold onto when the bus goes over the big bumps.

So, what are some of the potential challenges you'll need this strong reason to overcome? Although having your own show is rewarding, it's also extremely hard and stressful work. The workday and workweek are long, with very little time to attend to life's needs. (I sometimes had to hold meetings while I was standing at the urinal.) It will test the strength of your marriage, relationships, family ties, and more, to their limit. I've known show creators who have suffered severe depression when the show and its production are over. Some people may end up hating you. You will be gossiped about. A network may end up owning your series and then putting it on a shelf whenever they want, without your ever being able to touch it again. Money in the form of royalties may not show up for years, if at all. If your series does become a big merchandising hit, products inspired by your characters will be contributing to society's mass consumerism, sweatshop labor, and environmental damage (unless you can somehow offer alternatives).

All that said, do you still want to do it? Good, because I'm not done poking holes yet. I want you to feel as though this is something you really want, beyond a superficial reason such as the desire for fame. For example, do you think you will be able to support your show to the network if all you want to do is become famous? That's how people end up selling their souls. My goal is to help you create a show and *not* sell—or lose—your soul in the process, to produce a show with integrity. I believe that you have to get outside yourself to really make the best go at this process; your reasons for doing a show will be challenged with every hurdle you jump over. It's not my intention to talk you out of pursuing this passion; I just want to give your show and your characters the best chances of success.

Reality Check

Let's take a closer look at some of the motivations that may not hold up so well in your pursuit of a career in animated cartooning.

Fame
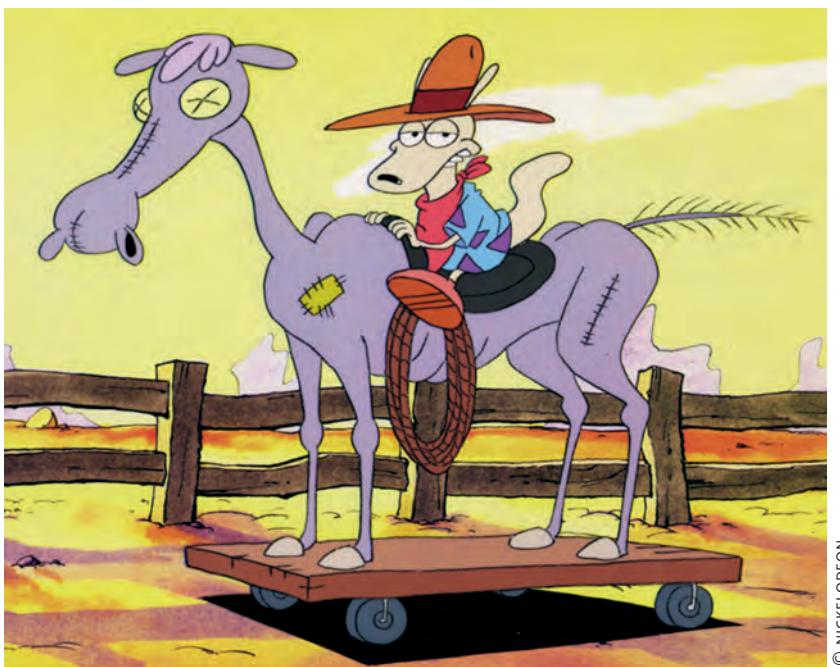
So yes, it is cool to sit at a table and sign autographs and draw pictures for little kids. And yes, some people will put you on a pedestal in admiration for what you create. But let's put things in perspective: I don't want to take anything away from cartoonist as a noble profession, but we need to get over ourselves. We're not curing cancer, nor will we end up even remotely resembling Mother Theresa at the end of our lives. If you want to achieve some level of fame through your work, there are plenty of other avenues and creative arts through which this is more likely to happen. But keep in mind, the payback you get from achieving fame is very short-lived and scant icing on what otherwise could have been a very enjoyable, rewarding cake. On a creative note, pursuing a career as a cartoonist merely to achieve fame means you will be operating directly from your ego, and the ego can be rocky creative soil when what you really need is rich, fertile ground. My belief is that the ego "edges genius out." How so? Your ego can be a hindrance just when you need to be a good leader of the team who is collaborating on your show. I've seen creators who are too busy with publicity interviews and photo sessions when they should be in the trenches with their crew. This dynamic totally shuts down the creative flow. And trust me, someday the show will be over, and your fancy fame carriage will turn back into a pumpkin in no time. Then the most important thing to you will be your real friends—who, one hopes, will still be there, if you didn't lose them while you were gazing at yourself in the mirror.

That said, fame can and does come with the territory if you have a successful show, and you may find yourself with legions of adoring fans someday. But a better use of your fame and the fact that those people look up to you is to bring attention to causes you believe in as well as helping others, by visiting children's hospitals, donating art to charity auctions, supporting environmental awareness and education, and other worthy causes. In this sense, fame can be a force for good. But 99.9% of the time, fame and all its benefits won't be in the forefront of your mind, because you'll be working hard on your show; therefore, you need a stronger, more lasting motivation.

Money

Let me say at the outset that of course I want you to make money from producing an animated series. I want you to score big time. When it comes to your contract, I want you to get the best possible deal and to be able to support yourself doing what

Rocko in a still from the episode "The Good, the Bad and the Wallaby."

you love. Money will always be part of the equation, and you should be well paid for your efforts. But remember, this is not a "get rich quick" book; it is about creating and protecting your art. I remember from the moment I became a professional artist that people interested in such a career were always asking me whether I made a lot of money. I always replied, "If you are getting into art worrying about whether you will or won't make a lot of money, don't do it. Art is too difficult a career. The rewards outweigh the monetary benefits." In my experience, you make money because you are creating a work that is inspired, something that makes other people feel, laugh, cry, and get hooked on it. You make money because you are doing something you *love* to do!

I'm not saying I haven't made a fair amount of money from my work. I've reached a point in my career where I can trust that money will be there when I'm striving in the right direction. Money makes a lot of wheels turn in my world. But if you create a show solely to make money, you won't. Ernie Zelinski, author of *The Joy of Not Working*, said it best when he stated, "Sadly, some people who have excessive designs on bettering their financial positions allow themselves to be manipulated, humiliated, and degraded while in the pursuit of money. Moreover, unrealistic expectations for what money can do for them lead them to experience the negative emotions of envy, deprivation, dejection, and disillusionment." I feel this quote lends itself beautifully to the entertainment business, because disillusionment runs rampant in this industry, and this sorry state is what I would like to help you to avoid. Doing a show just to make money leaves you wide open to manipulation and humiliation—I've seen it happen again and again. Also, what is enough money? What are your values? What sacrifices are you willing to make to see your dreams come alive? If you need a little more guidance setting your

priorities, I highly recommend the book *Your Money or Your Life* by Joe Dominguez, Vicki Robin, and Monique Tilford.

The really big money in children's television is usually the result of a huge merchandising hit (think *SpongeBob SquarePants*), but it's not as common as you might think. The first, most important element is to have a great show; after that, basically a lot of planets have to align and deals be negotiated. Other possible income streams may open up, depending on your contract. Network show creators can derive a good income from successful international syndication, DVD sales, residuals, and various forms of high-tech online download distribution. The marketplace can be a tricky playing field, so my advice is to get a good lawyer or agent to protect yourself and to stay inspired. That strategy more than anything will bring in the money.

Power Trip

Your crew is your lifeblood. If they smell a massive ego bent on throwing its weight around and taking all the credit, you're in for a lonely ride. Animation is one of the most collaborative art forms out there, so you need to get over yourself and move forward as a team. You are working to lead your crew; at times, you are actually working for them. Read about the explorer Ernest Shackelton and his crew on the *Endurance* to see how a good leader puts the crew before himself. Also, trying to impress people usually invokes envy, disdain, or open animosity, none of which is a good basis for lasting work collaborations or friendships.

Another suspect motivation that falls under the Power Trip banner is the old "I'll invent the character and then sit at home and collect checks while everyone else does the work" attitude. I actually hear this a lot. Although creating a series is possible no matter your level of talent or experience, you still should not abdicate your role as leader and guiding light. It would be like the captain of a ship sitting in his quarters without giving orders or headings; before you knew it, your crew would be drunk below deck as your ship careened off icebergs, like a ball in a pinball machine. I've seen firsthand productions with absentee creators trying to make a go of it, but unless the show is based on an established book series or other source material, it doesn't work. A crew needs your vision, and the production needs your direction.

I'm not the best character designer, the best writer, editor, or director—there are much more talented specialists out there. However, I do have well-rounded filmmaking and producing experience, which helps me create projects and characters and inspire the crew to bring them to life. But it's my vision that keeps all the pieces flying in the same direction. If you want to sit at home and collect checks, put in the work to make your show a hit, and then enjoy its long run of hilarious episodes.

Reasons to Plow Ahead

So, now that we've had a closer look at the reasons *not* to get into animated cartooning, what are some of the strongest, most powerful reasons to forge ahead on this creative expedition? You may have your own well-considered motivations, but here are some examples I can speak to:

- You have characters in your head who are just screaming at you to breathe life into them. They want to live, and you have no other choice but to build a series around them!

- You believe that your core talents reside in seeing through your compelling vision in the midst of a hectic environment. Personally, this has been when I have felt the most alive.

- Creating a great series, whether on TV or on the Web, can be very uplifting and have a powerful, positive impact on the lives of kids and adults alike.

- Storytelling is at the core of our being, and this medium is an obvious extension of that. You feel that the best fit for your artistic inclinations is their expression in an animated series.

- Creating a series makes jobs for all types of artists and an atmosphere of collaboration.

- Working on a series is a good stepping-stone to bigger things in life you may want to do. With *Rocko*, not only did I feel I could do something unique on television, but I also wanted to sock away as much money from the series to invest in my independent films afterward.

- As the creator of a show, you have the opportunity to promote and nurture a positive work environment, a place where people look forward to coming to work. You will have a strong impact on whether the schedule and environment are humane and worker-friendly.

- Your series can give a viewer pause, whether it's something personal to relate to or a societal issue, such as the importance of recycling. (I say this as a winner of the Environmental Media Award, thank you very much!)

- If you do make money from your show, you can share it with various causes (for example, 1% for the Planet, the Hunger Project, or Children International).

- Maybe the animation industry is in the doldrums once more, and you feel like your show could shake it up and pull it out. You could inspire others to take more risks in this regard.

- A successful animated show gives television networks and studios a reason to pick up many more shows. Do you know how many networks have asked, "Where's my SpongeBob?" We all need to applaud and support one another, because what's good for one show is great for all of animation.

- As the creator of a show, you can be a catalyst for change in this culture

of hyperconsumerism, and you can make an impact on the ethics of the media industry. Become a champion for artists' rights, for example, or a watchdog for fair labor practices in the production of your show's merchandise.

- Best of all, you can make people laugh! Doing volunteer work at hospitals, schools, and fundraising events can lift so many spirits. Trust me, sitting in a child's hospital room watching that young patient view your television series in fits of laughter is the best feeling in the world. Then you get to say, "Get out of that bed soon so you can run and play outside!"

Are You Prepared?

It's hard to be fully prepared for everything that comes your way when doing your own animated series, but several key factors help one to be well-rounded for all of the various skills that come into play. These are the attributes I feel are most beneficial, but that's not to say that if you're not skilled in these areas you won't find success. These are preferable based on my experience, so if you feel a bit inexperienced or out of practice in any of these, you may want to brush up or take a few classes first.

- The ability to draw, preferably fairly well. Writers who can at least sketch will have a leg up on writers who can't draw at all.
- A talent for creative writing and a library full of works by the literary masters.
- The ability to animate your characters and general knowledge of how

things move. It may surprise you how many people neglect this important skill.

- A curious, observant mind, one that absorbs each detail and files it away.
- Some travel knowledge and experience. This comes in very handy when you are referencing other parts of the world in your story lines. Being the creator of a successful show often results in a fair amount of international travel.
- A commitment to hard work and a willingness to delegate.
- A general knowledge of the theater arts, specifically, how to tell a story to an audience. Vaudeville is also a valuable area of study.
- A certain level of film fanaticism. It's great to know every camera angle that Stanley Kubrik or John Ford has ever used—it will come in handy when you're revising storyboard layouts at three o'clock in the morning.
- Knowledge and appreciation of a broad range of music genres. (Or better yet, being a musician!)
- Knowledge and appreciation of art history and the great masters.
- A familiarity with radio actors, voice-over work, and the ability to sell a character and story with narration.
- The ability to immerse yourself in the realm of imagination, no matter what cruel realities are begging for your attention.

These are some of the general traits that will benefit you in this career. When it comes down to actually working and performing in the world of television animation, there are many more steps you can and should take to be on your toes, and one of them is what you are doing now: Reading up on the industry. When I was considering pitching a series to Nickelodeon, I read every book I could get my hands on about kids' television, the business of television (and cable TV specifically), and the business of animation, as well as every article I could find about the people in charge of Nickelodeon.

In general, I always recommend education for any endeavor you undertake. (Yes, the "school of hard knocks" is valuable too, but learning the most you can from college or a trade school is highly recommended.) I learned animation from a community college in the Bay Area, but there are many excellent animation colleges out there, including CalArts in Southern California and Sheridan College in Ontario, Canada, where you'll get a well-rounded education in all aspects of animation, which helps immensely when doing your own show. A strong foundation in the arts as well as history and science can all be beneficial when writing for a show. I also took public-speaking and business courses, and I know others who, even though they were not pursuing a theater career, took acting, comedy, and improvisation classes to improve their animated characters.

The one invaluable experience I am always touting to anyone who will listen is the experience of writing, directing, and producing your own animated short film. As I said earlier, I am constantly amazed at how many people working in

the animation industry have never made their own film or even animated before (especially today, when computer software has made it so much easier to do). Aside from strengthening your overall skills, directing and producing your own film gives you extremely valuable, hands-on experience in every area that would come into play when doing your own show: writing the story and the gags, designing characters, storyboarding, color, timing, layout, sounds effects, music, and ultimately, selling your film. Doing a short film also looks good to anyone who is buying a show or considering hiring you for animation work—it always sold me when I was hiring, because it shows dedication and the ability to see a project through.

Producing an independent film is very rewarding and one of the most fulfilling avenues for your artistic talents. I don't advocate doing an independent film purely as a stepping-stone to getting your own show or finding work in the business. You should do it because you'll love it. And conversely, by doing your own film, you may also find that you don't like animating after all, which is good to learn early.

Another important way to gain insight into all the processes and to familiarize yourself with the best artists for when you're ready to work on your own show is to start working in the animation business in any capacity you can. If you work on someone else's series, hang out in the right spots, stay close to the action, and keep your eyes and ears open, you'll pick up a lot of information. On my series,

I continue to derive tremendous enjoyment from doing independent films. This is a still from my film *Fish Head*.

there were always guys from the crew watching the process closely and asking me lots of questions. I could tell their wheels were spinning! Plus, it always helps to be on the inside when preparing for your own pitch, because you'll have access to all the most valuable—not to mention free—advice from your colleagues.

Do You Need an Agent?

I'm sure agents who represent animators won't like this answer, but I don't believe that an agent is necessary for getting a series in animation. For live-action entertainment and in the publishing world, it's preferable to have an agent to open doors for you, but that's not currently the case in animation if you're just starting out. (Later, when you get to the level of *The Family Guy* or *The Simpsons*, you will need an agent!) I'm not saying there aren't benefits to having an agent, such as lining up meetings or fielding phone calls. But I don't think one is essential because these are mostly tasks you can do yourself. Simply call the networks or studios and ask who's in charge of development and whether they are accepting pitches right now. You'll usually be greeted by some helpful soul who will guide you to the right person and answer any questions you may have. The key is to be persistent. Once you start getting interest from a network or studio, get yourself a good lawyer fast. (We will cover this topic in more depth later). If you can't afford one right away, some lawyers will work for a percentage of your future income. A good lawyer will be a great investment. If you want to consider signing with an agent at this point, just remember that an agent will usually take a 15% cut of your income for the duration of a specific project, even long after his or her work is done. I didn't have an agent for either of my series, but that was my personal choice.

Q & A
with Steve Hillenburg

STEVE HILLENBURG is the creator/producer of Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants* and was the director and season-four creative director of *Rocko's Modern Life*. He has a degree in Natural Resources Planning from Humboldt State University with an emphasis in Marine Resources and a Master of Fine Arts degree in Experimental Animation from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).

Q: *We all know you as the creator of the outrageously popular animated show* SpongeBob SquarePants *on Nickelodeon. Most people don't know about your background as an independent filmmaker and your education at CalArts in experimental animation. Do you feel that these experiences and education prepared you for creating and producing your own animated series? Were there others that also made an impact?*

A: *SpongeBob SquarePants* is without a doubt the product of combining two of my lifelong interests—the ocean and art. My interest in marine biology certainly had an influence on the cast of characters in *SpongeBob*, but my experiences seeing and making animated films at CalArts had a profound effect on what I thought was possible in the medium. The greatest thing about the CalArts program was that you not only wrote and drew your own films, but you also learned how to do everything—from creating a soundtrack to dealing with timing prints at a lab. You really got the whole picture. The films I created at CalArts helped me to get a directing job on *Rocko's Modern Life*. It was actually while working on *Rocko* that I got the experience necessary for creating *SpongeBob*. *Rocko* helped show me the necessary ingredients for creating a world that would have the right dynamics for writing shows. Equally as important, I learned how to write shows using storyboards instead of scripts, meet people I later hired for *SpongeBob*, and used a similar production model on *SpongeBob* as the one I had learned on *Rocko*.

Q: *Do you feel it's essential for a creator to combine his or her interests and passions, like you did on* SpongeBob *with the ocean and art?*

A: I think having genuine interest in something helps you to have a point of view, or perhaps something new to say. The funny thing is that I struggled for years to find a way to combine these two interests (art and marine biology). I had a teacher in high school say, ''Why don't you paint fish?'' But I just thought that sounded boring. About twenty years later, I found an acceptable solution.

Q: *After the pilot and the first few episodes, was everyone certain of* SpongeBob's *huge success? Was the network?*

A: No one was certain of anything. The network was hard to read (they are even more so now that they determine success by the ratings). They took forever to announce the second season pickup. I was finally told we had been picked up by some executive's assistant or the sandwich guy, a week before they officially told me. It's a weird culture.

Q: How do you juggle your artistic integrity with being the father of one of the most widely commercialized properties in the history of animation? How do you handle the challenge of riding a huge merchandising tidal wave and still focus on the task of producing a quality show?

A: My focus has always been on making good shows; without that, you have nothing. Most people don't realize that when you sell your show, you no longer own it. This means that although you may have a "say" contractually, you really don't control the merchandise. Of course this is painful at times, and believe me, there are fights that I have lost. After such instances, I try to remember this quote: "If you didn't want barbecue, why did you bring your pig to the picnic?"

Q: I know that you initially backed off from producing the show too quickly (which I applaud you for). Can you talk about that decision, and how volume animation can be affected by an overly ambitious time schedule? Did slowing it down allow for more steps to ensure quality?

A: Nickelodeon initially wanted to make *SpongeBob* a "strip show," where you get a huge order and create enough shows to air five a week. I foresaw disaster and declined. I said I'd rather do one season of twelve shows with a month's hiatus before starting more. I figured this way we would get as much time as possible to improve the writing, etc. Without my experience on *Rocko* I wouldn't have known to do this. Nickelodeon respected my decision, and we made a smaller number. What is great about Nickelodeon is their emphasis on letting the shows be "creator driven," and I attribute much of *SpongeBob's* success to this.

Q: Do you feel that one could ever set out to create a new show that would have the success of SpongeBob? Are there special ingredients you could bottle?

A: I didn't set out to make a "successful" show (well, maybe moderately successful). I tried to make the show that I wanted to see on the air. I figured there was a good possibility that the viewers wouldn't get it. My attitude was that I'd rather fail trying something new than fail making something old.

Q: There is a popular belief out there (especially among networks) that an animated show cannot be a breakout hit if it isn't script-driven. Yet SpongeBob is storyboard-driven [written within the storyboard, then scripted]. Can you account for this freak of nature?

A: *The Ren & Stimpy Show* and *The Powerpuff Girls* were also storyboard-driven, so I don't follow that logic. I think one reason the networks prefer a script is to make the approval process easy. It's harder for some executives to read through a storyboard. I learned how to write shows with boards on *Rocko*, and that's the method I'm most comfortable with. I absolutely think that it lends itself to a more visual or cartoony show. I will say that it's hard to find gifted board directors that can board and write. There is no magic solution.

Q: *You've been in TV animation since 1993. How do you feel it's changed since then?*

A: The kids that were watching the stuff we made in '93 are now the new generation of show creators.

Q: *What is your opinion of the use of agents in selling a show? How would you describe a good lawyer when negotiating the terms of a series agreement?*

A: I was already working at Nickelodeon, so I got a lawyer and pitched to them directly. I can't really say whether an agent is helpful for selling a show, though a lawyer is absolutely essential and will save you from making a regrettable agreement. They are worth every penny. No matter who you are, the network will try to give you the most rotten deal possible and then work up from there. It's business. Obviously, try to get a lawyer who is familiar with your type of project and the studios to which you plan on pitching. If the studio thinks your lawyer is a pain in the ass, then you probably have a good one.

Q: *Here's the most important question, with which I end all these interviews: What advice would you give an artist or writer who wants to follow in your footsteps and create his or her own animated series?*

A: Try to make something you haven't seen before. Follow your interests. Surround yourself with good people . . . and Tombow pencils.

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What's the Big Idea? How to Get Your Series Idea Out of Your Head and Onto the Page
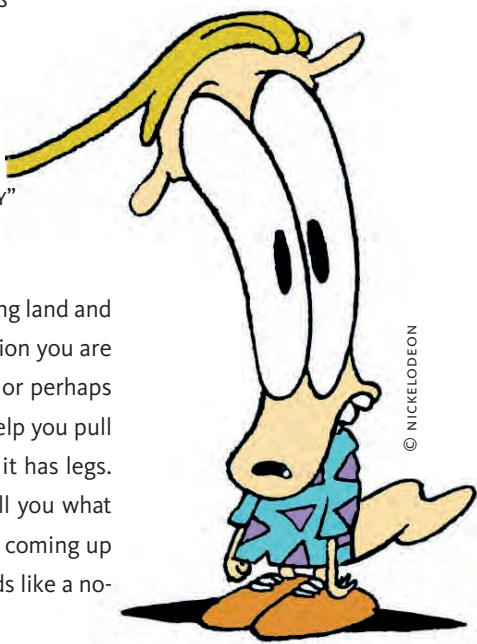
"I didn't set out to make a 'successful' show (well, maybe moderately successful). I tried to make the show that I wanted to see on the air. I figured there was a good possibility that the viewers wouldn't get it. My attitude was that I'd rather fail trying something new than fail making something old."

—STEVE HILLENBURG, CREATOR OF *SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS*

"Hey! Let's make a show about deli meats! Everybody loves deli meats!"
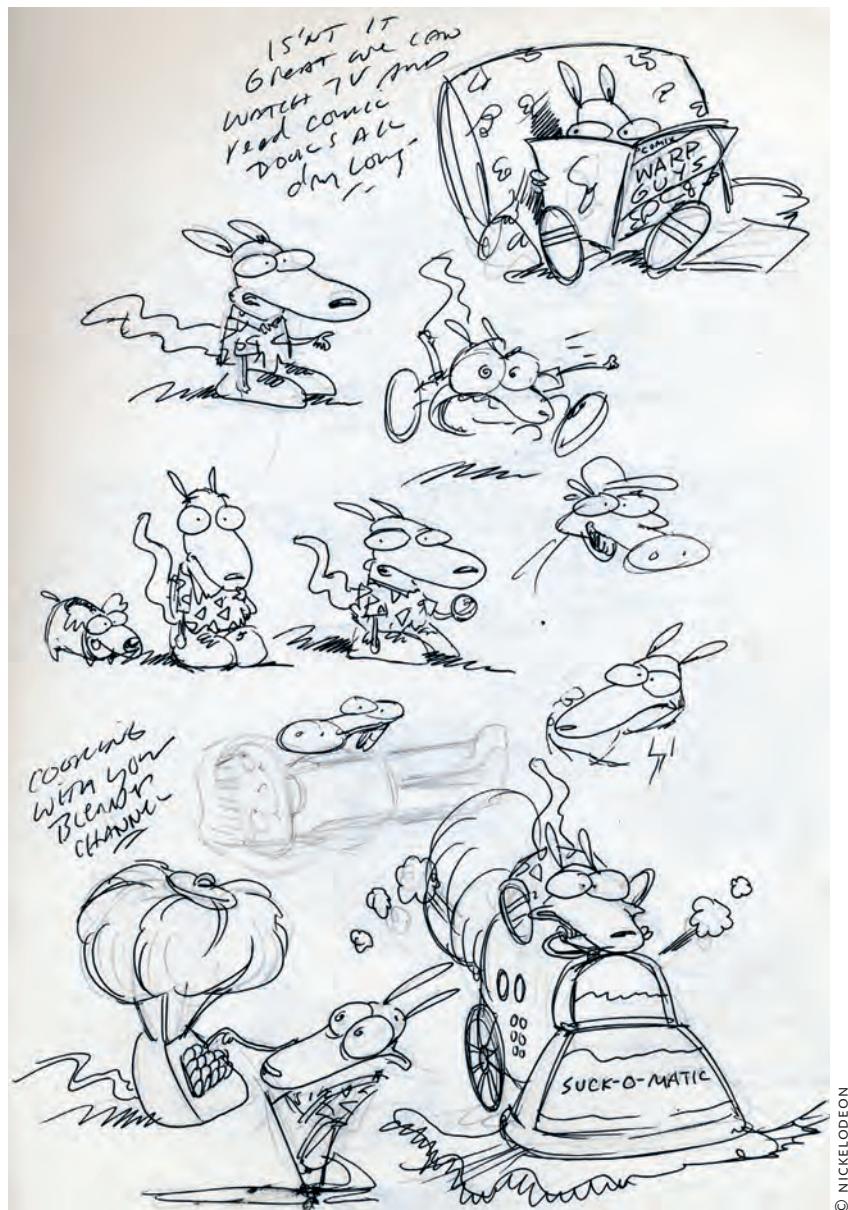
—HEFFER FROM *ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE* EPISODE "WACKY DELLY"

Deciding why you want to do your own animated series is akin to clearing land and making sure there are no earthquake faults on it. But the main foundation you are going to build on is this: the series idea. Maybe you already have one, or perhaps not. Or maybe for now it's just a little fuzzy. In this chapter I'd like to help you pull out an idea and start breathing life into it. Explore it. Poke at it. See if it has legs. Like every other step in this book, it should have inspiration. I can tell you what will kill inspiration right off the bat: Seeing other successful shows and coming up with the same idea and the same types of characters. I know this sounds like a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised at how often this happens.
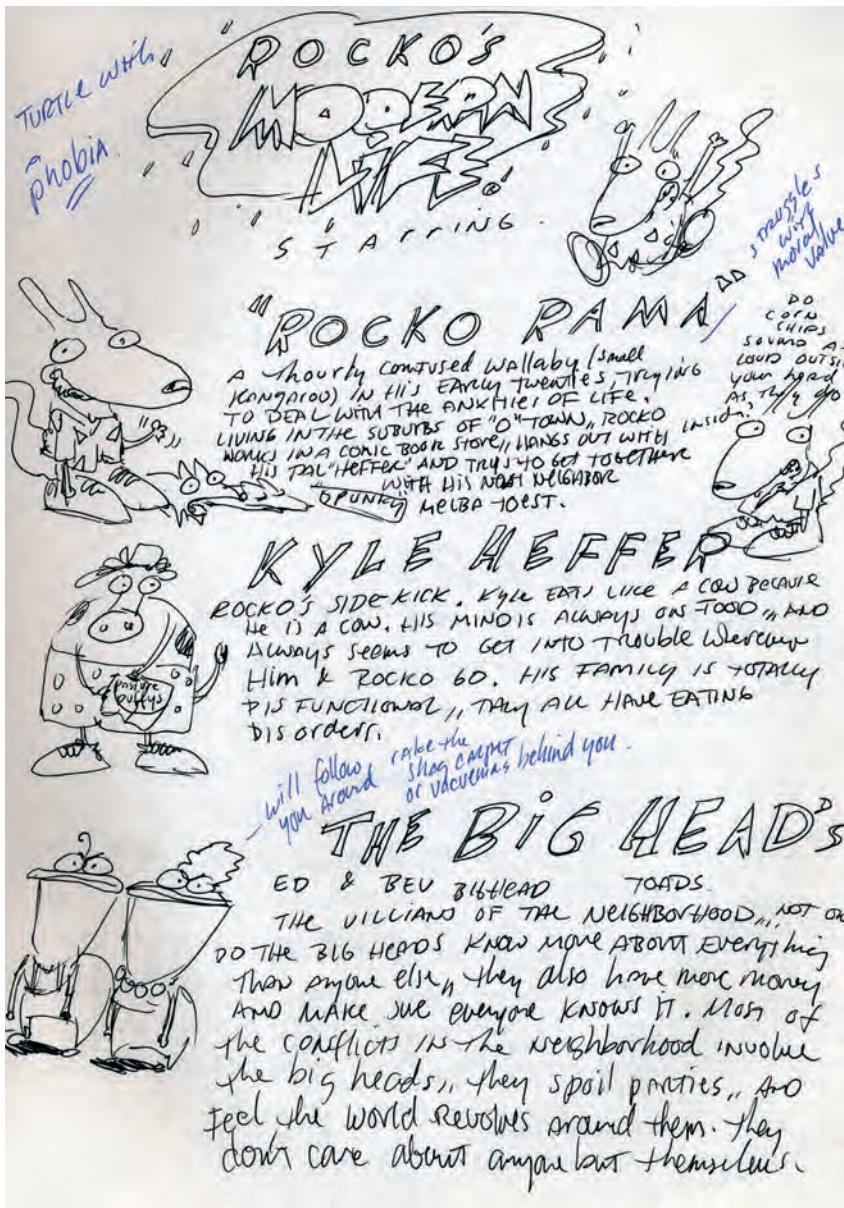
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These sketchbook pages show *Rocko* beginning to hatch, 1991.

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Is there an idea for a show that you feel only *you* can do? Your show should reflect who you are, your interests, and your style. You will attract others to it because it is *your* vision, and no one else can realize it better than you. Consider this: Steve Hillenburg had a background in marine biology. Who else *but* Steve, with his incredible talent for storytelling and animation as well as his fascination with and knowledge of marine life, could come up with SpongeBob and all those other great underwater characters? Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, used his own family as models and inspiration for his hit show (yes, Homer was his dad's name).

Not quite sure where to start? Close your eyes and envision turning to an animated show on TV or the Internet that you've never seen before but that
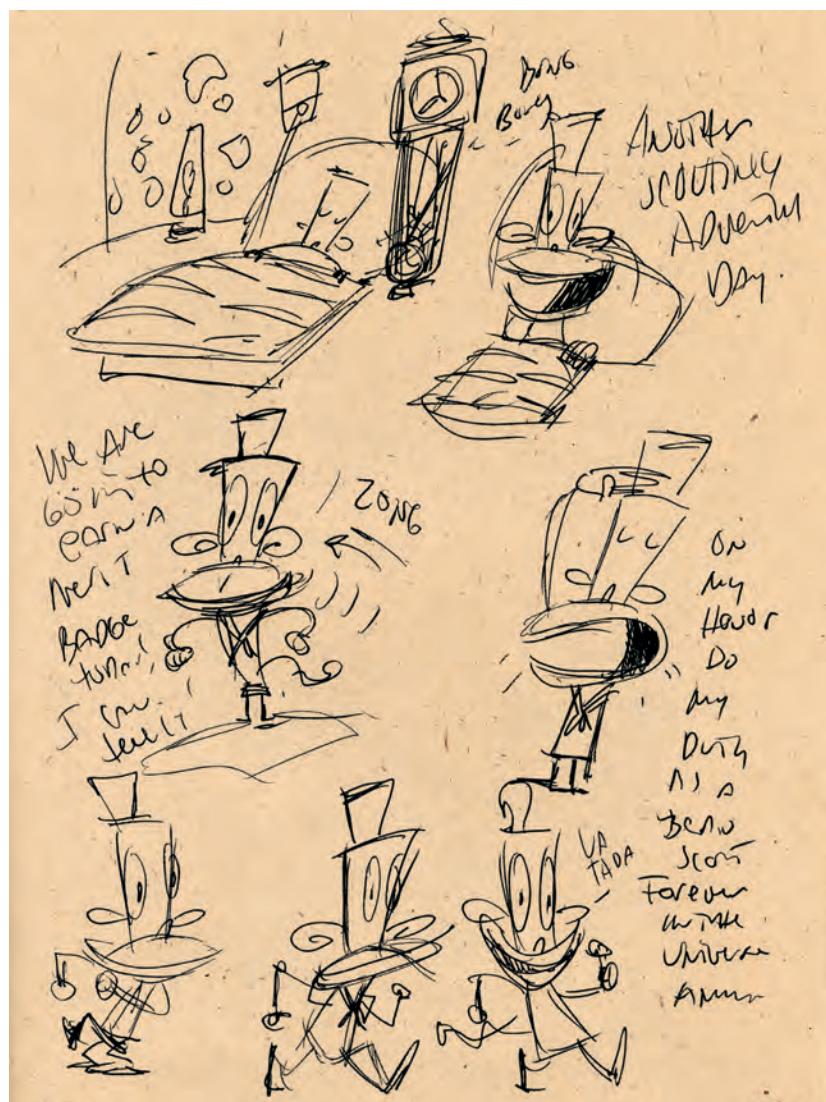
makes you stop and think, "This has me written all over it." What does it look like? How do the characters act? Does it recall a sport or a hobby you love, a place you live, or the friends you have? Or is it just so weird and crazy that it makes little sense to anyone but you? Don't worry about structure for now, just go with your vision. This show cracks you up, and you want to visit with these characters again and again. Don't think about what will make someone else laugh right now, just what will make you roll in the aisles. Next, pull out the secret tool—the one that never fails to magically gives birth to of all of my cartoon series and films—called a sketchbook. Yes, just an old-fashioned sketchbook. (I use ones made of 100% recycled paper. Try not to kill a tree in pursuit of your idea!)
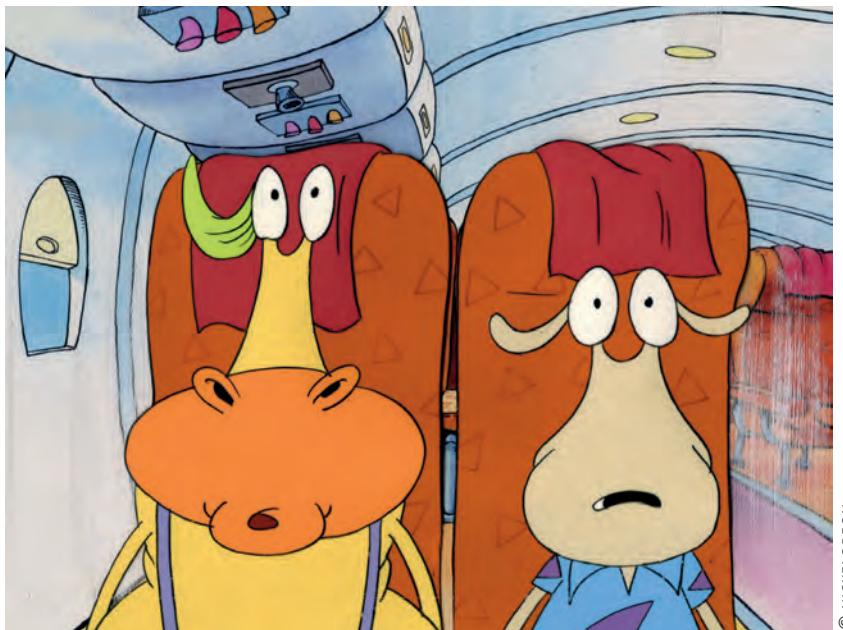
Next, draw, doodle, or scribble as much nonsense as possible without the

thought of someone seeing it. In fact, don't even lay down preliminary sketches. Use a black felt-tip pen and just go at it. (In fact, doodling while on the phone is an old trick taught in art school to release the drawings in your head that are waiting to be born.) Play around with your characters and your ideas, letting your brain drool on the paper, and see what comes out. The characters that want to live will come forward. Do you see yourself drawing a certain character over and over again? What does this show that you saw playing in your head look like? What are the personalities of the characters? Can you start to see them? Now, don't break a blood vessel in your brain over this; if it's not flowing or is no longer fun, put the sketchbook down and come back to it later. Let the characters take the stage for a bit, and they may start telling you what they want to do, acting right in front of you and spouting lines of dialogue.

Another question to ask yourself when you are developing the main concept is why it needs to be animated and why the structure of a cartoon is the best

Creating Animated Cartoons with Character

My character Lazlo flowed from a good pen . . . and some strong coffee.

Rocko needed a lot of squashing and stretching. How else could you depict a character free-falling while seated in an airplane?

showcase for this idea. My shows have always been anthropomorphic and visually very stretchy. Is your idea something that can be celebrated as an animated show? Even *The Simpsons*, which relies a lot on quick-witted dialogue and writing, still requires animation to achieve its comic effect. Some shows can almost be thought of as illustrated radio, such is the importance of the story. So utilize the medium—really stretch and push it to its limits with your ideas.

Eventually you will start whittling down your ideas to a core concept—the main theme that makes it a different kind of series and uniquely yours. This is extremely important since you will be living with this idea and its basic direction very intimately. It should be a part of you, something you enjoy learning about and drawing; maybe you even watch other movies or documentaries about it. Perhaps it revolves around the main character's conflict with life. Let's say you love cooking; what conflict could be there? If you were a rat who loved cooking, as in Pixar/Disney's film *Ratatouille*, then that would be a problem. Or let's say you're a family of superheroes who have to live a normal life because they keep getting sued, like in *The Incredibles*. Your core idea will go through many changes, but what's important is to start thinking about the most standout concept, which in entertainment is usually called the "hook." This hook will be the basis for building the story and is a keystone that supports your whole series.

The Hook

A show idea usually has a "hook," which can be thought of as the germ of the idea that sticks with the viewer. When I was pitching my idea for my series *Camp Lazlo,* I heard

an executive say, "I've never heard of an animated show about summer camp before." That was good, but it wasn't the whole hook. The hook also involves the conflict: It's not "friends hang out together in the neighborhood." What about the friends in the neighborhood? If you have "friends in a neighborhood are actually top-secret spies who go on dangerous missions," as in Tom Warburton's *Code Name: Kids Next Door*, then it gets interesting. Characters have hooks too, which we'll cover more later, on page 68. You, as the creator, obviously already know about your special character and all the wacky, crazy stuff he will do since it's all in your head, and you may be tempted to say, "If I could only get to a storyboard I'd show you how funny and zany he can be." That's skipping ahead, and it won't work. Storyboard development comes later. So for now, for your own sake, and the sake of the busy people you will be talking to, find an angle that sticks out and is memorable.

The hook for a show can be its synopsis and should be easily described in one sentence. For example: "A happy, free-thinking monkey and his two odd friends wreak havoc on a very structured scout camp." Or: "A young wallaby with an overactive imagination moves out on his own and experiences the daily chores of his modern life in hilarious ways."

How do you arrive at a hook? With *Camp Lazlo,* I started thinking about the fun I had at scout camp when I was a kid. It was so innocent and simple, and there were so many weird personalities there among the different campers that I was inspired to start drawing a monkey, and then an elephant. . . . Then I remembered the fun we'd had with the scoutmaster, and how we all thought he was just a transplanted city guy with a stick up his butt. I saw how an obsessive scoutmaster trying to control campers out in nature—especially an unpredictable, happy-go-lucky camper—could have comedic possibilities. So I broke down the basic premise: A scout camp. The main character, happy and disorderly. The conflict: Happy Chaos versus Boring Structure. If you can't break down the hook to a simple sentence, you need to rethink it a bit. Simplify it, but don't lessen the impact. A good hook should have something people can easily relate to, like the fact that everyone likes to consider him- or herself rebellious in the midst of too much structure. Try to state a simple conflict in a sentence. Humor is about conflict. Here are other examples:

Three overly cute kindergarten girls change into superheroes when needed, fight nasty villains, and return to school before recess is over.

(The Powerpuff Girls)

A hard-working yellow sponge in tight brown pants tries to fit in with his undersea community, much to the dismay of his neighbors.

(SpongeBob SquarePants)

Simplicity in your overall concept will be helpful when someone is just sitting down to watch the show for the first time, and can immediately figure out what is going on. This is conveyed not only by the strong, simple idea, but by the design

of the characters and the show. You shouldn't need a program to know who the players are and what game they are playing.

The hook is also the theme around which you will build your show's look, style, presentation materials, and more. Since my character Lazlo was at summer camp in the woods, I built the style around colors you'd find at camp, twigs and leaves, wood cabin design, etc. *Rocko*'s show was about the chaos of modern life, so the look, style, and colors we used reflected that feeling and worked to communicate that core hook. Think about how Cartoon Network's *Samurai Jack* series featured that beautiful Japanese design and how *SpongeBob*'s look is distinctly nautical and you'll get the idea.

One thing I have learned about the hook is that you hang onto it tightly at first, but eventually it becomes less the main focus and more of a stage. For instance, on *Camp Lazlo*, we started using camp activities as the basis for some episodes, such as swimming, fishing, or having a pet llama. . . . (okay, that one was a little strange, but our story editor actually had llamas at her summer camp!). As the series progresses, the characters, if developed properly, begin a process of discovery that brings their personalities forward as the dominant focus. This process shouldn't lead you away from overall character and series consistency and the familiar aspects of your series hook, but you will find that the characters begin to flesh out their own episodes within the structure you have set up. For instance, on *Rocko's Modern Life*, the friendship between Rocko, Heffer, and Filburt began to overtake the hook of "modern life" itself.

The Overall Design

It's helpful to start visualizing the look of the show sooner rather than later, while you're still in the early stages of creating the world in which your characters will live. Your show's appearance should never be an afterthought. This is your chance to really push it, to make your animated world look different from anything else out there—to make it yours, something no one else can do! This will be your visual hook. Your show needs a great look that stands out from the pack, one that could never be mistaken for another's. This should go without saying, but never copy another show's design, and especially not one from the network you are pitching to!

As discussed above, your hook and your characters will help you discover the look of your show. But first and foremost, what are your personal preferences and style when it comes to your art? What do you gravitate to? Everett Peck (*Duckman* and *Squirrel Boy*) had already achieved a distinct style early in his highly successful illustration career that he then tailored to a detective film-noir look for *Duckman*, and to a happy suburban look for *Squirrel Boy*. Both are unique, but both are Peck through and through. My overall design for *Camp Lazlo* differed from that of *Rocko's Modern Life*, but my style is easily recognizable, and so I don't mind viewers saying, "Hey, that's the guy who did *Rocko*!" when they see it. At the same time, I always

want to push my style in a new direction. If you feel you want to bring in an outside designer to help you with this, that's fine. Just try to retain your personality in your work and make it distinctive. We will get more into the design of the show later (in chapters 7 and 8). For now, I want you to start linking your conceptual hook with your visual hook and considering whether your story and characters can easily live in this design world or whether they'll get lost in it. Your animated universe does require some rules. But just because the stage needs to be set for acting doesn't mean it can't also be cool and distinctive.

Rules for Your Universe

Another concept to start thinking about at this stage is, what are the "rules" in this world you are creating? By rules I mean what forces govern the environment and the characters' actions? Can anything happen? For instance, when I was considering doing a show with animals living in the woods at summer camp, I had to figure out if Lazlo, a monkey, would interact with a bear in the woods as an animal or as a character. It became like Goofy, who is a dog, taking Pluto, who is also a dog, for a walk; very strange rules, but you have to figure them out and be ready to explain them, especially to development folks at the networks. I don't recommend proceeding with the "anything goes" approach, because an audience needs consistent rules in order to follow the characters and story. We will touch on this subject in more depth in chapter 4. So once you start developing this germ of an idea, your hook, and your design, it's time to start discussing the most important aspect of your series: character.

An early development version of *Camp Lazlo* called "3 Beans."

Q & A

with Everett Peck

EVERETT PECK is the creator of the Cable Ace Award–winning and Emmy-nominated animated series *Duckman* on USA Network, and *Squirrel Boy* on Cartoon Network. He is also a highly acclaimed illustrator and comic book artist, with illustrations appearing in *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Time*, and *Rolling Stone*.

Q: *We all know you as one of the most highly accomplished illustrators of our time, who made the transition to animation with* Duckman *in the 1990s on the USA Network, and later with* Squirrel Boy *on Cartoon Network. Could you fill us in on how you added "animated series creator" to your résumé? And what experience helped you to fulfill that role?*

A: As long as I can remember, I always loved to draw. I grew up in a small beach town in Southern California, which was great for surfing but didn't have a lot going on with art museums. So, like most kids of my generation, my biggest early art influence was watching Saturday morning cartoons on a black-and-white TV. I loved all that stuff. In those days there really wasn't the tightly organized programming that there is today, so they threw all kinds of cartoons at kids. In one hour you could see everything from Yogi Bear to an old Popeye or Betty Boop, topped off with Clutch Cargo. But my very favorite was Disney. So I made up my mind at an early age that I would become an animator and go to work for Walt Disney.

As I got older, other forms of art started to have a pull on me, especially print cartoons and illustration: Mad Magazine with all the great artists in there, especially Don Martin and Mort Drucker; Rick Griffin's work in *Surfer* magazine; Jack Davis's Monster cards; and Virgil Partch's cartoons. There was also the all-pervasive work of Big Daddy Roth, Von Dutch, and the lesser-known Basil Woolverton. When I got into high school I was determined to master pen-and-ink drawing and was heavily influenced at that point by nineteenth-century pen-and-ink illustrators like Heinrich Kley and John Tenniel. I also followed the work of contemporary penmen like Ronald Searle, Gene Holtan, and Ed Sorel. By my senior year, I was more interested in illustration as a career than animation, so I entered Long Beach State as an illustration major. It was there that I was influenced by underground comic artists, especially Robert Crumb and Victor Moscosco. I also liked the artists of Push Pin Studios.

After I graduated from college, I began my career in illustration and worked pretty much continually for twenty years. It was a fun time for illustration, but I always maintained my interest in animation and collected as many old 16mm cartoons that I could get my hands on. But contemporary animation seemed to be in the doldrums.

Q: *You paved the way for other illustrators, such as Gary Baseman, to transfer the characters from the printed page and paintings to animation. What were the challenges of making that leap? What were the obstacles, if any, that you didn't expect?*

A: Illustrators work with characters and situations. When you create an illustration you are basically using characters to create a world to convey a concept, a scene. You're telling a story visually. That's what you do with animation; you just use a lot more scenes and characters. So it wasn't that big of a leap conceptually. There was a stylistic challenge for me in that my style tends to be quite loose, with a lot of lines, sort of "searching" around until I find the form I want. I also use a lot of cross-hatch and other line combinations to build up vol-

ume. Of course that won't work for commercial animation, so I had to simplify the line. I did a similar thing with color, especially for *Duckman*. When I do a painting, I use a lot of brushstrokes and gradations. At the time that was very difficult to do within television budgets, so I had to go with flatter color backgrounds. By the time I did *Squirrel Boy*, technology had advanced enough so that we could use all the gradations and textures in the backgrounds that we wanted.

Q: *I know from my experience as an illustrator and later as an independent filmmaker, how hard it is for a team of people, including the overseas studio, to suddenly start drawing like you. It was hard enough for me to make my own characters look right, and now I had to tell others how to make them look right. How was that for you?*

A: Yeah, that's sort of weird. As I mentioned, I did change my line to a more concise, thicker one that's easier to replicate. I also concentrated on making the characters' silhouettes as interesting as I could. I've been really lucky to have great people to work with who help me get my drawings in shape. Jerry Richardson has worked with me on several animation projects, and he's amazing at turning my squiggly drawings into something that can be replicated by 300 Koreans! When we were starting up *Duckman*, he went over to Korea and spent a little time training the overseas crew on how to draw the characters. We also spend quite a bit of time developing model books on how to draw the characters, showing poses, expressions, do's and don'ts, etc. It's really amazing how good a job the overseas studios do, considering the process.

Q: *How do you feel the animation and TV business has changed since* Duckman? *Was your experience different with* Squirrel Boy?

A: I think today's prime-time animation market is considerably more narrow and formulaic than it was ten years ago. There are a few very successful shows that have reinforced a formula of sitcom family formats full of pop references and flat graphics. Because they've been successful, it's very difficult to introduce something that departs from that formula. Kids' TV and feature animation, on the other hand, utilize lots of different conceptual and visual approaches, your *Camp Lazlo* being one of them!

Q: Duckman, *which started as your Dark Horse comic book, was adapted for television in the early 1990s, when TV was pulling out of the candy-coated animation age and into real-life edginess. Shows like* The Simpsons *were making some waves, but* Duckman *really dove into the adult genre. Did you get flack for that? It now seems commonplace, with shows like* South Park, *but you guys really took some risks.*

A: We never really intended *Duckman* to be for kids; it was always intended as an animated show for adults. I always wanted it to be as close to the original comic as possible. By adult, I don't mean just gross stuff or sexual content, but we wanted to deal with adult issues that kids don't have a real grasp of. I also wanted the world to be sort of dark and surreal. Jeff Reno, Ron Osborne, and all the writers were totally onboard with that. Because we were a "late night" show on an obscure network, we were able to get away with a lot of stuff. We didn't really get a lot of notes from the network; I'm not sure they really understood what we were up to.

Q: *You also took a big risk with having Frank Zappa do the music for* Duckman. *What was that like? How did you feel that affected the overall tone of the show?*

A: The owner of the production studio for *Duckman*, Gabor Csupo, was a friend of the Zappas. When we were starting the show, Gabor thought Frank might be interested in doing the music. I thought that would be pretty great, so we had a meeting and showed Frank the initial animation we had done. He liked it and agreed to do the music. Unfortunately, by the second season, Frank was pretty sick and not able to be involved personally, but he allowed us access to some of his music catalogue. I was pleased with the Zappa music. It fit nicely with the sort of dark, odd world I wanted for the *Duckman* series. Frank was a really great person. His son Dweezil was the voice of Ajax.

Q: *Are you a hands-on creator/producer, or are you able to stand back a bit?*

A: I'm pretty involved with all aspects of production, but I'm also a team player. I like to choose a group of super-talented people that I know, trust, and whose input I value. It's a much more enjoyable process that way. That's a big difference between animation production and illustration. Animation is very much a team activity that is infinitely more complex than illustration. Illustration is much more solitary and direct. Neither is better than the other, it just depends on what you like.

Q: *You just came out with a great DVD collection of* Duckman *episodes. How was that experience? And how do you feel the episodes stand up? Because we did our series in the early 1990s, when the DVD format was still developing, did you have to do any polishing to get it ready for the digital format?*

A: It was a really great experience when we actually got started, but it took years to get it up and running, with several false starts. Finally, I got in contact with Ken Ross at CBS. He really got behind the project and helped me get *Duckman* released on DVD. We had to make a few editing choices, but overall I'm pleased with the final results and very happy that the show is finally out there on DVD. Most of it translated pretty well to digital, but I was kind of surprised. When I was doing *Duckman*, I was always a little disappointed in the way it looked. I just couldn't seem to get the look I had in my head onto the screen. But after not seeing a lot of the episodes for a while, I was sort of surprised by how rich it looked compared to the flatter shows of today.

Q: *How do you see the future of television animation, or the future of animation in general?*

A: I think prime-time TV animation is pretty stale at the present time, but that will change. Someone will come up with a unique show that will break out into a new direction. Then there will be a rash of shows just like that one. But I think there will always be a few new prime-time animated shows on air. There are still a lot of very inventive and original kids' shows out there as well, and there has never been a better era for feature animation. A lot of that is directly attributable to the very talented folks at Pixar. The important thing is that animation is on the radar.
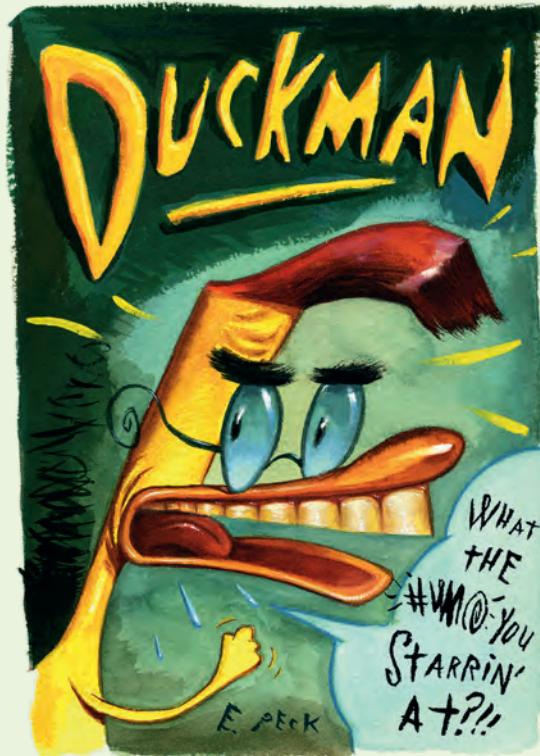
When I got out of school in the mid 1970s, no one was thinking much about animation. If you

wanted to see any interesting new animation, you had to go to a little film festival. That all changed in the early '90s with the advent of *The Simpsons* and the release of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. I don't think we'll ever go back to the dark days of no animation on prime-time TV again.

Q: *What advice can you give to any writer or artist who wishes to follow in your footsteps and become the creator of his or her own animated series?*

A: Well, my first question to them would be, "Is there anything else you'd rather do?" If they insist on a path toward creating properties for TV animation, then I'd recommend gaining as much knowledge about the business as possible: Talk with people who have had some experience creating a show. I'd also suggest that they develop their property as much as possible before presenting it to a network. Comics are a good way to do that. Webisodes are okay too, but the jump from the Internet to series television has not happened too often so far, certainly not as much as people thought it would ten years ago. The more fully your property is developed and established, the better deal you'll be able to make. You'll also stand a better chance of keeping creative control of your property. Good luck!

The Secret to a Great Series: It's All About Character!
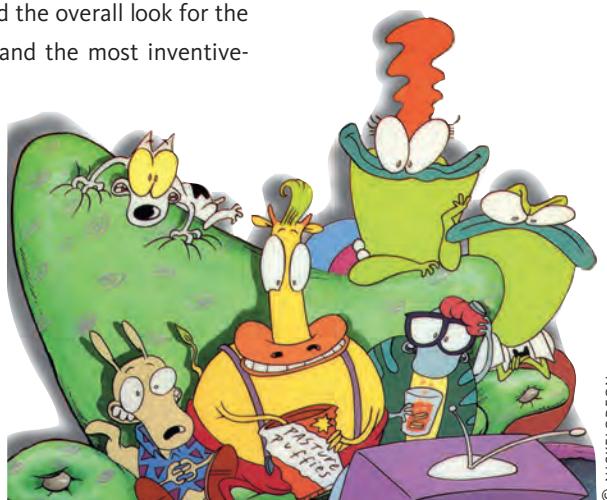
"The creation of a character begins with what you already know."

—LINDA SEGER, AUTHOR OF *CREATING UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTERS*

"Whoooeeee! We found it! The penny has been in your butt crack this whole time!"

—CHIP AND SKIP, FROM *CAMP LAZLO* EPISODE "A PENNY FOR YOUR DUNG"

So what's the big deal about character anyway? Only that it's the lifeblood of your series. We've touched on the importance of the hook and the overall look for the series, but let's face it—you can have the coolest idea and the most inventive-looking cartoon on the planet, but if the characters are flat and have no appeal, it will never capture an audience. The characters are the reasons your audience comes back to watch. Think about any live-action or animated show you love; you want to see what the characters are going to do next because, if they are developed well, they are alive in your mind. *Seinfeld* the sitcom was about "nothing," but we all loved watching the characters because they were both despicable and disturbingly familiar. A hook and a premise for your show will take you only so far; well-

drawn characters will live and breathe, inspiring you to feel for them and laugh with them—and at them. When you take one character that is well-defined and put it in a room with another well-defined character, you should be able to see the conflict right away. Hopefully, it's hilarious.

By this time, you should already have a seed of an idea and some doodles of the characters you want to work with. In this chapter we'll start peeling back the layers and figuring out which are your main characters and what makes them tick, as well as their hook and optimal design. I'll walk you through the structure of the character group, the protagonists and antagonists, the first-, second-, and third-tier character frame, and how these personalities will interact with one another. Finally, we'll discover how to blend the whole ensemble into an entertaining animated series, from the first episode to the last.

What Makes a Good Character?

What I want to know from the start is, Why are your characters interesting? Do I care about them? Do they make me laugh? Can I relate to them? Most importantly, do I want to invite them into my home? In the two shows I've done so far, I've made my characters anthropomorphic animals, but they can be anything—human, inanimate objects, you name it. Think about the people around you who attract your attention. Are they bland chameleons, fading into the background? Or do they have a distinct flair, something that sets them apart? A quirk? A tick? Strange, obsessive habits? An odd take on the world? Are they like a car wreck you can't help but stretch your neck to look at? Or are they so appealing and attractive that you can't help but take notice? Think about how any one of those people could make an interesting character. Start laying out the broad brushstrokes and then filling in the details: What are their favorite foods? Where did they grow up? Why do they have a fear of whipped cream? Look at Indiana Jones, for example; he's very brave, until he encounters a snake. Every character has his or her Achilles' heel, and you should be able to zero in on it in order to propel the character into interesting situations.

Character Hooks

The viewer should be able to understand a character and a situation even when sitting down to watch the show for the first time. This is where an easy hook comes in. I'm not saying your characters should be shallow, but their depth can be explored later on. For example, Samson from *Camp Lazlo* is a whiney germophobe with a cleanliness obsession and nose spray. The audience can pick up on this right away, even if they haven't seen the show before. Heffer, from *Rocko's Modern Life,* is the lovable, obnoxious friend who likes food. *Camp*

INSIDE ROCKO'S BRAIN

NAME: ROCKO RAMA
AGE: 20
SPECIES: MALE SCRUB WALLABY
DESCRIPTION: A YOUNG ANTHROPOMORPHIC **WOODY ALLEN**, WHO HAS JUST MOVED AWAY FROM HOME INTO A SURREALISTIC ADULT WORLD.

NAIVE TO THE NEW CHORES OF LIFE,,, A NEW STUDENT TO THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS.

MOTIVATED BY HIS NEED TO FIT INTO SOCIETY AS AN ADULT,,, BUT RELUCTANT TO PART WITH HIS CHILDHOOD.

HIGHLY OVERACTIVE IMAGINATION THAT LOVES COMIC BOOKS AND SEES THE WORLD AROUND HIM IN BIGGER THAN LIFE CARICATURES.
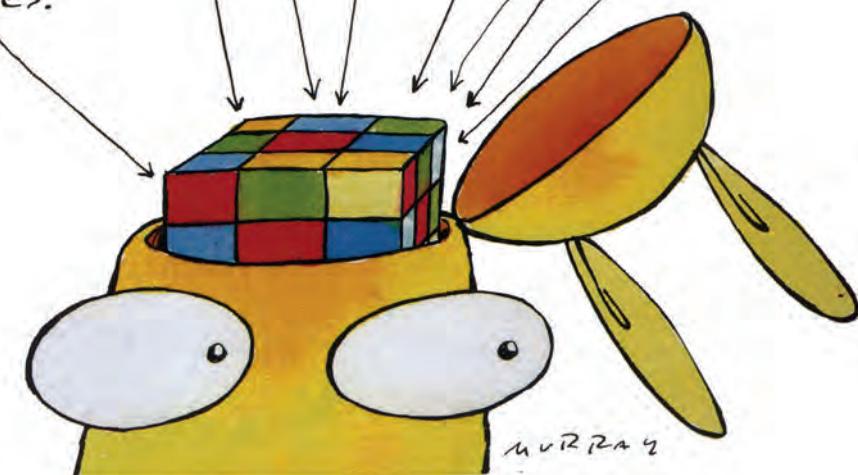
LUST FOR NEIGHBOR MELBA TOEST AND TIRELESS IN HIS PURSUIT OF HER.

FEELINGS OF AN UNDERDOG,, AND THE URGE TO KICK THE ADULT SOCIETY IN THE CROTCH.

IMPATIENCE QUICK TEMPER SENSITIVITY.

TENACITY IN HIS QUEST TO OVERCOME REPEATED FAILURE.

WOODY ALLENESQE IN HIS TIMING AN CLUMSINESS.

MURRAY

The Secret to a Great Series

Samson, from *Camp Lazlo*, was richly neurotic.
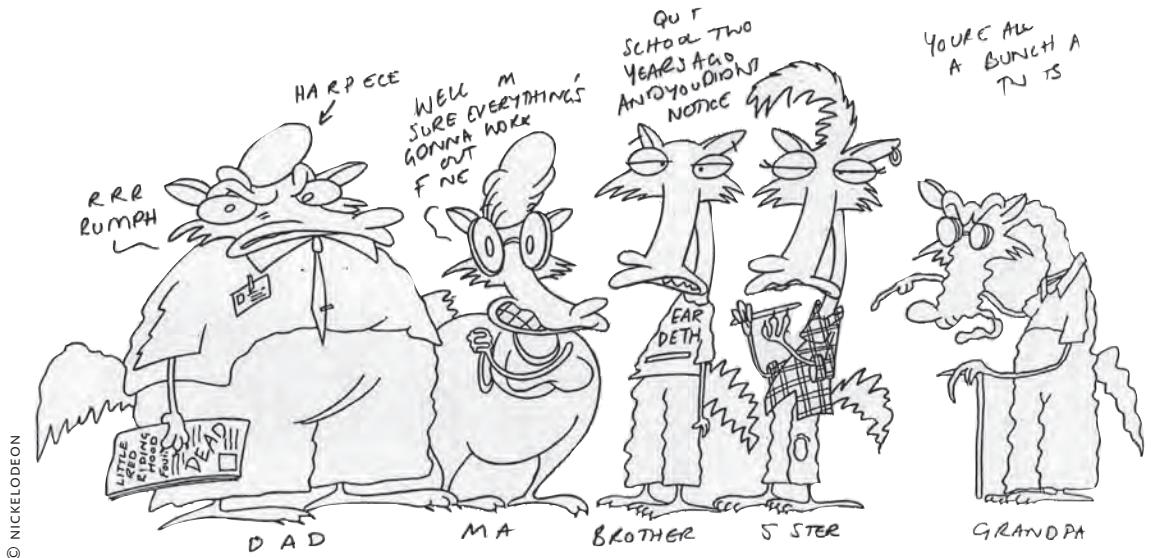
Lazlo's Edward is the short, know-it-all bully who's always butting in. Skip and Chip, the dung beetles, are the gross, dim-witted brothers who always lend a dumb, silly humor to any situation. These over-the-top character traits create the immediate friction and give texture to the show. We all remember Wile E. Coyote from the Looney Tunes cartoons, whose entire motivation in life was to catch the Road Runner. Who knows what he would have done if he ever caught him? (Some have wondered why, if he could send away for Rocket boots, he couldn't send away for a frozen Road Runner steak—one of many unsolved cartoon mysteries. . . .)

Great characters are defined by their wants and the obstacles to attaining them. For instance, I love the little squirrel named Scrat from the *Ice Age* films; all we know about him is that he wants to get the acorn, and it never quite happens. It's a very one-dimensional setup, but it's funny. Play around with weird quirks for your characters. Consider possible deformities, obsessive-compulsive traits, or extreme materialism (or extreme simplicity). Look at favorite

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The Wolfe Family from *Rocko's Modern Life* is the typical model of dysfunction.

foods or food allergies. Maybe you see a Richie Rich–type character, but one that likes to lick the pavement, or a character with his face always in a book who has an odd fascination for something crazy, like roller derby or Mexican burlesque wrestling. Other traits may be revealed as you move forward. *Rocko*'s Heffer the cow was adopted. This character detail created a bit of a stir when it was revealed and was acknowledged by the *Los Angeles Times* as being "groundbreaking" (which cracks me up). They said nothing about the fact that his adoptive family was a pack of wolves that originally wanted to eat him and tattooed a butcher's

Scoutmaster Lumpus and Samson from *Camp Lazlo*.

diagram on his hide to show where the best steaks were. The character hook can be fun to watch and relate to, but it is often the friction he or she creates with other characters that inspires the humor. In other words, if the characters are defined by their desires, the comedy is usually sparked by another character or situation presenting an obstacle to the first character getting what it wants.

Protagonists versus Antagonists

Because attempting to overcome obstacles in any story is often fodder for humor, defining the roles of protagonists and antagonists becomes very important. *Protagonist* is a Greek word meaning "One who plays the first part, or chief actor or actors," while the *antagonist* is the one who "creates or represents the obstacles the protagonist must overcome." Most stories have one of each, if not more, to set the plot in motion. For instance, in *Camp Lazlo,* Raj can be the protagonist who loves marshmallows, but Lazlo is the antagonist who cuts Raj off because he's addicted. Scoutmaster Lumpus (protagonist) just wants to sit and relax in his lounge chair, but the scouts (antagonists) are constantly disrupting his solitude.

These desires are windows into these characters' personalities but also an immediate hook into who they are and what they are about. What is fun about setting up an immediate hook for a character (such as Edward in *Camp Lazlo* being a macho bully) is to go in and set up a conflict to play off that character hook. Take, for instance, the time when Edward had a doll that he secretly played with that would ruin his reputation if anyone knew about it. Or when the dung beetles were hung upside down and suddenly became smart because all the blood rushed to their heads. With that in mind, let's see how these characters fit into your series. First, let's look at your main character.

Ingredients for a Main Character

By now, I hope you've spent some time doodling in your sketchbook, playing with some personalities, and maybe finding one that you keep coming back to. If you are gravitating to this character, then take note of it—it may become the core of your series. The main characters of a series have several functions. Primarily, they are the glue that holds the cartoon together, the representative graphic (quite often the first impression anyone has of your cartoon is a dynamic drawing of your main character). They often become a figurehead, the hub around which the rest of the characters revolve. Your main character sets the flavor and tone of the whole series, so he or she needs a strong hook, an appeal that fills the screen and leaves you coming back for more. But the most important function of a main character is to be your voice, as the creator, to say something with your show, to give it a reason to be on the air, and to warrant an audience. The main character in many ways represents you, or an important aspect of yourself. It's my opinion that your main character shouldn't disturb your audience but be welcomed into viewers'

Lazlo
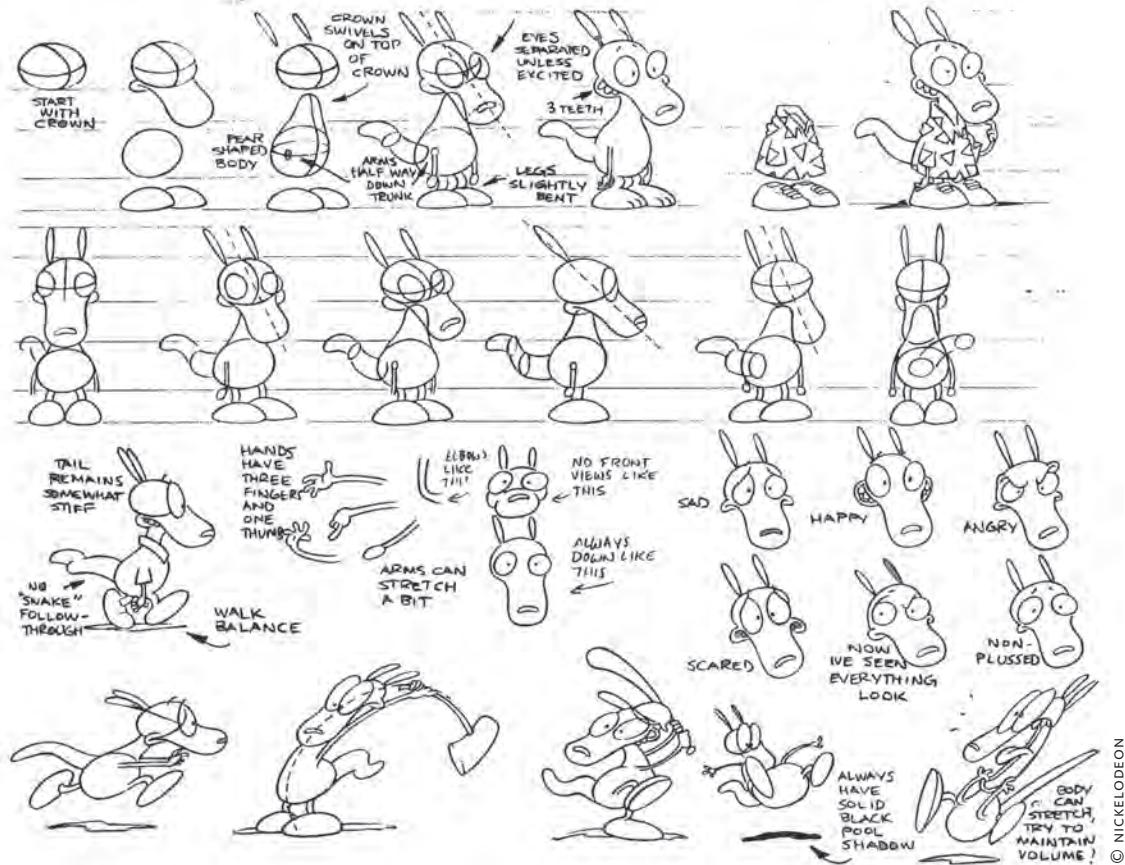
homes to entertain them. A main character should have the ability to transform his or her surroundings, to leave an impression.

Main characters can also offer us comfort; we feel more protected when we know they have gained a little more control over their antagonist in what is usually a situation of good triumphing over evil in some way, or the protagonist overcoming his or her obstacles. Edgy characters are fine as supporting cast, like Edward, Daffy Duck, and Squidward, as we quite often can relate to them. But I would have trouble watching a whole episode of Daffy Duck without the calm, confident Bugs Bunny hanging around to offer contrast. Victims and weak-boned characters usually don't bode well for main characters. (Although simpletons who can walk through war zones unscathed are often successful, such as Forrest Gump.) Sometimes this protective and "do good" nature of my main characters drove my writers nuts, because it's actually easier to write an episode in which a despicable character is just acting rotten without boundaries. I remember several occasions in the writing room on both *Lazlo* and *Rocko* where some crazy character would be running over the other characters, and we would all be laughing. And then I would say, "But what is Lazlo doing this whole time? He wouldn't let that happen." And the writers would slouch in their chairs and answer, "Can't we just lock Lazlo in the closet for this episode?"

This is not to say that my main characters didn't get into trouble themselves, though. They did, and often. But overall, the main character should help the viewer feel somewhat secure. It's usually someone with whom we identify or aspire to be more like. Being easy to relate to is important. Rocko found himself in the eye of the hurricane, the gentle soul who was sane in an insane world.

Sometimes finding the right character design is a long road, as you can see from the many incarnations of Lazlo in these sketchbook and model sheets.

START WITH CROWN

CROWN SWIVELS ON TOP OF CROWN

EYES SEPARATED UNLESS EXCITED

PEAR SHAPED BODY

ARMS HALF WAY DOWN TRUNK

3 TEETH

LEGS SLIGHTLY BENT

TAIL REMAINS SOMEWHAT STIFF

HANDS HAVE THREE FINGERS AND ONE THUMB

ELBOWS LIKE THIS

NO FRONT VIEWS LIKE THIS

ARMS CAN STRETCH A BIT

ALWAYS DOWN LIKE THIS

SAD

HAPPY

ANGRY

NO "SNAKE" FOLLOW-THROUGH

WALK BALANCE

SCARED

NOW I'VE SEEN EVERYTHING LOOK

NON-PLUSSED

ALWAYS HAVE SOLID BLACK POOL SHADOW

BODY CAN STRETCH. TRY TO MAINTAIN VOLUME!

© NICKELODEON

It's important to explore and explain every aspect of your main character. This is a detailed model sheet of Rocko from the production bible.

(Don't we all feel that way at times?) Lazlo was a hard-working optimist, often to the point of being naïve. He broke rules, but not in a malicious way. He still drove others crazy, but there was usually a commendable reason for it in the end.

The main character is obviously crucial, but in order to consistently come up with stories revolving around this character every week, his or her chemistry with the rest of the cast needs to be in place. That's where the secondary main characters and multi-tiered characters come in. Relationships are very important. After all, where would Lucy have been in *I Love Lucy* without her husband, Ricky, and her best friend, Ethel? So first set up the series with your main character (the protagonist), and then find the various players that will surround and feed the main character: the secondary main character, the antagonist authority figures, the bullies, and the crazy, deranged characters. (Actually, in the case of my shows, all my characters are crazy and deranged.)

Secondary Main Characters

An animated series can really only exist with one main character. If you are creating very short cartoons, then the Road Runner versus Coyote model of two main characters could work. But if you are writing longer stories (my shows were eleven-minute episodes with three-act structures), then I would recommend a deeper
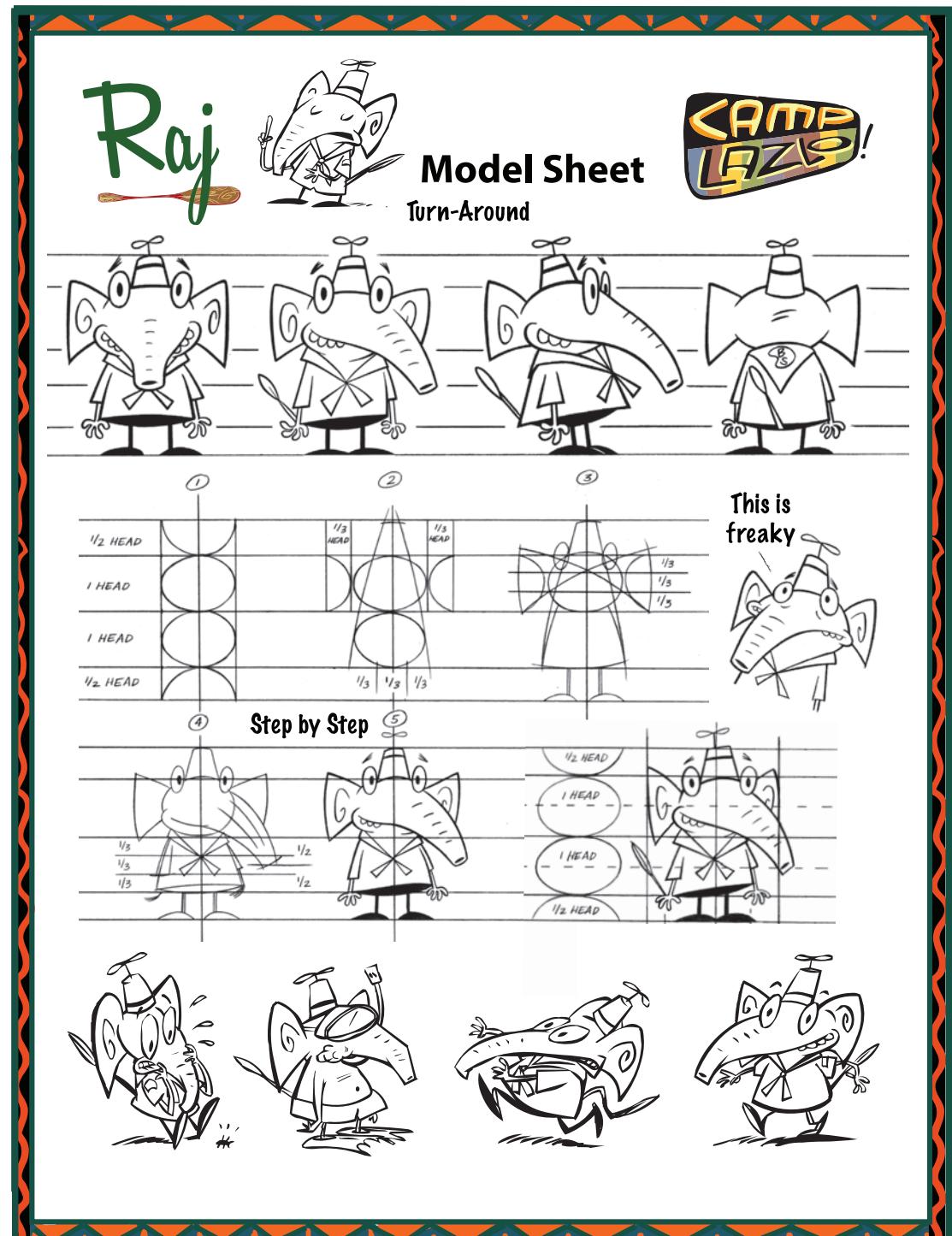
character base. I find it most interesting within a series to have a supporting set of secondary main characters who form a duo with your main character, or better yet, a trio. (Or, in the case of *Codename: Kids Next Door*, five main characters work well.) Sometimes these secondary main characters blur the distinction between the actual main character and the rest of the ensemble. A small group of main characters creates the possibility of conflict or love within a narrow focus. Often these duos or trios are operating as a collective protagonist unit, which, if split up, are not as strong in their efforts to overcome the antagonistic obstacle. Haven't we all seen the movie where a team starts self-destructing right before they have the opportunity to overcome a major obstacle or win a big game? It's usually because conflict within the group is setting them against each other, but not so much as to destroy their overall chemistry. So how does this work?

First, flesh out the attractions the characters hold for one another. Maybe there are misfits within the group (like Lazlo, Raj, and Clam). In the Emmy Award–winning long-form TV movie *Where's Lazlo?*, my co-writer Mark O'Hare and I went back to the roots of the friendship among the trio. The only reason Lazlo, Raj, and Clam became friends was that they were assigned to a cabin together. Initially there was little attraction, but small insecurities stemming from being individuals new to an already structured camp formed the basis of their compatibility. In the case of Rocko and Heffer, Heffer was an overpowering presence that Rocko was never able to shake off. Rocko was probably the only character that was polite enough to tolerate Heffer, and this trait developed into a soft spot of compassion, then friendship.

Next, identify the conflicts and the contrasts that create friction within the group. At the beginning, Raj and Clam were at odds with each other. Raj was a spoiled rich kid with several phobias, obsessive-compulsive quirks, and fears of nature. Clam was a strong-willed rebel who never let go of his toaster (his security blanket). Lazlo came in as the catalyst that would transform not only Raj and Clam but also the whole camp. In *Rocko's Modern Life*, Filburt had his phobias too. Although Heffer's fearless "bull in a china shop" approach to life often overshadowed Filburt's fears, Heffer would also sometimes add to Filburt's woes (like the time Heffer accidentally sat on and killed Filburt's beloved pet bird and then tried to hide it). Heffer and Filburt would also butt heads by fighting for Rocko's attention. In both shows, friendship is what triumphed over all of the conflicts, a core value within the series. Kids (and adults) gravitate to characters that can be good friends. Even if characters are crazy and don't always get along, if friendship wins out in the end, it's appealing and desirable. People connect with it, because it can add a touch of warmth to a frenetic, edgy world.

Finally, identify the ways in which the characters will be able to transform one another. In *Camp Lazlo*, Lazlo and Clam were able to help Raj get over his phobias so he could enjoy camping in nature. In the episode "Swimming Buddy," Lazlo and Clam actually teach Raj how to swim. In *Rocko's Modern Life*, Heffer's fearlessness often expanded both Rocko's and Filburt's comfort zones to achieve

Raj

Model Sheet

Turn-Around

Camp Lazlo!

This is freaky

① ② ③

1/2 HEAD
1 HEAD
1 HEAD
1/2 HEAD

1/3 HEAD   1/3 HEAD

1/3 1/3 1/3

1/3
1/3
1/3

Step by Step ④ ⑤

1/3
1/3
1/3

1/2
1/2

1/2 HEAD
1 HEAD
1 HEAD
1/2 HEAD

Raj from *Camp Lazlo* provided a great nervous contrast to Lazlo's relaxed nature.

growth. On Halloween, Heffer was able to coax Filburt to go trick-or-treating, but then Filburt's overconsumption of sugar led to some disastrous results. One of the factors of the long-form *Where's Lazlo?* that I really liked was that Lazlo spends a lot of time helping Raj and Clam transform and become more carefree in order to enjoy camp, but in the end, they pull together to teach Lazlo that being

Rocko, Heffer, and Filburt had great chemistry as a trio, as seen in the Halloween episode "Sugar Frosted Frights."
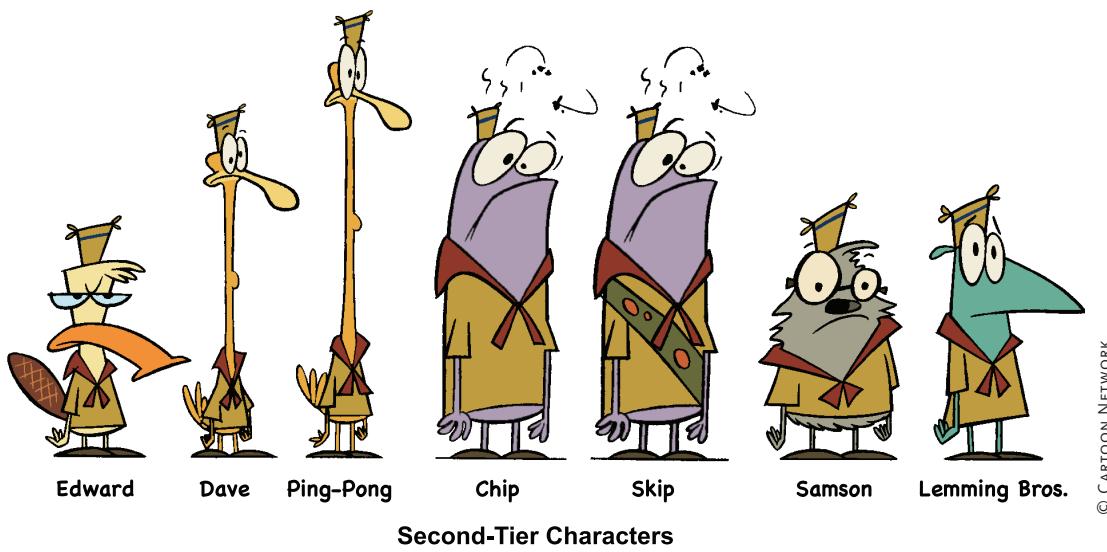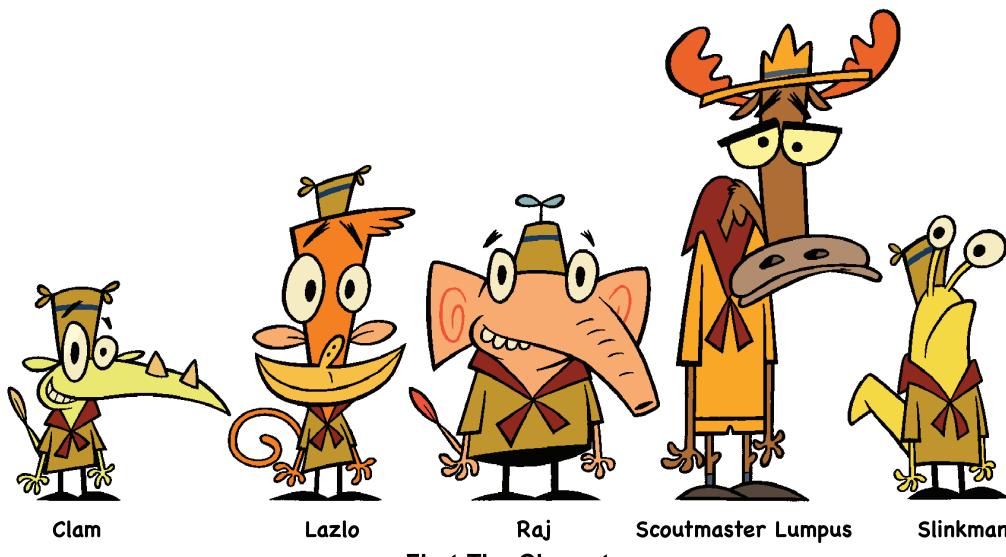
too carefree can result in friends being left behind. The complete transformation encompasses all of them and results from being together and learning from one another.

## Inner- and Outer-Circle Characters

Now that we have the main character and the secondary main characters set up, we need a support base consisting of the inner and outer circle of characters. I like to set them up as first-, second-, and third-tier characters (depending on the show's main premise, you may not need a third tier). I use the tiers to coordinate story consistency and on-screen time for individual characters so that the audience can get used to a particular cast and so that the character well is deep enough that we don't have to venture to outside circles in order to create interesting stories. Our goal was to involve the first-tier characters in every story in the first season of a show, while letting the audience slowly get to know the second-tier characters. By the second season, we started weaving some second-tier characters into the main story lines, and by the fourth season, the audience had become used to the third-tier characters, so we could even wrap some stories around them. This structure gave us a way to "hire from within," so to speak.

The first tier of characters always includes the main and secondary main characters, as well as a main source of conflict. In the case of *Camp Lazlo*, the first tier included Lazlo, Raj, Clam, Scoutmaster Lumpus, and Slinkman. In *Rocko*, it was Rocko, Heffer, Filburt, and Ed and Bev Bighead. Notice that both first tiers included an antagonist. In *Lazlo* it was Scoutmaster Lumpus; in *Rocko* it was Ed Bighead. These characters always had some beef with the main characters. You can usually pick them out easily on other shows: On *SpongeBob SquarePants*,

Clam　　Lazlo　　Raj　　Scoutmaster Lumpus　　Slinkman

First-Tier Characters

Edward　　Dave　　Ping-Pong　　Chip　　Skip　　Samson　　Lemming Bros.

Second-Tier Characters

The first- and second-tier *Camp Lazlo* characters.

SpongeBob and Patrick are in the first tier, as well as Mr. Krabs and Squidward, the antagonists. In *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show,* Bullwinkle the Moose and Rocky the Squirrel were the main characters, and Boris and Natasha were with them in the first tier as villain antagonists.

The second-tier characters will initially add support to the stories revolving around the main and first-tier characters. These characters should have great hooks and easily definable traits that add texture and memorable comedic moments. In *Camp Lazlo*, the second tier consisted of Edward, Samson, the Lemming Brothers, the Dung Beetles, as well as the Squirrel scouts Jane Doe, Patsy, Gretchen, Nina, and Miss Mucus. You will notice a mixture of antagonist and protagonist characters here. When the second tier started flexing its muscle, Edward would become an antagonist and turn the camp against the main characters Lazlo, Raj, and Clam. This would create a power struggle in which the
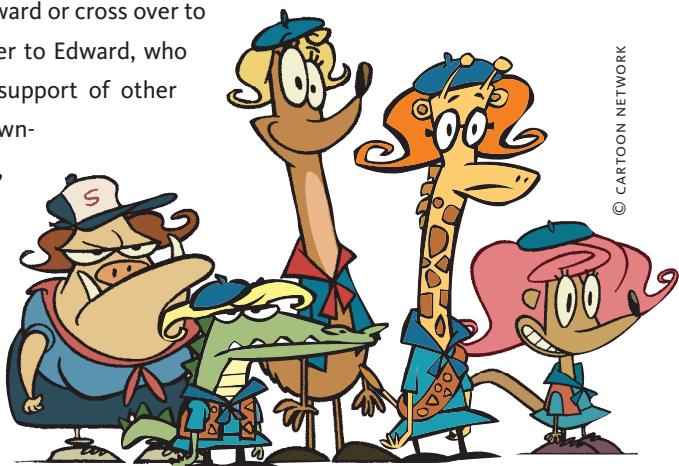
other campers would either support Edward or cross over to the other side. This dynamic gave power to Edward, who couldn't exist as a bully without the support of other campers. Edward would become a brown-nose and squeal to Scoutmaster Lumpus, knowing that doing so would ultimately get the others in trouble. The Dung Beetles and Samson were initially comedic caricatures of stupidity and whiney neurosis, respectively (Samson being a young Truman Capote–like guinea pig). Later we had whole episodes revolve around them, but the audience needed to get to know them first. In *Rocko's Modern Life*, the second-tier characters were the Chameleon Brothers, Earl the Tough Dog, Really Really Big Man, and the Hippo Lady.

Miss Mucus   Gretchen   Den Mother Jane Doe   Nina   Patsy Smiles

Squirrel Scouts

The Squirrel Scouts offered strong second-tier character texture.

   Be careful not to fill up the stage too quickly. It's best to maintain simplicity in the beginning, and let the richness unfold gradually. It's too easy to fall into the trap of running to different characters for new ideas, and it takes real discipline to stick to the players you already have.

   Third-tier characters are incidental, part of the background. They fill up crowd scenes but also provide important services to the first- and second-tier characters. Examples include McMuscli the camp cook, and Pothole McPucker, the Mayor of Prickly Pines, from *Camp Lazlo*. When you are first fleshing out your animated world, it's good to think about whether you will need recurring background characters; otherwise, they can be developed as the series progresses. Some characters on *Camp Lazlo* started out as background characters and then moved up as the series evolved. Harold the walrus was a background character who was given a few lines in one episode. We liked him so much, we gave him larger roles as the series progressed. The running joke about Harold was that no one knew his real name, but that was okay by him. He was just glad to be acknowledged by the main characters.

   You may have noticed that I also colored the characters differently depending on their tier, using brighter colors for the main characters than the second- and third-tier characters so that the main ones would dominate the screen when they walked into a scene. The hour-long Lazlo special *Where's Lazlo?* demonstrates the hierarchy of the characters pretty well and how all three tiers combined to make a rich episode. Lazlo, Raj, and Clam are the outsiders, and Scoutmaster Lumpus is the rigid rule-maker who is broken down to a sniveling coward by the end of the episode with the help of the outsiders. You see the trio of Lazlo, Raj, and Clam as the catalysts who disrupt business as usual. Raj at first

The Secret to a Great Series
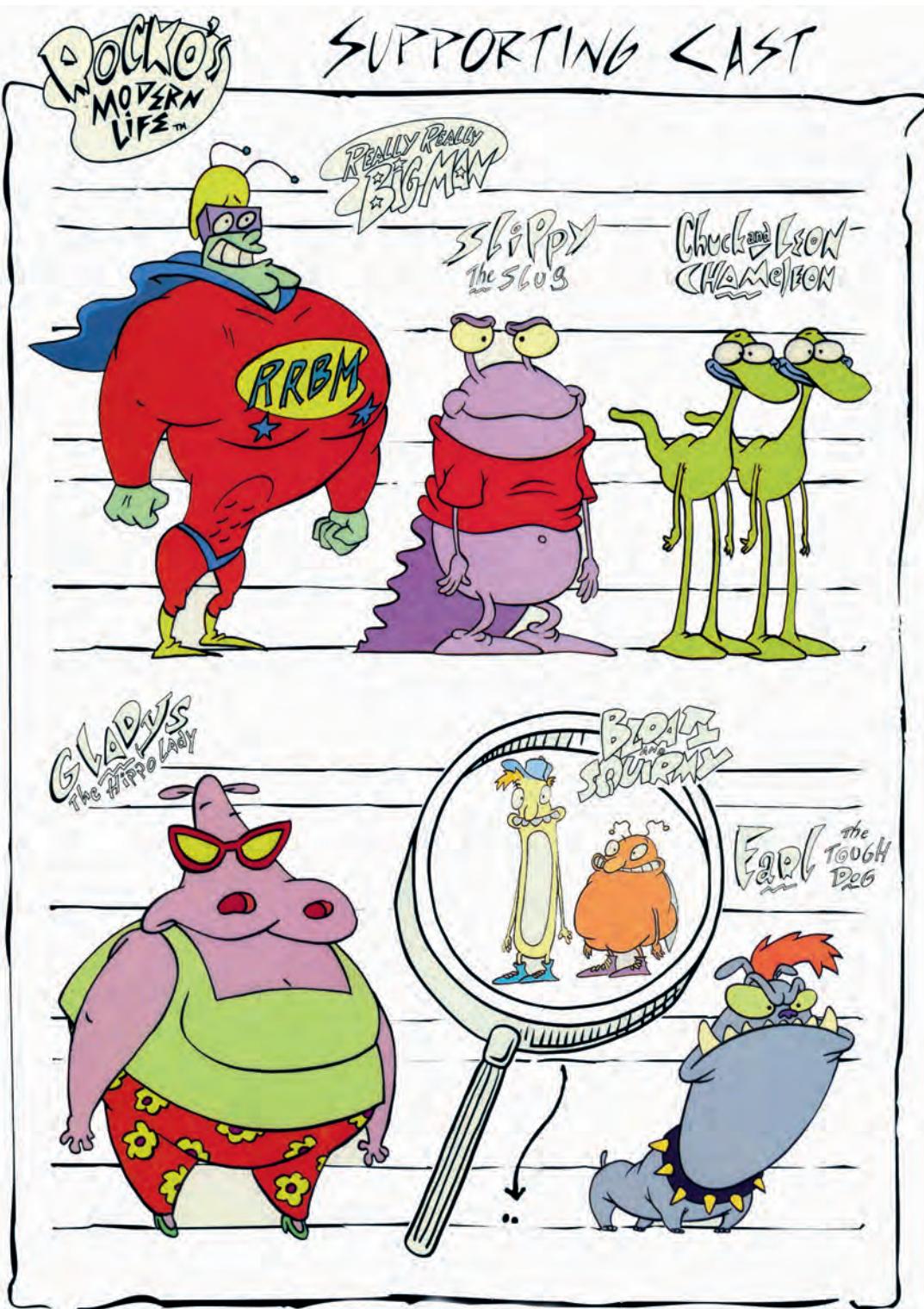
The secondary characters from *Rocko's Modern Life*.

resists admitting how different he is from the other campers and tries to fit in and not make waves. His conflict shows his insecurity about who he is inside, and whether he should follow Lazlo, the troublemaking monkey. By the end of the

episode, Raj realizes who his real friends are, and that knowledge, to him, is the most important lesson. A good group of characters that inspires volumes of new episodes and humor always contains personalities that rub up against each other and cause conflict. Again, conflict is a source of humor—characters that always get along are not funny or interesting.
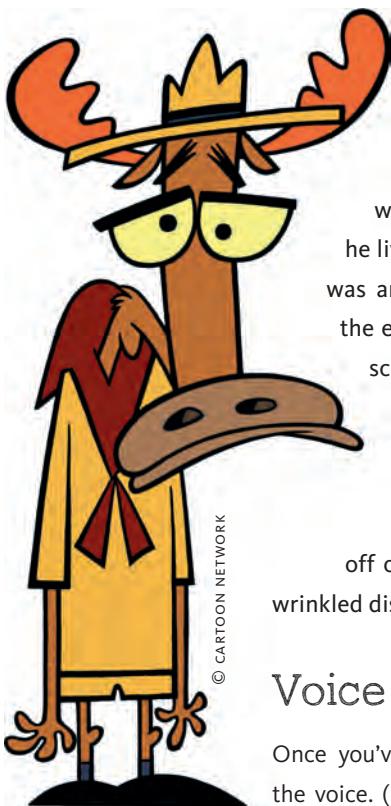
Backstory

Every well-drawn character should have a backstory. Even if it is not visible at first, there has to be a reason a character is who he or she is. My character Edward from *Camp Lazlo* had older brothers who used to beat the tar out of him. This scenario happened to be inspired by a guy I knew from junior high who was just like Edward—he liked to bully other kids because he got bullied at home himself. The fact is, knowing the backstory helps you predict how a character will act and gives you an opportunity to weave those details into a story line—they don't exist in a vacuum. Heffer on *Rocko's Modern Life* was a character based on a friend of mine I grew up with. He loved to eat and often didn't realize how big he was (in size and personality). In a second-season episode, we find out Heffer is adopted and that his adoptive parents were wolves whose original intent was to eat *him*. This is a good example of a backstory that answers some questions about why a character is so messed up. This episode was called "a high watermark for television animation" by the *Los Angeles Times*.

Some backstories are revealed as the series progresses. Could we ever have foreseen that Samson's parents were spineless electric jellyfish? This backstory not only explained his reaction to the jellyfish on the beach for that

Dad Wolfe feeding baby Heffer in a home movie from the *Rocko's Modern Life* episode "Who's for Dinner?"

episode, but his overall neurosis and nervous nature (imagine getting a stinging shock every time you were hugged by your mother as a child). A character's backstory can become a process of discovery: Tom Kenny (who voiced over Scoutmaster Lumpus, Heffer, SpongeBob, and many other characters) was so involved with Scoutmaster Lumpus and brought so much to that character— he lived and breathed him. During one recording session where Lumpus was an extraordinarily diabolical, deviant sociopath, Tom joked that at the end of the series, we should reveal that Lumpus had locked the real scoutmaster in the closet and that he was really a patient from the local asylum. "Hmmmm," I remember saying. "Can I use that?" So of course, in the last episode of the series, the truth did come out. What I really wanted was for the scoutmaster who had been locked away the whole time to be Heffer. But the network wouldn't sign off on that plan, so we used a subtle facsimile that resembled an old, wrinkled distant cousin of Heffer's. I think that *Rocko* fans got the joke.

The diabolical Scoutmaster Lumpus from *Camp Lazlo*.

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Voice

Once you've developed the character's personality, start playing around with the voice. (I discuss this in greater depth in chapter 7.) Street-smart characters like Edward do well with New York–style accents. Samson sounds like a young Truman Capote. Accents and voice inflection can add so much personality to a character; Southern accents are fun to play with, as are uppity sophisticated drawls. It's helpful to think of an actor or actress who has portrayed a similar type of character and use that as a jumping-off point. Just be mindful of ethnic and cultural stereotypes when choosing voices so as to avoid causing offense. When I was first developing Scoutmaster Lumpus, I was hearing a bumbling Minnesota accent, but when Tom Kenny started trying it, the Minnesota accent made Lumpus sound too nice, not nearly crazy enough. So we tried a Don Knotts voice, and that didn't work either. Tom and I continued to play around with this trait for a while, and we finally reached a cross between Richard Nixon and W. C. Fields that seemed to work. A great voice actor may give you an even better sound than what you were originally looking for.

Character Design

By now I'm sure you have lots of great doodles and sketches of what your characters look and sound like and are formulating them in your head. Next it's time to start narrowing down how they look for the pitch. In *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo,* I used anthropomorphic characters. This device is not necessary for your show, but it worked for me, as I could use the personality of each character to define what kind of animal it was. Rocko was a quiet little wallaby. Filburt was

Scoutmaster Lumpus

a neurotic turtle. If your show features human characters, you should sell their personality along with the design. We've already talked a bit about the overall look of the show, so now it's time to design the characters with that look in mind, and then to distinguish each character with recognizable yet exaggerated features. Play with the teeth and the posture, maybe giving a slightly insecure character a slouch. Characters with big egos tend to walk like they have a stick up their butt. Your character's hook could be a really grotesque, exaggerated physical flaw—look at Pothole McPucker from *Camp Lazlo*. Okay, don't look at him. . . . I know it's painful!

Set up your characters as though they are in a police lineup, and play with their primary basic shapes. Their silhouettes should immediately distinguish them from one another. When they get on stage, their personalities need to pop out immediately. I also like to play with asymmetrical designs. Heffer's two nostrils are different shapes, and so are his eyes. Lazlo's eyes are dissimilar as well. Characters are more interesting with imperfect faces and bodies. Once I developed a lumberjack beaver with a missing arm. I figured that a tree had bitten it off, leading him to devote his life to cutting down forests. Work this kind of physical flaw into the backstory. Do something to give each character his or her own zany appearance: Throw an eye patch on one; make another pull his pants up to his armpits. A character I developed for my film *Fish Head* was blind and had an uncanny sense of smell, so I decided to give him three nostrils, which was his body's way of compensating for his lack of sight. Then I called him "Three-hole Jack."

Sometimes finding the right voice for a character can be as challenging as finding the right look.

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Here's a final note to keep in mind for character design: The more complicated your character design is, the harder it will be to correctly duplicate it, especially in a series production environment, where episodes are put together in a large-scale assembly line. Complex characters are also more time-consuming and expensive, so the simpler the better. Remember that every piece of clothing and every accessory has to be designed, colored, and animated, so if you can get away with one button rather that two on someone's shirt, that will help.

The attractive Pothole McPucker, Mayor of Prickly Pines in *Camp Lazlo*.
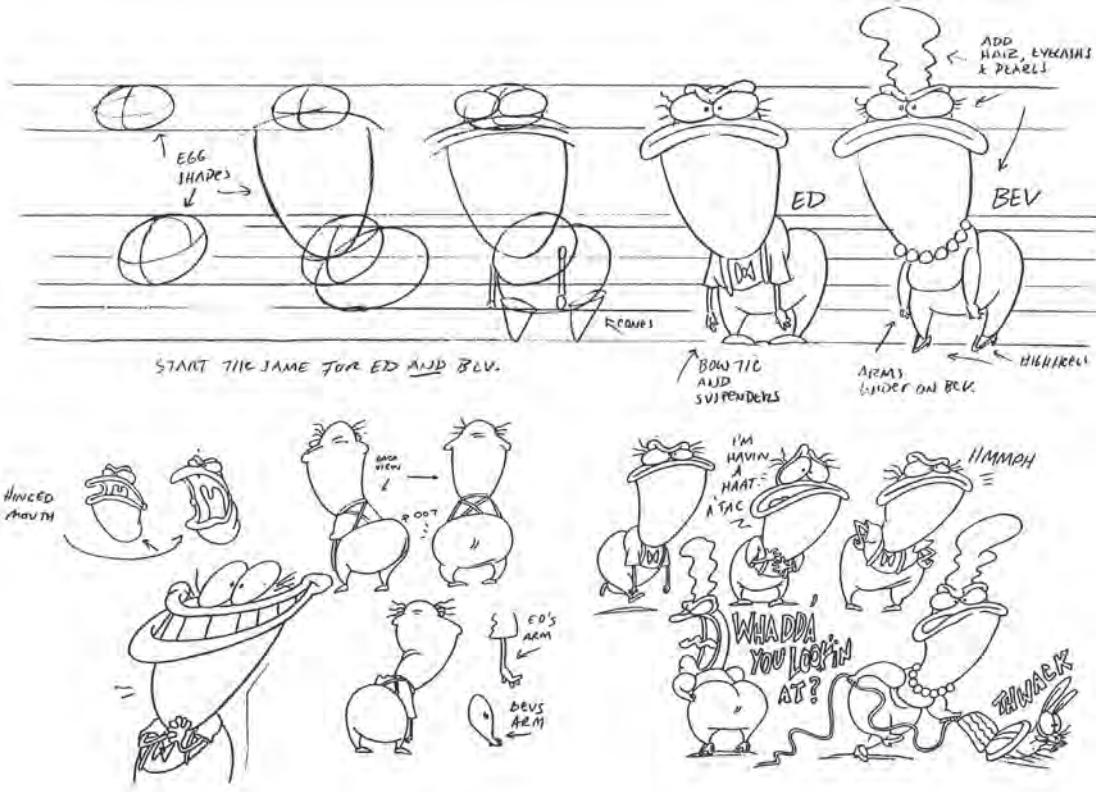
Creating Animated Cartoons with Character

A production model sheet for Ed and Bev Bighead from *Rocko's Modern Life*.

Consistency

After you have developed your character with its unique personality, design, manner of speaking, etc., *you need to lock it in* as much as possible. This will come into greater play later in the process, when you actually start writing for the pilot and the series, but I want you to understand it now so you don't run into trouble down the line. Obviously, if the development process calls for it, you will need to play with and finesse your characters, but only if you believe it absolutely necessary. A certain amount of evolution is predictable since you've worked hard to create structure and chemistry among your characters (case in point: all the versions of Rocko and Lazlo that we went through). For the most part, this work

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A Funny Note on Hooks

Dr. Hutchinson from *Rocko's Modern Life*.

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When I was doing ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE, the executives at Nickelodeon started getting heat about the fact that their cartoons didn't portray any positive female role models. They came to me and asked whether I could fit one into our show. My response was, "Are there any positive MALE role models? And who uses a cartoon character for a role model, anyway?" But I agreed to think it over and try to fit in a strong female character. "Oh, and can you give her a strong hook?" they asked.
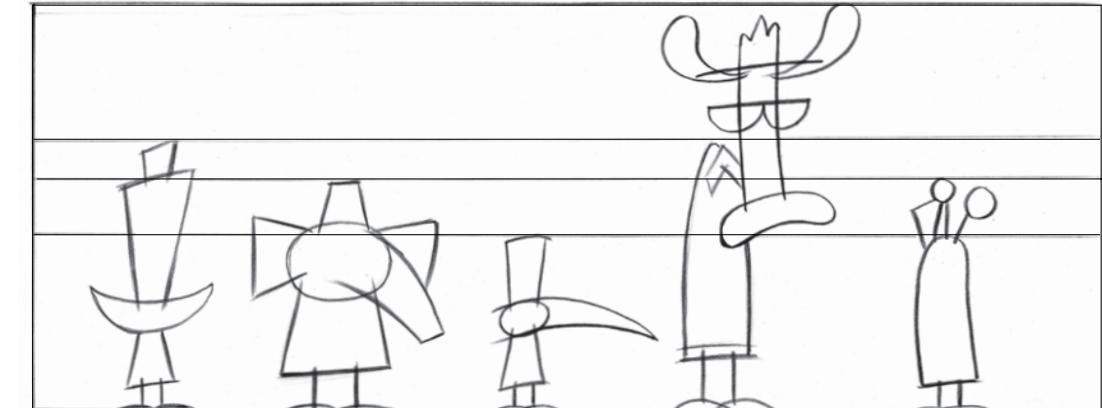
I shared this request with my directors, and we came up with Dr. Hutchinson, a dentist who eventually marries Filburt, and they have children together. And Doug Lawrence designed her with... well... a hook. An actual hook for a hand in place of the one that had apparently been bitten off by a crocodile patient when the good dentist hit a nerve. Enough said. It served her well.
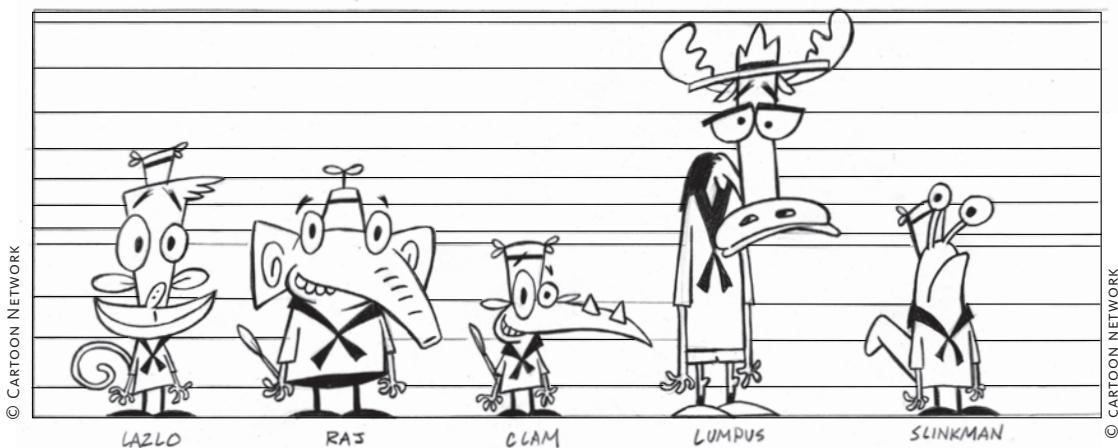
should be done before preproduction begins. Once the show airs, unless you view a small change as a natural progression for the character, don't mess with the way the audience expects a character to look and act. Plus, when you get to the production phase, you want everyone to be on the same page, and you can't do that if you keep changing the characters. Unless a story calls for a special outfit, every design element needs to remain consistent.

Sometimes, as a show progresses, there is the temptation to start playing with a character's personality in order to write new jokes. *Do not sacrifice the consistency of a character for a joke!* To me, that's just lazy writing. Sure it's funny to have Spunky suddenly start talking for a few frames, but you have just messed with the inherent traits of this character, and the audience will wonder what just happened. What are the rules? If they can't rely on Spunky not talking, what else might happen that they're not expecting? Leave the surprises to the story twists
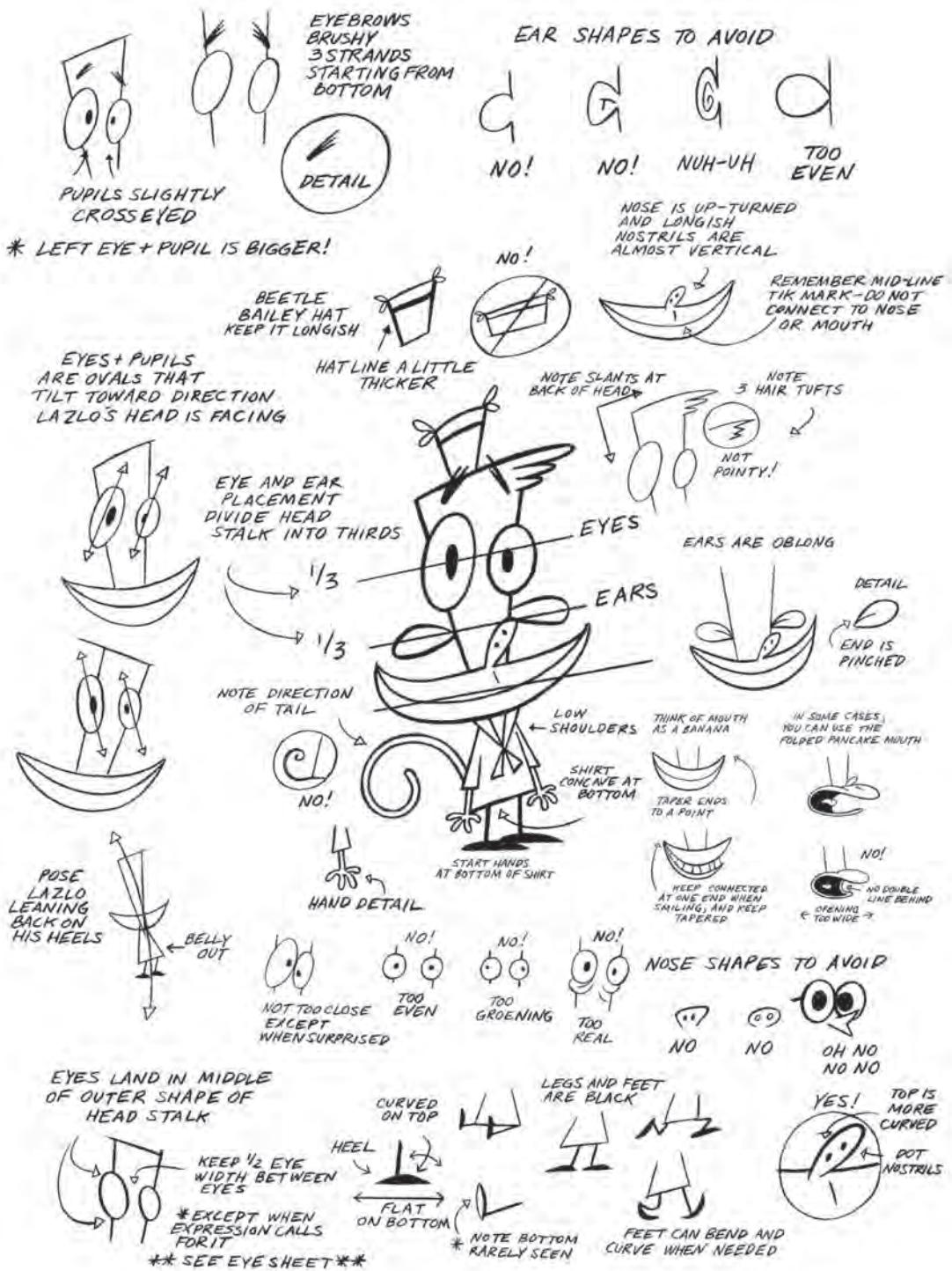
BASIC SHAPES OF PRIMARY CHARACTERS

LAZLO   RAJ   CLAM   LUMPUS   SLINKMAN

This is an illustration of how *Camp Lazlo* character designs were distinctive.

and keep a tether to consistency within characters. We will cover more of this subject later in chapter 6.
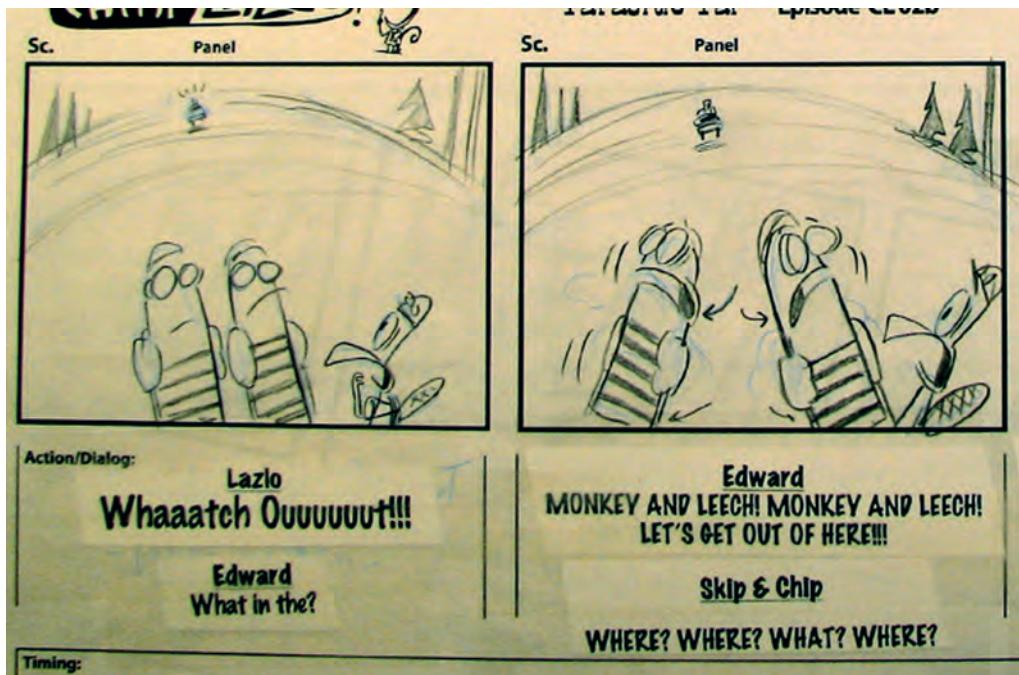
There was an old rule in the Looney Tunes universe that when you squashed or stretched a character, or had them get hit with a mallet, you had to have them revert back to their original form as quickly as possible. It's a kind of cartoon violence agreement: If the characters pop back right away, some cartoon violence is allowed by the networks. With changes in personality brought on by some outside force, as in the case of Samson touching the jellyfish and going crazy in the episode "S is for Crazy," it's best to bring him back to status quo by the end of the episode so that he is the same old Samson in the next one. If you are creating a character for a one-shot film, it's okay to use an arc such as a character losing his sight halfway through the film as part of the story. It won't work in a series, however, unless suddenly having a blind character works within the dynamic of the cast.

EYEBROWS BRUSHY 3 STRANDS STARTING FROM BOTTOM

DETAIL

PUPILS SLIGHTLY CROSS EYED

* LEFT EYE + PUPIL IS BIGGER!

EAR SHAPES TO AVOID

NO!   NO!   NUH-UH   TOO EVEN

NOSE IS UP-TURNED AND LONGISH NOSTRILS ARE ALMOST VERTICAL

NO!

REMEMBER MID-LINE TIK MARK—DO NOT CONNECT TO NOSE OR MOUTH

EYES + PUPILS ARE OVALS THAT TILT TOWARD DIRECTION LAZLO'S HEAD IS FACING

BEETLE BAILEY HAT KEEP IT LONGISH

HAT LINE A LITTLE THICKER

NOTE SLANTS AT BACK OF HEAD

NOTE 3 HAIR TUFTS

NOT POINTY!

EYE AND EAR PLACEMENT DIVIDE HEAD STALK INTO THIRDS

EYES

EARS

EARS ARE OBLONG

DETAIL

END IS PINCHED

1/3

1/3

NOTE DIRECTION OF TAIL

LOW ← SHOULDERS

THINK OF MOUTH AS A BANANA

IN SOME CASES, YOU CAN USE THE FOLDED PANCAKE MOUTH

NO!

SHIRT CONCAVE AT BOTTOM

TAPER ENDS TO A POINT

POSE LAZLO LEANING BACK ON HIS HEELS

← BELLY OUT

HAND DETAIL

START HANDS AT BOTTOM OF SHIRT

KEEP CONNECTED AT ONE END WHEN SMILING, AND KEEP TAPERED

NO!

NO DOUBLE LINE BEHIND

OPENING TOO WIDE

NO!   NO!   NO!

NOT TOO CLOSE EXCEPT WHEN SURPRISED

TOO EVEN

TOO GROENING

TOO REAL

NOSE SHAPES TO AVOID

NO   NO   OH NO NO NO

EYES LAND IN MIDDLE OF OUTER SHAPE OF HEAD STALK

CURVED ON TOP

HEEL

FLAT ON BOTTOM

LEGS AND FEET ARE BLACK

YES!   TOP IS MORE CURVED

DOT NOSTRILS

KEEP 1/2 EYE WIDTH BETWEEN EYES

* EXCEPT WHEN EXPRESSION CALLS FOR IT
** SEE EYE SHEET **

NOTE BOTTOM RARELY SEEN

FEET CAN BEND AND CURVE WHEN NEEDED

The Secret to a Great Series

The "do's and don'ts" page for animating Lazlo from the *Camp Lazlo* production bible.

Transitioning Characters to Film

In my opinion, Aardman Animations' Wallace and Gromit are the best examples of successful characters that survived a short episodic series and then went on to great success in a feature film. First created by Nick Park as a student independent film, the chemistry between this eccentric English inventor Wallace and his more intelligent and grounded dog, Gromit, is brilliant. It set up a formula for the two to embark on many adventures together. I feel that the most important aspect of *Wallace and Gromit* is their companionship and universal appeal. You want to hang out with them—to invite them over for tea and crackers. Nick Park kept his characters consistent throughout the short films and the feature film. I also admire the way that Park and Aardman Studios kept the entertainment media wolves at bay with regard to protecting their property, and they still prospered from it! They also showed that a series does not have to be long to be successful. *Wallace and Gromit* had a very successful merchandising life based on just a few films.

Last Word (for now) on Character

The most important question you need to ask yourself about the characters you create is, do they feel alive to you? Do you care about them? Do you want to set up a world in which they can live? Do you see many possible stories and gag ideas stemming from their very makeup? I suggest taking these characters and your show concept and coming up with possible premises, or "episode ideas." Do they come quickly? Or are you stuck already? You shouldn't start scratching your head for show ideas until episode fifty, which, if you do eleven-minute episodes like we did, would be the one-hundredth episode. If you find yourself not immediately coming up with ideas for these characters, you may want to rethink their personalities or the entire series idea. I want you to put some sample episode premises in your pitch materials, so start writing them. If you have your series hook and premise in place and your characters fleshed out, and you are still convinced this show needs to be made, then you are ready for the next step.

Writing for the *Dung Beetles* (from the storyboard for "Parasitic Pac") always made me smile.

Q & A
with Tom Warburton

TOM WARBURTON is the creator and producer of the Cartoon Network's animated series *Codename: Kids Next Door*. He is a veteran of the animation business whose work has appeared on Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, and MTV. He recently authored and illustrated a children's book titled *1000 Times No* for HarperCollins Publishers.

Q: *We all know about your great animated series* Codename: Kids Next Door *on Cartoon Network. Could you give us a brief history of how you became a creator of your own cartoon series? What kind of experiences and education prepared you for this?*

A: Well, I kind of did that whole "start from the very bottom and work your way up" thing that you sometimes hear big-super-giant-mega CEOs talk about.

When I graduated from school (Kutztown University [in Pennsylvania], a school without an animation program), I headed to New York City with Animation Magazine's list of studios they used to publish and just started pounding the pavement. Eventually some suckers (Buzzco Associates) gave me my first opportunity, and I became an intern doing all the things like making copies, making deliveries, and cleaning coffee cups. But when I wasn't doing that stuff, I was learning the nuts and bolts of animation. That's where I really received the basic skills that I took from job to job. And from job to job I went, since animation in NYC is, and always has been, a transitory occupation.

I was laid off after only ten months but soon found myself working as a layout artist on the first season of Nickelodeon's *Doug*. Five months later, it was on to J. J. Sedelmaier Productions, where I worked on a million commercials as well as B*eavis and Butt-head*, *Schoolhouse Rock*, and *Saturday Night Live's* "TV Funhouse." That's when I really came into my own and started directing and such. But while I

was doing that, I was helping Sue Rose on her fledgling "Pepper Ann" pitch and working on my own show ideas. Eventually, *Pepper Ann* got picked up by Disney, and my own pilot, "Kenny and the Chimp," got green-lighted by Cartoon Network, so I left JJSP to be the character designer on *Pepper Ann* (from home!) and work on my show idea. After the storyboard for "Kenny and the Chimp" got approved, Cartoon Network sent me out to LA for a couple of months to make the pilot, which was an amazing experience, but I kind of got the feeling it wasn't going to get picked up as a series. So I came up with Plan B: a pitch about some of the side characters from "Kenny and the Chimp"—the five kids who lived next door. Thus, the "Kids Next Door" were born! And Cartoon Network [CN] liked it, so we started the whole pilot process again!

Q: *I remember your telling me a bit about how the series got picked up. It was part of a competition, correct? Could you tell us a bit about that experience?*

A: *Codename: Kids Next Door* was part of CN's second "Big Pick Weekend," where the viewers get to pick which pilot becomes a series. The first one consisted of only three shorts, but this one had ten! And mine was the first one done, so I had to wait a year for the others to be finished. I was lucky enough to get a job on Mo Willems's *Sheep in the Big City* while I waited for the competition to begin. Finally, FINALLY, they started running the shorts for an entire summer, and then the vot-

ing began on a weekend in August. And why retype that story when you can just go to this old blog post about how it all went down? http://kidsnextblog.livejournal.com/41952.html. Possibly the best day of my life . . . but also a scary one. Now I had to actually *make* a series—something I had never done before!

Q: *Your show was one of the few done outside the LA studio system (along with* Ed, Edd n Eddy*), but it was still part of the network family (that is, not an acquisition). What was that like, and what were the good aspects, the bad, or the most challenging?*

A: I think the part I missed was being around other people who were in the same lonely boat as me. I would have loved to be able to run up a flight of steps and ask another show creator how to handle something. But instead, we were our own little island, just chugging along, trying to figure it all out. On the other hand, it was great being by ourselves, as we didn't have to deal with all the giant-studio politics that invariably happen, and we didn't have artists suddenly shifted to another production or have to share editing suites and stuff.

Q: *Could you elaborate on the process of developing your characters? How did you come up with their personalities? Were they based on your own, or on people you knew?*

A: To be honest, the characters in *Kids Next Door* [KND] have always been your basic, stereotypical ''team'' personalities at their very core—you know, the fearless leader, the brainy inventor kid, the airhead, the tough guy, the cool chick, etc. But in developing the characters beyond that, it's how you take those basic, boring traits and play upon them. That's what defines who they *really* are and what makes them interesting: How is the tough guy weak? How is the dumb girl smart? What is the fearless leader afraid of? The best way to find out these things is over time. Fortunately, we had six

seasons of *KND* in which to really explore the kids and learn more and more about them.

Another way to develop characters is to put them in situations that will draw out who they are. A favorite example of mine is the basic theme behind the movie *Castaway*: What happens when a man obsessed with being on time, who lives by the clock, suddenly finds himself with nothing but time on his hands? That's a really interesting question. Maybe not the best movie, but a great situation to put someone in.

As far as basing the characters on people I knew, I kind of realized as the show went on that each of the *KND*s held little parts of me in them: Number One's tenuous hold on leadership, Number Four's toughness (all show, of course), Number Three's overly optimistic view of the world, and so on. But then again, if you stare at something long enough, you start to bond with it anyway.

Q: *Could you fill us in on the process of doing your series? Were you script-driven or storyboard-driven, and how did that work?*

A: As with most things in my life, I kind of made up my own weird, not quite normal process to craft our episodes. We didn't write full scripts (which I feel are often cold and lifeless), and we didn't leave it up to the storyboard artists to write the episodes from outlines (mainly because I don't think massive cinematic, plot-heavy stories lend themselves to being storyboard-driven). So we did ''skroutlines,'' a kind of hideous cross between script and outline. They read like fun short stories and gave the storyboard artists all the freedom they needed to do exactly what I wanted, and the storyboard teams really ran with them. Kim Arndt, Matt Peters, Jesse Schmal, and especially Guy Moore all found ways to make each episode into a huge minimovie that leapt off the page. But who knows if I'd do it that way again. Each project lends itself to a new way of working, so I'll wait and see what kind of thing I'm making next.

Q: *How do you see yourself juggling an animated series' being your artistic expression and at the same time a commercial property? Do you have any conflicts with the business side of doing an animated series?*

A: I've always come from more of the commercial side of things. I was a graphic design major in college, and I worked in commercial animation for years and years, so I always knew that we were serving two masters—a creative one and a commercial one. I've never had any problem realizing that, when it comes right down to it, we're making a *product.* A network isn't spending millions of dollars to further your artistic vision—they're doing it to make money. But that's not to say that you can't make really cool art at the same time. You just have to realize that the pendulum between art and commerce will be constantly swinging, every step of the way, and if you're not careful it will crack your skull. Can you live with that?

Q: *If you could give any advice to the up-and-coming writer or artist with dreams of doing his or her own animated series, what would it be?*

A: I'm going to steal some words from the mouth of *My Life as a Teenage Robot's* creator, Rob Renzetti, that I read a long time ago. He said that the first thing you should ask yourself is whether you really want a series: Do you want to live with this thing nonstop for the next couple of years? Do you want to eat, sleep, and dream about it? Do you want to cry over it? To fight over it? There's very little real glory, and it's going to consume every moment of your life, so you had better be in love with this show.

If the answer is ''Yes!'' then go for it. Take it out to the world and show 'em whatcha got. Just make sure it's the right show for the network you're pitching to. Don't bring a show about satanic, foul-mouthed ninja nuns to the vice president of preschool shows at Nickelodeon. It sounds obvious, but you'd be surprised what some people pitch.

Pitching Your Series: Preparing the Proposal

"Confidence is preparation. Everything else is beyond your control."
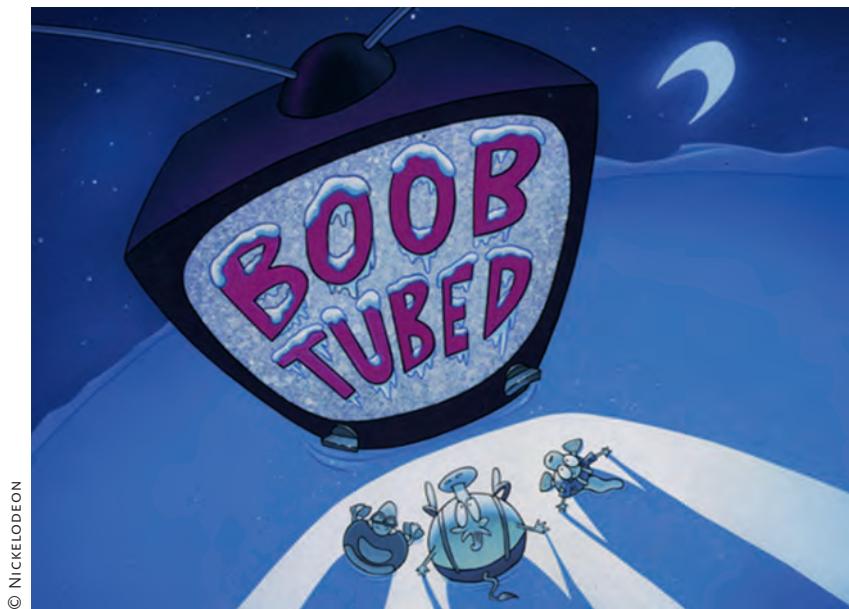
—Richard Kline

"Luck favors the prepared, darling."

—Edna Mode, from the Pixar/Disney movie *The Incredibles*

I hope that by now you feel confident that your idea for an animated series will blow everything else out of the water. (If you don't, go back and repeat chapters 3 and 4.) It's crucial to feel confident with your concept in order to move forward. With that in hand, now it's time to prepare materials that will sell your idea in the form of a proposal. If your goal is to get a series funded and/or produced by a network or studio, then you must compose the best proposal possible to reach that goal. Look at it as a sales tool that will persuade potential development folks to offer your great idea and your amazing characters a place to live and breathe. If you're not interested in having a network or studio connected with your project (which is a viable option), then you can skip this chapter. But if you need someone to help finance your project, even if it's Uncle Harold, it's good to be able to present strong reasons, both written and visual, for why this series is the best damn thing that will ever be produced!

Since most of the people who will be reading your proposal also read thousands of others, they don't need much of an excuse to toss yours aside and move on to the next. This chapter will guide you in getting your foot in the door, so

please follow along closely. I lay out some critical guidelines and pointers that will help you formulate your idea into a salable artwork and a convincing investment opportunity, which will help you move on to the next steps of development, producing a pilot, and ultimately, putting your own series into production.

Know Your Audience

This section is not about who you are pitching to (though you should know that too); it's about the specific audience you are targeting with your project. You should have a pretty good idea by now about who would represent the best viewers for your cartoon. Which audience would be the most receptive to your idea? If your show is kid-focused, what are their ages? Do some research on which networks cater to the age-group your show will target. If it's aimed at adults, consider a network such as Fox, home to *The Simpsons,* or perhaps a cable channel such as Comedy Central or Cartoon Network's Adult Swim that show *South Park* and *Robot Chicken*, respectively. Maybe your show is meant for the Web instead of television, in which case check out Mondo Media's *Happy Tree Friends* at http://htf.atom.com/. Figure out exactly to whom you are targeting your cartoon. This will help you focus in on that niche and save time when you're choosing the right studio or network to pitch to; your sales tool should reflect why your cartoon will bring in exactly the viewers they are looking for. To put it plainly, don't pitch a show with the edginess of *South Park* or *The Family Guy* to the Disney Channel; your research should have told you they're not the appropriate outlets for that type of humor.

Television Demographics

The term *demographics* may feel a little like reading "sodium tripolyphosphate" on the side of a mac-and-cheese box, but it's important to learn. A television demographic is the categorized viewership of a particular network or channel. It will often pinpoint age, gender, income bracket, spending habits, hobbies, and more, which allows a television network to target their main products. You mean the product is not the hit show? No, it's advertising in the form of commercials, just like in the old days when newspapers signed the most popular comic strips in an effort to draw in more readers who would buy the paper, thereby selling more advertising. TV networks likewise want shows that will bring in many viewers who will watch commercials. For example, the Fishing Channel targets men aged forty to seventy who have enough income to purchase a fishing boat and rod, or to travel to Cozumel just to fish, so their advertisers may include travel resorts and tackle and gear retailers.

But it's not enough to bring in viewers—they need to be the *right* viewers. A good way to know if you are a good fit with a particular network is to pay attention to whom they target their commercials. A channel that caters to fishermen who buy boats does not want a show that will bring in a preschool audience who are interested only in plush fish that squeak. You need to sell the network on why your show is right for their channel. To them, your job is to bring in the highest number of viewers in their demographic, including repeat watchers and appointment viewers (those who literally make an "appointment" to watch a show). Your pitch and your proposal need to play to that target audience. As of this writing, the Disney Channel's demographic counts more girls than boys, while Nickelodeon reports the opposite. But all of that could change tomorrow, so do your homework!

All About Impact: Crafting Your Proposal

For my show proposals, I prepared a short, very professional looking spiral-bound booklet that could accompany a verbal pitch or serve as a standalone piece for mailings. Development people prefer to have something physical to pass around if they like a proposal, so make it truly sensational! This is extremely important, because the people you are pitching to are often very busy, and they've seen it all before. They're used to the boring old vanilla pitch and will pass it right by. So give them what they really want—a whole new flavor brimming with lots of cool, tasty chunks! Let's take a look at the different elements that go into crafting a knockout proposal.

An Interesting Note on This Subject

Rocko discovers why "laundry day is a very dangerous day."

When Nickelodeon became interested in developing and picking up ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE, they were looking to break out of the pack of mundane Saturday morning fare. They wanted edgier stuff, cartoons that had a different look. Really what they wanted was to make some waves with their programming, which is exactly what they did, brilliantly, with the hit show REN & STIMPY, by the very talented John Kricfalusi. The edginess of REN & STIMPY brought Nickelodeon a lot of attention, both good and bad. At the time, I was in the middle of doing the pilot for ROCKO when REN & STIMPY debuted and immediately started pulling in huge numbers of viewers (mostly college kids). So when ROCKO hit the air, it started pulling in the same demographic. I was new to television then and didn't even know what "demographic" meant, but I learned quickly, as ROCKO started leading the network in overall households tuning in (meaning everyone aged six to sixty, but with the biggest spike of college-aged males).

Cover and Series Synopsis

They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but you have to admit that the cover influences whether you pick up a book or leave it on the shelf. The cover of your proposal will be the first thing anyone sees, so make it count and hit them with your best shot—feature your main character in colors that will jump out from across the room! Also make sure the name of the series is easy to read. A useful tip is to check out the title and logo treatments of other shows to see how other creators and/or marketing departments link the main idea of a show with the type style. With all the advancements these days in computer graphics and laser printers, putting together an amazing cover should be easy—a whole lot easier than when I pitched
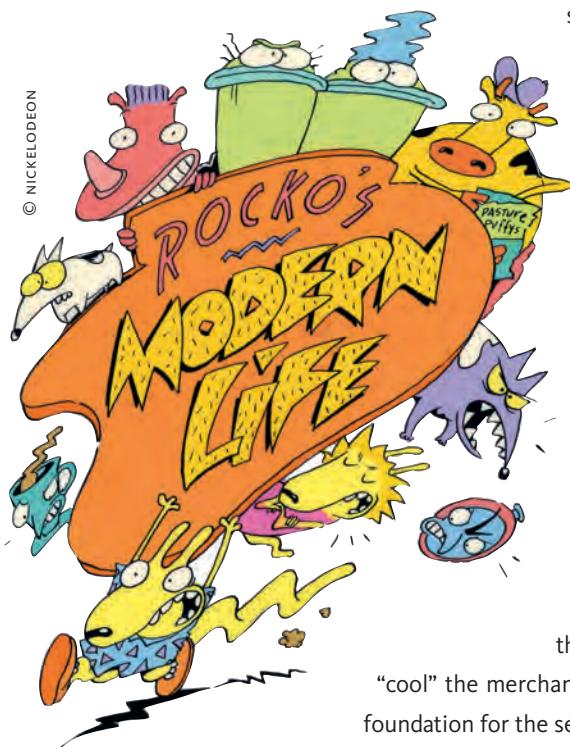
Then something interesting started happening: The advertising department called up programming and said, "We can't sell our advertiser's toys to college students. Nickelodeon is a kids' channel. Lower the target age! We need programs that appeal to younger kids!" So, ironically, the same executives who at the beginning were encouraging the edginess of Rocko, were suddenly telling me to change the show to tailor it more toward younger kids. Soon they were yanking certain episodes off the air and censoring others, and this was the beginning of the end. Rocko was what it was, and I wanted to stay true to that vision. I had done my part of the deal—I had delivered the show as originally pitched, and it had brought in good overall household ratings. Further, it was produced on schedule and on budget. To me and my many fans, it was a success. I'm still proud of it, but I also understood their business dilemma.

Later, when I brought Camp Lazlo to Cartoon Network, I had an age group in mind to target, and I made sure Cartoon Network was on the same page. I wanted it to appeal to six- to eleven-year-olds but also to be smart and edgy enough for parents and adults to watch. Ultimately I think we succeeded in balancing on that edge without producing too much content to which parents would object.

Rocko—so get familiar with software programs such as Adobe Illustrator or InDesign, or another graphics program you feel comfortable with.

After the cover, you should include a title page and table of contents that look sharp and professional. Try to use artwork from the show, such as your main characters or theme designs, on every page. It's a bit like a magazine, in that graphics will entice the reader to turn the next page. Give the headlines a type style that is related to the show, but keep the main text as easy to read as possible. And—most importantly—there should be *no* spelling errors! The entire proposal is a reflection on you. You don't need to have been an English major with perfect writing skills (God knows I'm not!), but absolutely everyone can and should master

The cover of the first *Rocko's Modern Life* proposal, 1991.

spell-check. It's also a good idea to have someone else proofread your whole proposal before sending it off—fresh eyes catch more mistakes.

Next comes the series synopsis, in which you hit them with the main idea of the show in the first few pages. Remember when we broke down your series idea to a simple sentence? This is the place for that. Some executives or development people will start to make a decision about your idea based on the art of the main character and the series idea, so make it grab them! I used a simple sentence first, followed by a paragraph that went into slightly more detail about the show and its primary characters. Highlight the main conflicts and why they would lead to funny story lines. You don't need to go into the style of the music or the voices here, or how "cool" the merchandising toys would look. Focus instead on the main foundation for the series. Why is it solid? Why should they be interested in connecting with this series? Should they want to read on? Of course they should, because it's an amazing idea that's going to make smart business sense to them. You don't need to tell them that in so many words—just help them come to that conclusion after reading through your awesome proposal.
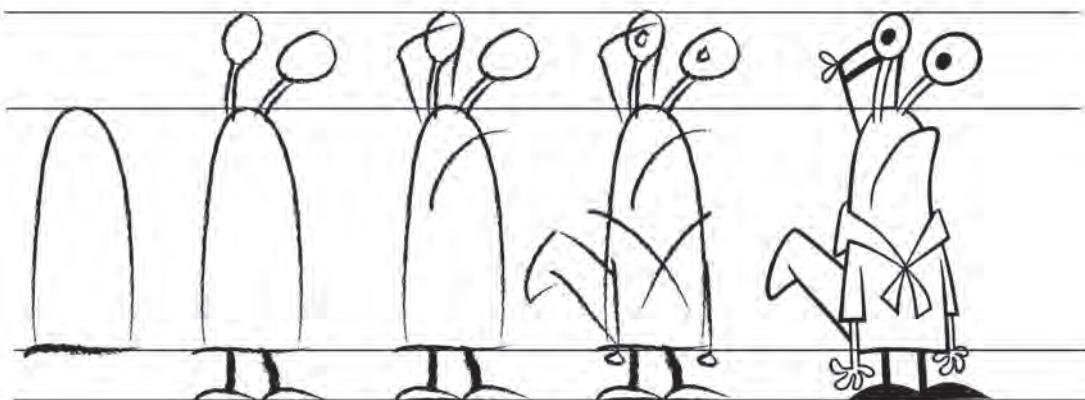
That said, don't get too detailed with this first proposal. It's okay to be explicit about some elements you want to end up in the series, but sometimes development people like to flesh things out in their own heads. They may have some good ideas to add to yours, but you don't need to start agreeing to any changes at this stage. If you're involved in a verbal pitch face-to-face, always remain calm and quietly stand by your vision. Arguing about new ideas and changes and shoving your supposed artistic genius in their faces will never end well. Just show them that you believe in and respect your idea, and they will too.

Dwellings have lean, and warped perspective.

Look Out tower

LEAKEY LAKE

Docks & Boathouse

Assembly & Mess Hall

Scoutmaster Lumpus's Cabin

Bean Cabins

CAMP K'DNEY

Jelly Cabin (Lazlo's)

Road to the town of Bent Twig

Camp Kidney

The Camp Kidney layout for the *Camp Lazlo* production bible.

Setting

What I like to do next is to lay out the setting for the series. Where do these characters live? It's like the unfolding of a novel—you want the readers to start picturing the scenes in their mind. Set the stage to sell the hook for the show and provide space for your actors to have the room to be funny. Here it's preferable to show a sample painted background or sketched layouts of the background to give an idea of what you are talking about. For *Lazlo*, I showed a painted background of a hilltop view of Camp

The brushy background style for Camp Lazlo was established early on by including in my proposal painted background examples like this one.

Kidney to illustrate the setting. I already had an idea for the brushy style I desired for the backgrounds, so I displayed it, as well as describing the setting in words. You may want to include more details, such as the smells and sounds of the environment. Don't make this section too long, though—one page will do.

Main Characters

Show color designs of your main characters individually, with a one-paragraph description next to or under each one. No need to include all of the background characters, just the main and secondary mains that you've mentioned in your synopsis and overview. Again, great designs and colors that pop will help out a lot here. Make sure the specific pose of each character conveys some of the personality you are trying to convey. It shouldn't look like a mug shot—unless your show is about fugitives.

Series Overview

By now your proposal should have them hooked, so start fleshing out the overall idea in more detail by offering a series overview. Start discussing the dynamics among the characters and how they work within the hook of the series. Describe the protagonists and the antagonists, all of which should be accompanied by the appropriate art. Most importantly, show why this animated series would be

so funny. It's not nearly enough to say, "When these characters start talking and moving around, they're going to be so hilarious!" I'm sure they will be, but you need to lead your pitch audience to that point. The characters and the story need to be funny right there and then, and not just in your own head. Your goal is to get the pitch audience laughing, so try out your ideas on your friends first. Do they laugh, or do they look at you puzzled? Play up any of the funny quirks that may be a part of the series or the characters and be sure to highlight these pages with designs and backgrounds from the show.

Sample Premises

A premise is a brief description of an episode (like the entries you find written in *TV Guide* in an attempt to get you to tune in). Remember when I asked you to come up with some sample premises? Those go here in your proposal. Offer about six or more, but don't put in six great ones and six stinkers just to show you can produce volume. Stick with the six greatest ideas, and use a friend or relative to help you weed out the rejects. When I pitched *Rocko,* one sample premise I

"Heffer the Cow" the Chameleon Bros.

Spunky

The Bigheads

© NICKELODEON

© NICKELODEON

These are marker comps that I included in my Rocko's Modern Life *proposal. I was used to doing these comps for commercial storyboards and found that they were a quick way to show the network my proposed color styling and overall look.*

proposed was: "Spunky falls in love with a mop." This sounded funny, of course. It matched Spunky's personality and helped sell the series, but when we actually went to make the episode based on that premise, it was very difficult to keep that gag fresh and to wrap a story around it for eleven minutes!

The Conclusion

This is where you show that you've done your homework about the particular network or studio and its market and that you know why your series would be a perfect investment for them. The conlusion doesn't have to be long, just enough to summarize why you created this show and why it's perfect for their network or studio; it should be personalized to their needs, never cookie-cutter. It should also support the fact that your idea is inventive and hilarious and doesn't look like anything else in their current show lineup; it hits their target demographics; and you are just the disciplined, hard-working, incredibly

creative person to pull it off. Go in there with that exact creed stapled to your brain and you will do just great!

Brief Bio or Résumé

It's beneficial to include a brief bio or résumé at the end of your proposal—something that spells out what you bring to the party, aside from the great idea. Have you had other animation jobs? Are you connected to any other shows? Have you worked with independent films? Have you won creative awards? Do you have any illustration or writing experience, perhaps for children's books? Even stand-up comedy or acting experience is good to list. Keep to the experience or talents that support you as an accomplished creator, someone who will spearhead your series to great heights. And here's a bit of advice on promoting yourself in person during a pitch meeting: Someone who comes into the room with a huge ego and starts bragging about how wonderful he or she is will be a total turnoff. You should be poised and confident and let your ideas speak for themselves. If you're questioned about your experience, answer with honesty and humility, as you would for any job interview. That will speak volumes about your character and integrity.

Contact Information

Here's probably the most important advice of all: Make sure to include your contact information on the proposal! Preferably on the back cover, list your phone number, email address, website URL (if you have one), and your agent's contact info, if applicable. The last thing you want to have happen is for the network to decide they want to develop your show but not be able to contact you. Also, whether you've given your pitch in person or sent it by mail, be patient. Development folks field up to a dozen pitches a day, so you may not hear back right away. Don't keep calling the minute you leave the meeting or the day after you mail your proposal, but definitely follow up if you have not heard anything after a few weeks.

Will They Steal My Idea?

This is a very common fear among creatives who have pitched ideas for development or publication, be it for television, film, or book publishing. But rest assured that most of the companies and people you pitch to are not in the business of stealing ideas. They need *you* to carry out the idea if they are interested in pursuing it. And if they became known for stealing ideas, they wouldn't keep getting new pitches for long. Also, in the very litigious society we live in, the last thing anyone wants is to spark a lawsuit. But does that mean it will never happen? No. I've seen

too much weirdness in this industry to be able to say for sure, so here are a few ways you can protect yourself.

First, put a copyright notice on your proposal in plain view, both on the title page and on the back cover. For example:

All materials, concepts, and characters © 2010 Joe Murray Studio Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

This line will protect your copyright. Some lawyers recommend other precautions, such as having the recipient sign a nondisclosure agreement whereby they agree not to share the material with anyone unless you initiate a contract or business arrangement. Sometimes a network or studio will make you sign a waiver stating that you won't sue them if they produce a show that is similar to yours. This may seem dodgy—who's to say what defines "similar?"—but with all due respect to your idea, there's a chance they've seen something just like it at least thirty times before, so I say, go ahead and sign it, but keep your copyrights intact. Another form of protection is to mail yourself a copy of your pitch materials before you start submitting them and leave them sealed in the envelope—this serves to document the date of your materials, made official by the postal cancellation stamp.

If, by chance, a show hits the air with characters and an idea that bears more than a passing resemblance to yours, and it started development after you pitched your show, you may have a legal case against the network or studio currently airing it. You would need to show evidence that the idea was conceived and pitched by you before their show went into development, or that the show took a turn toward your idea after you pitched it. However, this is the very reason they have you sign a waiver, so it could get very complicated. Personally, I think this is the least of your worries. In most cases, there is no logical reason why a network would not want the person who conceived the idea to be the one to carry it forward.

Rejection and Revision

If your first pitch or even your first several pitches don't seem to be getting any bites, take a second look at your idea. Is there a better way of presenting it? Does the main idea or characters need to be revisited? It's important to remember that, just because you can't get a development person to move forward on it does *not* mean it's a bad idea. Stop for a minute and reread that previous sentence. There could be several reasons the network or studio isn't interested, but often it's simply because they may be looking for something different at the time. If you believe in your idea, and you know that the universe is screaming out for you to do this show, you just need to keep trying. Or, do it yourself. By that I mean, if you feel you could sell your show better if they could only see what you are

trying to describe, then create your own pilot episode, or create a short film with the characters. Just don't give up on it! I've been in a situation where someone pitched a show about sports, but an executive above the development people hated shows about sports. Then, after that executive left the network, a new one came in and said, "Find me shows about sports! I love shows about sports!" Ideally, in that situation, the sports pitch is still sitting on someone's desk and can be resurrected. Sometimes it's all about timing, so keep the faith!

Or consider this scenario: Let's say an executive looks at your idea and says, "We like it, but it's blue. If it were red, we might consider it." (This example is very basic in order to make a simple point.) If you say, "Sure—red, purple, hot pink, I don't care! Hot damn, I'll do whatever you want!" then that demonstrates a lack of true vision, and that you are too eager to mold your show to whatever shape someone else wants it to be. Although you may think this is what they are looking for, they are not. Most likely what would happen if you went away and changed it to red is that, when you came back, you'd find a new executive in charge of development who despises red. In this scenario, it's important to stress the importance of your vision and your commitment to it. I'm not suggesting being totally inflexible, only that you use your best judgment. If you've already worked out the balance and concept to be best suited to blue, then politely say, "Thank you for your time, but it needs to be blue," and move on. If it doesn't adversely affect the concept to change it to blue, suggest revisiting that thought, and maybe you'll see if it's a change you could work with. If they are really interested in your idea, and not just stringing you along, they will be fine with that response. My main point is, don't be too quick to revise your whole concept based on an off-the-cuff observation. Be confident in your ideas, and your confidence will be infectious.

Q & A

with Craig McCracken

CRAIG MCCRACKEN is the highly accomplished creator of the hit shows *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* on the Cartoon Network. He also served as art director on *2 Stupid Dogs*, director on *Dexter's Laboratory*, and was in charge of Cartoon Network's development program, the Cartoon Institute.

Q: The Powerpuff Girls *and* Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends *really built the foundation for Cartoon Network. But before that, you did independent film work, as well as being involved in several productions at the old Hanna-Barbera (H-B) studios. Could you fill us in on your rise through the ranks to become one of the most successful cartoon creators?*

A: Well, my independent film work was kind of a fluke; it was never something I actively pursued. During my freshman year at CalArts I produced three student films, each titled ''No Neck Joe'', that were just these really dumb jokes about a guy with no neck. Spike and Mike (Craig ''Spike'' Decker and the late Mike Gribble), who ran the Festival of Animation, saw these films and approached me about adding them to the festival. At the same time, they said they'd pay me to make some more. I was a nineteen-year-old kid with nothing better to do with my summer, so I sort of became an independent filmmaker overnight. With this initial interest in my work, I started thinking about what my second-year film would be, and that's when I first developed *The Powerpuff Girls*, then called *Whoopass Stew!*

Fast-forward a year later. I had finished the *Whoopass* film, and Spike and Mike were interested again, so they paid to color it. I spent another summer polishing that film for the festival. I had just started the first semester of my third year at CalArts when I got a call from my friend Paul Rudish, who was working at Hanna-Barbera at the time. Paul said they were looking for an art director for this new show called *2 Stupid Dogs*. So I brought in my portfolio, showed it to the producer Donovan Cook, got the job, and never went back to school. I had never worked a day in the industry, I had never art directed anything other than my own films, and here I was designing the look of this new show. Actually, the whole *Dogs* crew was made up mostly of a bunch of young kids who were just starting out in the industry. When Donovan asked me if I knew any storyboard artists, I recommend my friends from school, Genndy Tartakovsky and Rob Renzetti. H-B crammed all of us into this funky trailer on the parking lot and we learned on the job how to and how not to make TV cartoons. We were really lucky to start out at H-B because they had production down to a science. There were a lot of really helpful and experienced people there who took their time to show these punk kids the who, what,

where, how, and why of TV animation.

A while later, word got around that Fred Siebert, the president of H-B at the time, was looking for new ideas for shows, so I took my *Whoopass* film and pitched it to development. They really liked it. They showed it to Fred and he really liked it, so we started negotiating for a series pickup. This was in 1993, four years before the show was actually picked up by Cartoon Network.

While I was in contract negotiations, Cartoon Network partnered with H-B to produce the *What A Cartoon* shorts program. Series negotiations stopped, and *Whoopass* became part of the shorts program. At the same time, a producer at H-B, Larry Huber, suggested that Genndy pitch to the program his student film about a kid scientist and his annoying sister. So I pitched *Whoopass*, Genndy pitched *Dexter's Lab*, and we both got the green light for production. So Genndy, Paul Rudish, and I got to work making what turned out to be two *Dexter* shorts and two *Powerpuff* (the title *Whoopass* didn't fly, surprise, surprise) shorts for Cartoon Network. *Dexter* was greenlighted as Cartoon Network's first original series. I art directed and storyboarded and was sort of the second-in-command after Genndy on the first four seasons of *Dexter*. After the successful run of *Dexter*, Cartoon Network wanted another show from our crew, so they turned to *Powerpuff*. Genndy and I switched hats (he became my second-in-command) and we got to work producing *Powerpuff*.

Q: *Was there a difference in how you approached producing* Powerpuff *as opposed to* Foster's *as an animated series?*

A: In my mind *Powerpuff* is much more of a "cartoon," whereas *Foster's* is more like an animated sitcom. *Powerpuff* is shorter, more gag-driven, and the characters are slightly more two-dimensional, while *Foster's* is much more story-driven and the characters are a bit more complex. From a production side, *Powerpuff* utilized hand-drawn animation produced overseas in Korea, and *Foster's* was animated digitally in Flash both here and in Ireland.

Q: *As you just mentioned,* Foster's *was produced in Adobe Flash, making it one of the first widely distributed shows to do so. Were there any pitfalls to that method? And how do you see the future of Flash in series television?*

A: If you're looking to produce a very organic show, where it's all about the drawings changing from scene to scene, then Flash is not the way to go. But if you're interested in a very tight, graphic, crisp show, then Flash is great. Flash animation is built on the concept of building a library of animated assets that can be repurposed over and over again. The better and fuller your library, the better and fuller the animation in the show will be. The only pitfall that I found is that when a scene called for some complex animation and extra poses needed to be generated, there wasn't always someone to produce those new assets. But one major benefit to doing a show this way is that, the more episodes you do, the bigger your library becomes, and the faster the show is to animate. For example, a typical hand-drawn, twenty-two-minute show takes about sixteen weeks to animate overseas. When *Foster's* was in full swing with a hearty asset library we were animating a twenty-two-minute episode in just two weeks! So considering that networks always want stuff faster and faster, I can see Flash, or something like it, being a big part of TV animation production in the future.

Q: *One of the factors that impressed me about seeing the early Cartoon Network shows, led by* Powerpuff *and Genndy Tartakovsky's* Dexter's Laboratory, *was the attention to design and style that really raised the bar in modern animation art. How did you approach the design, and what were your influences? Why do you think it was that the Cartoon Network shows were so much more beautiful to watch than, say, the Nickelodeon shows that were out at the same time?*

A: Outside of the simple fact that Genndy and I just love the look of bold, graphic cartoons

made at studios like UPA [United Productions of America], early H-B, and Jay Ward, the design style we utilized was really chosen for practical reasons. We realized that we didn't have the time or money to produce animation that you might see in a classic Warner Brothers short or a Disney feature, so we decided to design the shows to work within the limitations that we were under. Nothing looks worse than full design animated on a limited budget and schedule, so we didn't try to shoot for what we couldn't achieve. Plus, in all honesty, we wanted our shows to be different than what was on Nick and Disney, so we utilized a style that we knew would stand out and pop!

Q: *What is your opinion of the overall volume-animation production process? What are the challenges, and in what ways can it be improved?*

A: It's frustrating at times; you're always wrestling with quantity over quality. Most animation artists I know dream about having the time to hand-craft each cartoon to perfection, like they did in the golden age of animation (1940s–1950s), but we just don't live in that world anymore. If I'm not mistaken, most units back then produced about two cartoons, or fourteen minutes of animation a year. Today we're delivering twenty two minutes every two weeks. It's not the same game at all. I doubt networks are going to go back to those days, so the only hope that quality has is that some magic technological advancement comes along that gives artists more control to craft their work exactly the way they want and faster.

It's possible that the concept of TV and networks may change altogether. After seeing the trends of video content on the Internet, I wonder if perhaps someday, audiences will not demand the same quantity that we're used to today. Maybe people will be satisfied with just a few episodes of a well-crafted cartoon and won't need or desire multiple seasons of a show.

Q: *You've been involved in television animation since the early 1990s. What was it like then as opposed to now? Where do you see it going?*

A: When I was at CalArts, the idea of selling your own show didn't even exist; it was not a job option for a young artist entering the industry. But today it's a career path that a lot of up-and-coming artists strive for, and that's a huge difference. Back then, the idea of creator-driven cartoons was a novel idea to networks (even though it was once the standard), and no one really knew what could come from that approach. Because there weren't really any expectations, it was a time of creative freedom and experimentation. We were allowed to just try stuff and see what worked. Today, the pressure is on the artist and the networks to create and find the next *SpongeBob*, so there's a lot more fear involved than when I started. Ironically, the next *SpongeBob* isn't going to look like, feel like, or be anything like the current *SpongeBob* because I truly believe audiences always desire and want something new and different. But oftentimes ''new'' and ''different'' are scary to the networks.

Q: *Could you talk about your process of developing your characters on both of your shows?* Foster's *had a huge ensemble cast that seemed to add a challenge to the chemistry of everyone involved, whereas* Powerpuff *followed a tongue-in-cheek "superhero" approach complete with very eccentric villains. How did you develop all of these?*

A: It sounds stupid, but I am still in touch with that energy and enthusiasm I had for cartoons when I was a kid. There's a real drive to get it out of my head and make it a reality. I think I'm constantly trying to make the cartoons I wished I had seen when I was young. With *Powerpuff* I wanted to make a show like the Adam West *Batman* series, where a kid could watch it for the action and adven-

ture of it and an adult could watch it for its campy silliness. *Foster's* was just the opposite: I wanted to make a show where kids and adults could enjoy the exact same thing at the exact same time, very much like *The Muppet Show* was for my family and me.

My process starts with drawing and drawing and drawing, trying to find some character or personality that I can connect to. Sometimes I might have a concept or a theory, but it never comes alive until I figure out the characters. Once I have them, I just start putting them in situations on paper and in my head to see how they relate to/play off each other. The more I do this, the better I get to know them. My goal is to know them so well that they kind of write themselves. Once this happens, I feel confident that I can put them into any situation and know how they'll react.

Q: *You were involved in the development of new shows with new creators at Cartoon Network. How do you see these new creators? Are there any trends? Are there consistent mistakes that they are making, in your opinion? It's interesting to watch a wave of new talent that cut their teeth on our shows from the 1990s, as opposed to what were our influences of the 1950s and '60s.*

A: What I like about a lot of the new, up-and-coming creators is that the stuff they're doing is so different from cartoons that I've ever seen before. It's awesome and inspiring! Interestingly, when I was growing up, all the cartoons that I really loved were made before I was even born: Hanna-Barbera, Jay Ward, and Warner Brothers. There weren't a lot of cartoons made by cartoonists for my generation. Today's audiences have grown up with, and been exposed to, such a wide range of animation. Whether it's *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, Pixar movies, anime, or shows on Nickelodeon, Disney, or Cartoon Network, this generation of animation fans has it better than any other in terms of sheer variety of content. Hopefully, the current trend of creator-driven cartoons will continue into the future, because I can't wait to see what the newest generation of animators produce.

Q: *I know you are a hands-on creator/producer but that you also put together very talented teams. Any opinions on when a creator should step in and when it's good to back off?*

A: The real trick I've learned is that if you want to survive production and not go insane, *do not* try to do everything yourself! It's really tough at first, but over time I've learned to pick one area of the show that I really focus on personally and let the other aspects be handled by people I really, really trust. For me, my main focus is story, so I put all my energy toward making sure the writing and storyboarding are the best they can be. Even though it's technically my show, it's impossible to get it made without the crew and me working together as a team.

Q: *What advice would you give to an artist or writer who wants to develop his or her own animated series?*

A: Find your own voice, your own style, and your own approach to making the cartoon you want to make, but at the same time realize that animation is a commercial medium that is, after all, a form of mass entertainment. So focus on character development and storytelling so that your unique and individual ideas and perspective on the world can be understood and related to by everyone watching. Oh yeah, and keep drawing!

They Love It, Now What? The Art of the Development Deal
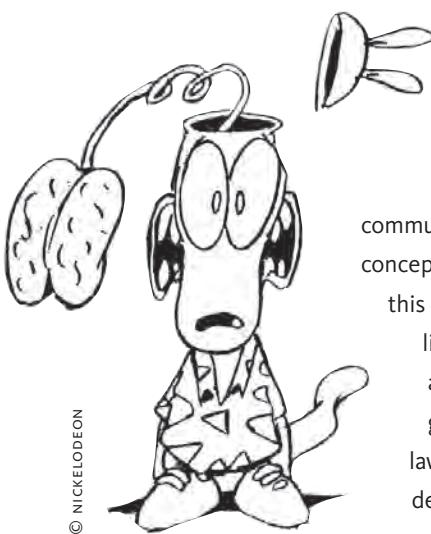
"If the studio thinks your lawyer is a pain in the ass, then you probably have a good one."

—Steve Hillenburg, creator of *SpongeBob SquarePants*

"Boy, I'm glad that's over. Let's get waffles."

—Scoutmaster Lumpus, from *Camp Lazlo* episode "Where's Lazlo?"

© NICKELODEON

So let's say the planets have aligned, and the network or studio loves your materials and your idea and wants to put your show into development. This is a huge step. It means you have successfully communicated your vision, and the network/studio has seen the value of your concept. So now what? Well, after you enjoy a brief celebration for getting this far, there are several answers to that question. In this chapter, I'd like to prepare you for the steps that follow, based on my experiences and those of many other show creators I know. I'll walk you through a general development deal, examine the importance of having a good lawyer, and break down what may be expected of you throughout the development process.

The Development Deal

First things first: Once you hear the words, "We have a standard contract we would like you to sign," politely say you look forward to receiving it, and then find a good lawyer—*fast!* Don't think for a minute that you can decipher all the contractual fine print yourself; that's what lawyers are for: to protect your best interests and your future earning power, and to put the deal language into terms you can better understand. Having done this a few times myself, I can offer a basic rundown of the types of deals you may be offered. Network or studio interest in a project can come in many forms:

- **An offer to put it into development.** This is usually a long process that involves many steps; if you succeed with one step, the network has the option to move to the next step. For example, after you have produced a pilot storyboard, they have the option of moving forward with an animated pilot (the next step) or saying "no thank you," and that's that.
- **An offer to option the idea in exchange for a nominal fee.** This means that the network or studio wants to hold onto your idea while they consider it, and during that time you cannot shop it around to anyone else.
- **An offer to do a cartoon short.** This could be a standalone cartoon short, or it could act as a pilot for a series.

These options all have their pros and cons, but all of them will produce a contract. Know this: There is no such thing as a "standard contract," which is one reason your lawyer will be so valuable in this process. You may get offered such a contract, but what it really boils down to is a "this-is-what-we're-going-to-offer-you-first-to-see-if-you-take-it" contract. *Everything* is negotiable, and getting the best deal possible ultimately comes down to your experience, your lawyer, and how much the network likes your idea. Don't be too scared by this deal-negotiation process—it's a *good* thing, after all! Just go into it with your eyes open, and remember these tips:

- **Find a good entertainment lawyer.** As much as you love Uncle Josh and the way he handled Grandma Millie's probate, he may not be the best person to protect your interests when dealing with networks and studios. Ask around for referrals, and don't be afraid to interview potential attorneys about their previous experience with development deals.
- **Don't sell or transfer ownership in your show idea or characters too soon.** These properties are your main form of leverage in your negotiations, so don't be too quick to hand them over to the studio or network, who of course would like for you to do so right away. Generally, the earlier in the

process you give up or sell your creative property, the less likely you are to strike a good deal.

- **Make sure there is a "turnaround option" in your contract.** If the network or studio passes on your project at any point in the development process, you will want to start shopping it around again as soon as possible. This clause will allow you to do so after a stated period of time; try to ensure that the option won't tie up your concept for a long period. Sometimes networks or studios will say no to your project but then will not want to give the opportunity to someone else, who might prove they made a mistake.

- **Don't make a deal contingent on any future ideas or shows.** Act like this is the one. So if they say, "Take this deal we're offering, and then you can make a better one on your next show," that should be a red flag. You can't predict the future, so don't negotiate away a better deal on your current project for what might happen with a hypothetical future one.

- **Make sure your contract covers all media formats, even technological advances that haven't been invented yet.** When I did my *Camp Lazlo* contract, there was no such thing as a podcast, and iTunes downloads were still a thing of the future. Going further back, when I did *Rocko's Modern Life,* DVDs had not been invented yet. It's important to make sure your rights and back-end royalties cover any media that could potentially exploit your characters.

- **Don't take contract negotiations personally.** Contract negotiating is a back-and-forth process. Some call it a game you're expected to play. Think of it like bartering for handmade crafts in a foreign bazaar—no one expects you to take the amount first offered. Negotiating is all part of that process, so get a good lawyer and then go with the flow.

Overall, remember that the studio, network, or company that wants to finance your project is *not* the enemy. Rather, they can be a valuable ally and partner in realizing your goal of getting your series out in front of an audience. You'll also be getting the opportunity to work with a lot of amazing, talented people from whom you can learn a great deal. But also remember that the backer is not in business to further your artistic goals but to make money and attract viewers. This doesn't make them or their parent corporations evil; it's just what they are about—business. You both want the same thing—to get a great show on the air, so stick up for your needs and desires while keeping theirs in mind, and everything will go more smoothly.

Thumbnails I drew for one of the first three *Camp Lazlo* development storyboards. This one was for an episode named "The Weakest Link."

They Love It, Now What?
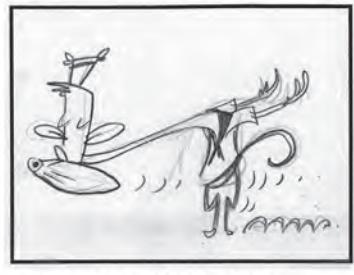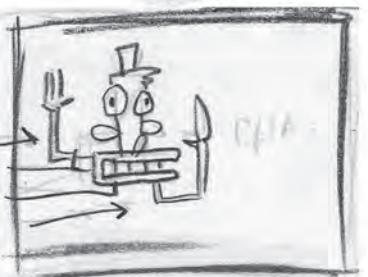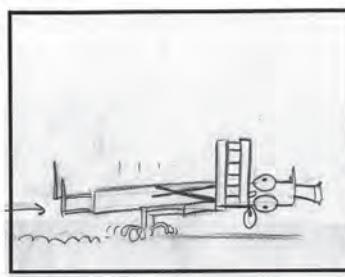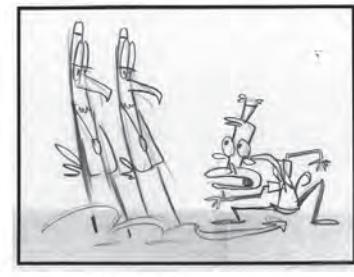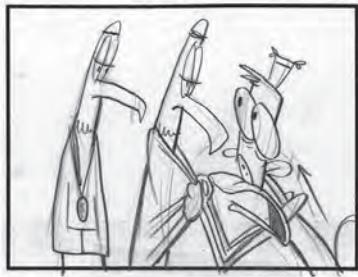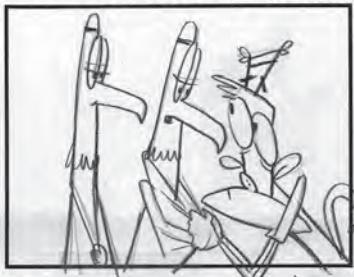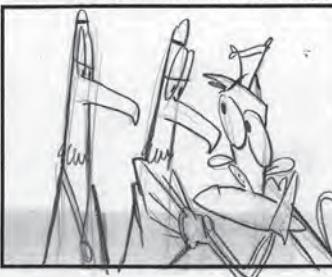
A Note on Surviving the Development Process

The development process can be long and arduous, and depending on how you structured your development deal, the money may come only in spurts and trickles rather than a Niagara Falls of good fortune. Tom Kenny, the voice of SpongeBob

One of the first color versions of Lazlo, Clam, and Raj for an early proposal.

SquarePants, put it best: "I've developed some shows that have gone as far as the pilot stage, and it's brutal to even get *that* far! Long hours, long gestation periods, with no paychecks coming in." Think long term and keep your eye on the prize while keeping your other eye on your expenses (depending on the deal you made with your lawyer, you may need any extra cash for legal bills). So my advice is to wait to buy that new car until you get your second season picked up.

Development Materials

Once you have finished the negotiation phase, it's time to start producing the development materials. Quite often you will be asked to create and supply the following:

- A series "mini bible"
- Pilot premises
- A script or outline of the pilot
- Pilot storyboard

If these steps go well, you will be asked to produce and direct a pilot episode or animatic : (a preliminary version of a cartoon episode combining rough storyboard panels and dialogue tracks; see page 142). This step includes finding the voices for the characters plus developing the sound effects and music styles.

The Mini Bible

No, not *that* bible (though you are called "The Creator"). When a show gets put into development, generally a mini–show bible will be requested along with either scripts or storyboards that can build toward a pilot. A mini bible, in animation industry terms, is basically a show program designed to accompany the final pilot script and/or storyboard in order to sell the series to the various people who will need to sign off on it. It should present what the series is about, how beautiful it will look, who the main characters are and how they will appear in full color, as well as background samples and descriptions of the series' setting.

A mini bible can include many of the items from your first proposal, except in greater depth and detail, such as how you plan to approach your writing, where you find the depth of your characters, and amazing full-color art representing the look of the show. (The art is big and key!) Don't confuse a mini bible with a full
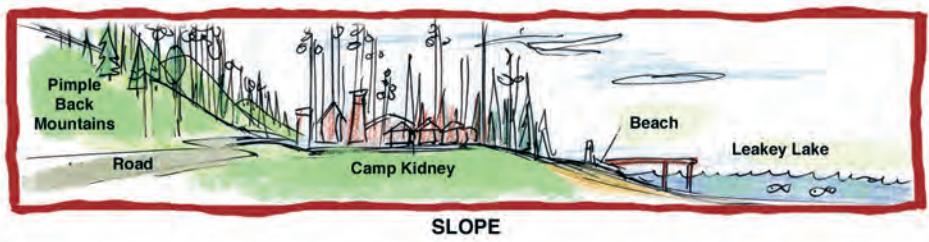
BIRDS EYE OF CAMP KIDNEY

Leakey Lake

Dock

Boat House

Swimming Area

Life Guard

Beach

First Aid

East Latrines

showers

Jelly Cabin

Activity Area

Green

Baked

Cocoa

MESS HALL/ MEETING LODGE

pinto

Fava

Soy

Garbanzo

LOOK OUT TOWER

LOUDSPEAKER/ FLAGPOLE

Deck

CAMP KIDNEY

Jumping

SCOUTMASTER CABIN

West Latrines

Stage

Gravel & Leaves

CAMP KIDNEY

Amphitheatre & Campfire Pit

Paved Road to the Town of Prickly Pines

Pimple Back Mountains

Beach

Road

Camp Kidney

Leakey Lake

SLOPE
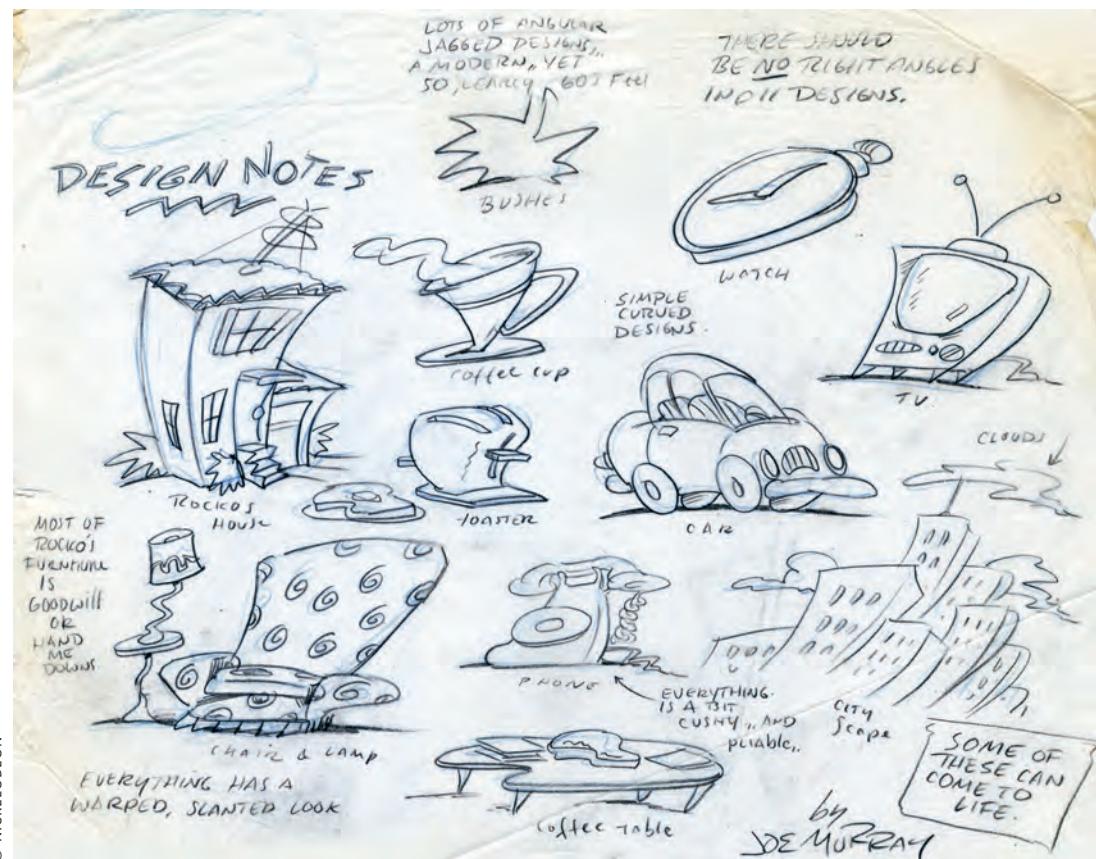
A birds-eye view of Camp Kidney. This was very important so that all of the writers, directors, and storyboard artists knew their way around the camp.

Design Notes sketches:
LOTS OF ANGULAR JAGGED DESIGNS, A MODERN, YET 50, CLEARLY 60'S FEEL
THERE SHOULD BE NO RIGHT ANGLES IN All DESIGNS.
BUSHES
SIMPLE CURVED DESIGNS.
WATCH
TV
CLOUDS
COFFEE CUP
TOASTER
CAR
ROCKO'S HOUSE
MOST OF ROCKO'S FURNITURE IS GOODWILL OR HAND ME DOWNS
PHONE
EVERYTHING IS A BIT CUSHY,, AND pliable.,
CITY SCAPE
SOME OF THESE CAN COME TO LIFE.
CHAIR & LAMP
EVERYTHING HAS A WARPED, SLANTED LOOK
COFFEE TABLE
by JOE MURRAY

production bible, which tells a large staff plus an overseas crew how to produce your show, down to the shapes of the leaves on the bushes. We'll discuss that later on page 172.

The development contract will usually spell out what is expected in the development mini bible. With my experience in development, I suggest you go the extra mile and give them more than they are asking for: go into greater detail about the setting and the characters; do turnarounds of the characters; "rotate" the character in four drawings so it can be animated from all sides (you will need these views for the pilot); do more backgrounds; start picking out a color palette for the show; go into detail about what you expect from the writing; and describe the style of the animation. You want to go into as much detail as you can so that the crew can easily move on to producing a pilot.

In my development mini bibles, I've included:

- Full model sheets (construction and turnarounds) and costume color designs for each of the main characters
- Designs for all the background characters
- A chapter on writing and what I expected from it, including a guide to the ground rules and the writing pyramid (see discussion on page 127)

These are some of my early sketches while working out the design style of *Rocko's Modern Life*, 1992.
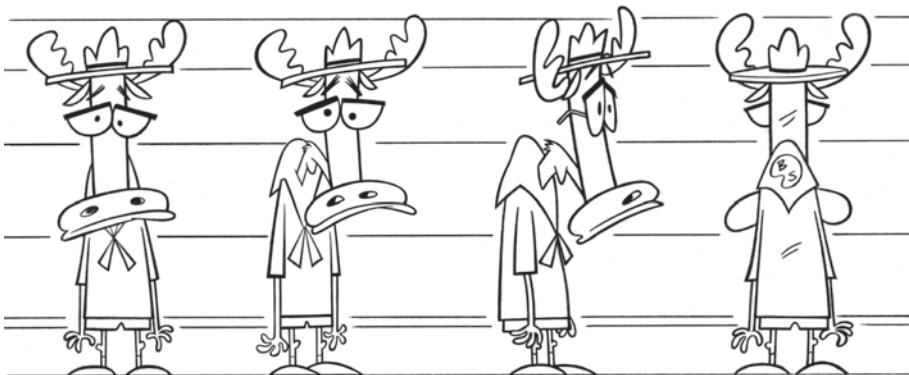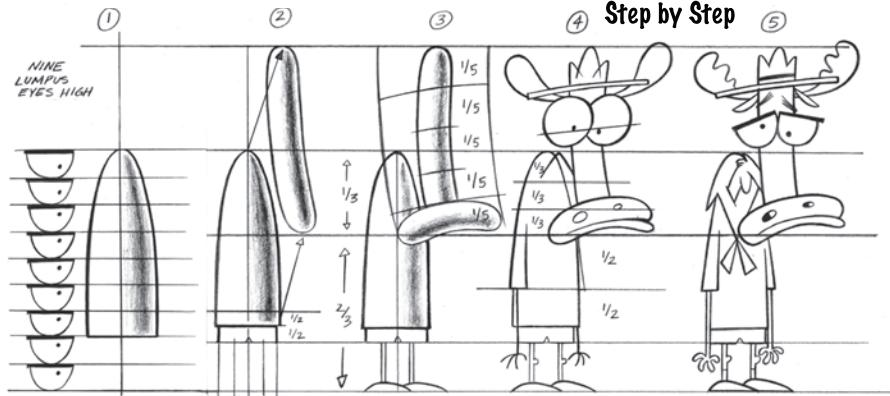
Scoutmaster Lumpus

Model Sheet
Turn-Around

Camp Lazlo!

Step by Step

NINE LUMPUS EYES HIGH

- A character size-comparison lineup (who is taller than who in your world?)
- Sample designs of main props and houses, plus style sheets showing the way trees and background elements will be designed
- A color palette you have in mind (for example, for *Camp Lazlo,* I put in old camping and Indian-blanket colors)
- A chapter on background style with samples and descriptions of how the backgrounds would be painted, or whether they would be done digitally

- A chapter on production notes, including ideas on balancing the need for quality with the requirements of working in a high-volume environment, and how these ideas would be cost-effective
- A conclusion discussing how a series is a living and breathing thing, and how sometimes bibles need to have amendments, like the Constitution

These are guidelines I've followed in the past, but a network or studio may have their own way of doing things, so be flexible. Find out what they are looking for, and then give them a little more than what they request.

Pilot Premises

In the development phase, you will be asked to create a few premises for pilots; most likely, you and the network will decide which ones work best to move forward to an outline, script, and/or a storyboard. A running joke in the industry holds that most pilots suck. In my opinion, it's because they try to do too much. They are always trying to introduce all the characters, spell out everyone's relationships with one another, and mine all the possibilities for humor that could ever be derived from that series, yada yada. Don't make that mistake. My best advice is to do a simple pilot, with your main character and just a couple of sidekicks or secondary characters, and create a simple story line with lots of gags. Keep it in the main location, and have the characters be extremely consistent with the descriptions you set up earlier. Then make it funny. No—strike that. Make it hilarious! If your

Camp Lazlo color palette.

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Creating Animated Cartoons with Character
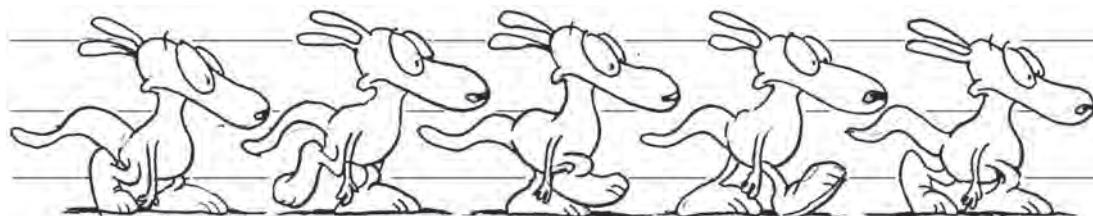
An early drawing of Rocko's neighborhood.

series is set up right, anyone viewing an episode at any time should be able to figure out the basic idea and the characters' personalities quickly. In my opinion, a strong pilot episode could be one that is just plain hysterical, and one that could have been plucked out of the middle of the first season. Keep it simple.

Storyboards and Scripts

There are two camps (no pun intended) when it comes to scripting and/or storyboarding for an animated series. First there is the "outline-driven" show, which starts with a premise. The writers then go on to create an outline that lays out the story beats. Next comes storyboarding, where the story gets fleshed out with plenty of gags and the dialogue is written; lastly, a recording script is typed from the finished storyboard. This is how *Rocko's Modern Life, Camp Lazlo, SpongeBob SquarePants, Ren & Stimpy,* and the old Bugs Bunny cartoons did it. This method takes advantage of storytelling as a visual tool and allows the artist the time needed for plenty of "squash and stretch" cartoony gags. The cons to this method include finding enough great storyboard people who are also exceptional

The Rocko walk cycle for the *Rocko's Modern Life* pilot model sheet, 1992.

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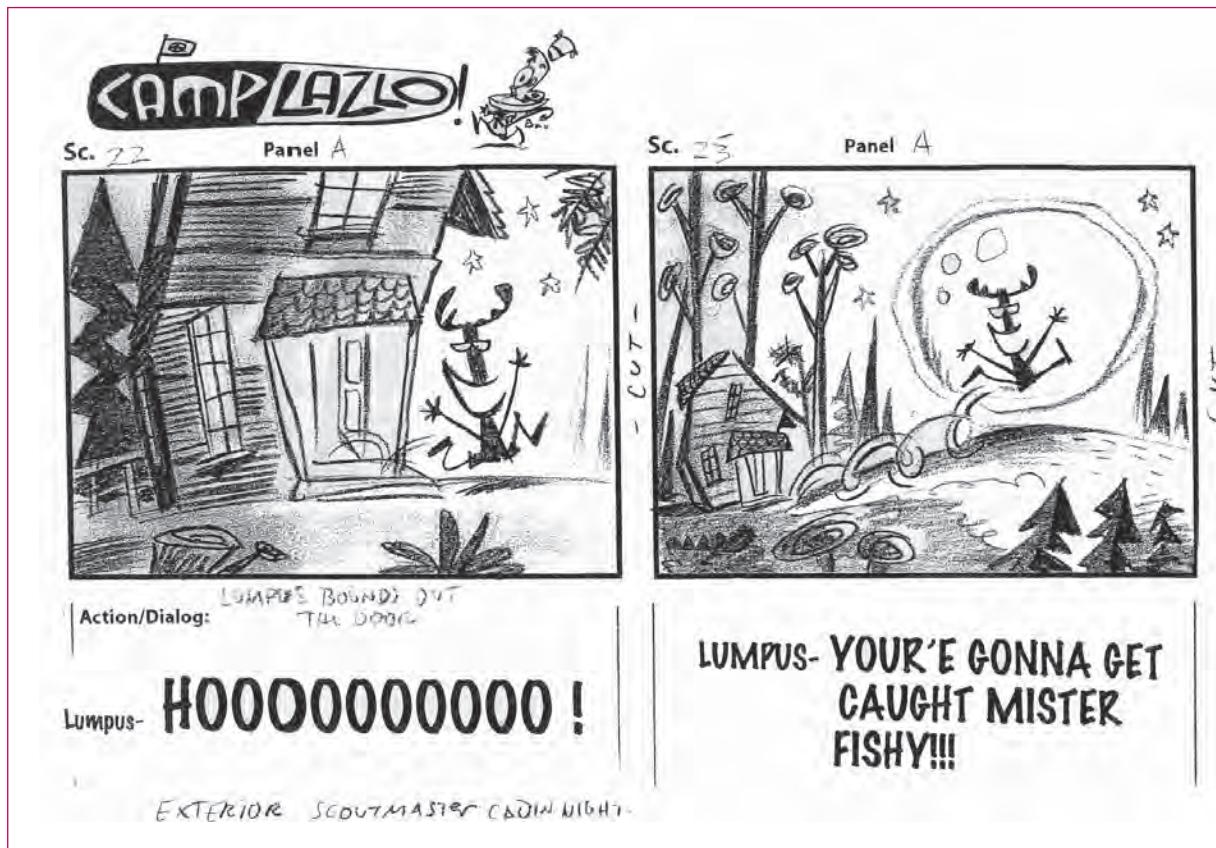
writers. Lining them up just takes a little extra work.

Second, there is the "script-driven" show, in which a script is written from a premise, and all the gags, screen direction, and dialogue are written into the script. After the script is approved, storyboard artists add the characters and the layouts to fit the script. This is the way *The Simpsons, Family Guy,* and many other current shows are put together.

Either approach can work and be funny. I prefer the outline-driven method because it allows for more visual "stretchiness" and for sight gags to take precedence over dialogue gags. While I'm a big proponent of written story structure, I love the freedom and process of sitting in a room full of other visual storytellers to determine what will ultimately end up on screen. Not to lessen the importance of good dialogue, but animation is organically a visual medium that can take full advantage of artists being able to flex their lunatic muscle. It's more fun for me that way. A script-driven show holds the danger of becoming nothing more

Sc. 22   Panel A   Sc. 23   Panel A

Action/Dialog: LUMPUS BOUNDS OUT THE DOOR

Lumpus- **HOOOOOOOOOO !**

EXTERIOR SCOUTMASTER CABIN NIGHT.

LUMPUS- **YOUR'E GONNA GET CAUGHT MISTER FISHY!!!**

than an illustrated radio show.

It's good to decide early on which method you want to use. Some networks don't want to use the outline-driven method because it takes more of a leap of faith on the executives' part to let an outline go to storyboard that isn't completely finished. Or perhaps they have more experience with live-action shows and thus feel more comfortable reading a script than looking at a storyboard. This is the time to hammer out the method, because if you know you'd be miserable doing a script-driven show, and that's the only type of show this network will allow, you should find that out as early as possible.

Writing Story

By now you have your premise for the series and an amazing cast of characters with warped personality traits. Aside from the depth of your characters, the strength of your story is the most important key to the success of your pilot, and later, to the success of the series as a whole. Although pilot episodes are probably the hardest to write because you have yet to really get to know these characters, the pilot still has to be highly original and knock the socks off the audience, the network, and anyone else who screens it. Pilots can be a struggle. I try to stay away from introducing each character and the premise in a "first day of school" kind of format. A good pilot looks

Storyboard from the pilot episode of *Camp Lazlo.*

like you've taken it out of the middle of the first season, has a simple story line that hangs from the hook you pitched for the series, and, if possible, includes only the first tier of characters. For *Rocko's Modern Life,* my pilot included mostly Rocko, Spunky, and Earl the Tough Dog. For *Camp Lazlo,* it featured Lazlo, Raj, Clam, Lumpus, and Slinkman.

I'm going to talk about the process I used for writing both of my series that continued from the pilot through series production. I will discuss more of the challenges of pumping out good writing on a week-by-week basis in chapter 8. But for this chapter, I want to approach the craft of writing for a cartoon in general. There used to be a school of thought among Saturday morning cartoonists that story was not important, and that kids would watch anything. I sure didn't feel that way in the 1960s, and my two kids don't now. Younger viewers are much more particular about the quality of entertainment they are willing to accept, and the average audience as a whole is looking for something highly original. The one technique I always ran away from was formula. Not only can an audience smell it from a mile away, but it also bores me to death. Why would someone put so much effort into a trite, worn-out story idea? I wanted cartoons out there that broke new ground, that rode the edge, and that offered the unexpected.

On *Rocko,* I deliberately hired writers who had never worked in animation before, because I wanted to bring a fresh, somewhat warped approach to the medium. My writers have always come from comedic backgrounds outside of animation, such as being improvisational actors and comic-strip artists. If any idea ever smacked

of a Saturday morning theme we had all seen before, or if anyone could predict where the story was going, it was thrown out immediately. But note that formula is different from structure: Structure is the skeleton from which you hang the rest of the nonformulaic, unpredictable story. You can go way out there, getting as hilarious and off the wall as you want—as long as you have a tether to a structured base and don't lose the consistency of the core character traits or the internal rules of your universe. This story is what makes everything else work. This relates back to what I was discussing earlier: that one element failing brings down with it the rest of the production. The best and coolest design in the world is not going to save a bad story. There are times, however, when a good story can make up for other weaknesses.

So how do we try to minimize the chances of having a bad story? In the *Rocko* or *Lazlo* eleven-minute episodes, I preferred to work in a three-act structure. (Two eleven-minute episodes made up a half-hour show, with a commercial break in the middle.) We also did this for half-hour episodes and for the hour-long *Camp Lazlo* special. Here's how it works:

Act I: Set up the story: Whose story is it, and what is the basic conflict? What is the catalyst for the conflict?

Act II: Set up the hilarity that ensues as a result of the conflict from Act I, with an escalating action that is almost resolved by the end of Act II.

Act III: Kick the episode into higher gear with a new twist that often seems to come out of nowhere, usually causing a fury of activity that leads to a final resolution.

The plot lines were always kept rather simple to allow for as many sight gags as possible. For example, when we started *Camp Lazlo*, we had a list of camping activities around which we wanted to build episodes. The pilot involved one close to my heart: fishing, and the lack of fish one usually catches. Another activity was river canoeing. As we approached this, we thought, "What happens? What is going to make canoeing interesting?" Our next thought was, "How do we do it without making parody jokes about the movie *Deliverance*?" So we built it around the character Raj, and it looked like this:

Act I:
1. Raj has a retainer that he loves but only a short time left to wear it. He sets it down on his mess-hall tray while he talks about how excited he is about that day's canoe trip.
2. Raj loses his retainer in the garbage and thinks he will now have to live forever with crooked teeth.

Act II:
3. Raj is despondent, but Lazlo and Clam convince him to go on the canoe trip anyway. His overly dramatic blues prompts Lazlo to sing a song on his banjo, acting as a catalyst to pull Raj out of his funk.
4. Raj decides that he has gotten over his retainer and finally starts enjoying his canoe trip, only to discover his retainer floating past him on a mess-hall tray.

Act III:

5. Raj goes berserk and risks his friends' lives chasing his retainer through dangerous rapids and over a massive waterfall.

6. Raj decides that his friends are more important than his stinky retainer, but it doesn't really matter because they all lost their teeth falling over the falls anyway.

This story has many successful elements to it:

- It stays consistent with Raj's obsessive-compulsive character and builds a story around it.

- It stays consistent with the camp setting by featuring an outdoor activity (canoeing).

- Aside from the familiarity of summer camp, this story has a common theme kids can relate to—losing your retainer.

- There are many built-in opportunities for sight gags, as well as a very catchy song that Lazlo plays on his banjo that restores Raj's good humor.

- It ends with a touching note about friendship, though we defused the sappiness by having all their teeth fall out before we faded to black.

Here's another simple idea: Some days at camp are terribly hot.

Act I:

1. Lazlo, Raj, and Clam are baking in the sun and ask the great "Scoutmaster in the Sky" for a brief break from the heat—a small drop of cool.

2. A "Freezy Breeze" air conditioner drops out of the sky and almost kills them. Their prayers have been answered, and they accept this gift from the heavens.

Act II:

3. They smuggle the air conditioner back into camp, plug it in, and start enjoying a winter wonderland.

4. The rest of the camp, also baking in the heat, catches on to the Jelly Cabin's source of relief. For the entire night, the coveted air conditioner is stolen from one cabin to the next, creating a montage of sweaty, self-centered campers.

Act III:

5. After waking to find their air conditioner missing, Lazlo, Raj, and Clam realize they made a big mistake by not sharing Freezy Breeze with the rest of the camp. A big fight breaks out among the angry mob over rights to the air conditioner. The Jellies grab it in the commotion.

6. The Jellies climb to the top of the tower with the air conditioner and threaten to smash it if everyone doesn't agree to share. They agree. At that moment, Lumpus grabs the air conditioner from behind and floats up to the sky attached to some weather balloons, causing it to snow. This of course solves the heat problem. There is a great climax to this episode where Lumpus keeps floating up with the air conditioner and is spotted by the airplane from which the air conditioner fell in the first place.

Don't Sacrifice Character Consistency and Story to Get the Funny

Every story is designed to get from one story beat to another in the funniest way possible, with as many gags possible, and without sacrificing the story and its structure. When you do your pilot, you will be tempted to bend the characters a bit because you came up with this great gag that you know will impress the head honchos—don't do it. You may find yourself locking in a character trait that you never intended and later come to despise. In approaching story writing, I use a pyramid graphic. It builds a foundation on the consistency of the characters and the ground rules for the story universe; the next level represents the story itself, while the top level—the star on the tree—represents the particular gag or joke. To get to the top, you have to work your way up while maintaining each level of foundation.

There are many cartoon purists out there who insist that a cartoon can consist of a mouse hitting a cat over the head with a frying pan for seven minutes—who needs story? I won't argue that those seven-minute classic cartoons weren't brilliant—I loved them! And my first short animated film—all two minutes of it—amounted to nothing more than a conflict and a series of gags to go with it. However, I feel that expanding to an eleven-minute format calls for more substance. The characters need more story to hang on to while they bonk each other over the head with frying pans. When you expand to a half hour or an hour, then your story, not just the gags, really has to pull you through.

Writing Gags

Most animation aficionados would say the gag is the core of a great cartoon. I would agree that it's the meat in the cartoon sandwich. However, the structure and story hold a cartoon together even while the gags are what viewers really remember. In the shows I've produced, we wrote the story structure first and left most of the gags to the storyboard teams—an extremely important responsibility. Some gags are inspired by a character's personality (like Clam spitting water back into a cup and offering it to a thirsty Scoutmaster Lumpus, or the Dung Beetles losing a penny in their butt crack). Others are the result of a previous setup that builds to an ultimate payoff; for instance, in the last episode of *Camp Lazlo*,

"Lumpus's Last Stand," the gag we used to reveal that Scoutmaster Lumpus had locked the real scoutmaster of Camp Kidney in the closet probably had the longest setup in the history of series animation.
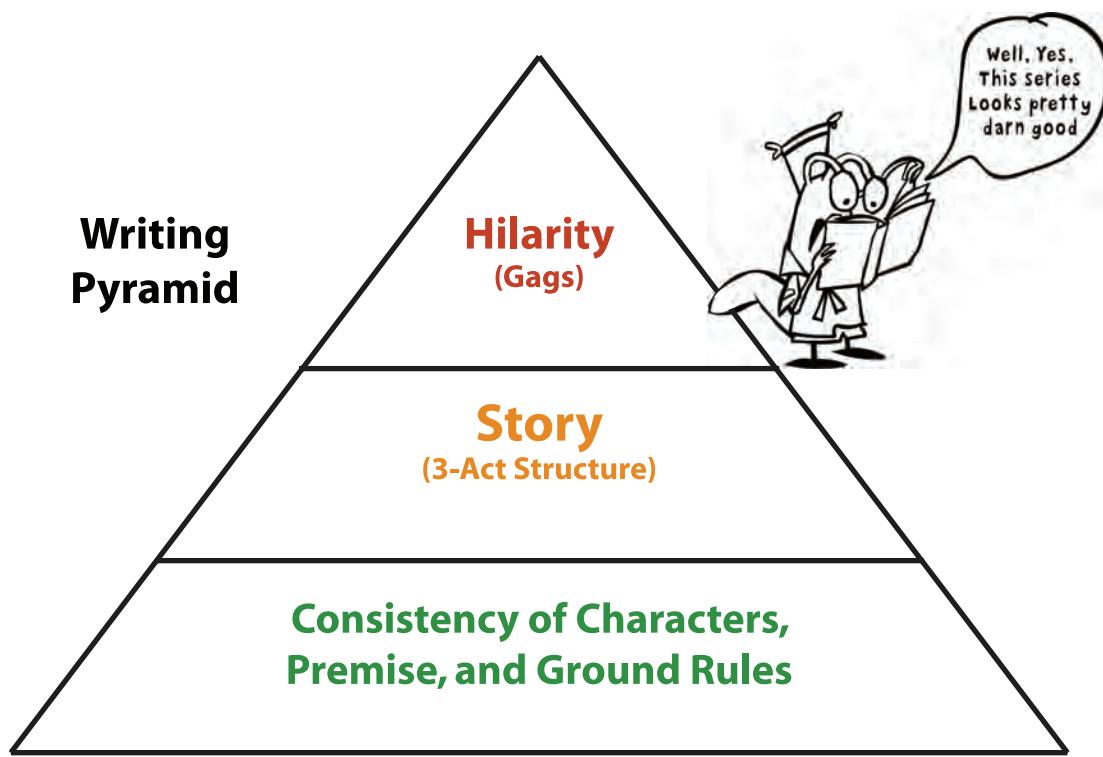
The basic structure of a gag can be seen in my first-ever animated film. The simplicity of the gag shows my inexperience at the time, but it still works. I set it up with a grouchy husband watching baseball and not wanting to be disturbed. His wife asks him to put her cat outside. A series of smaller gags escalates the resistance to the conflict: The cat is too fat to be moved, and the husband struggles to budge the pudgy feline, but to no avail. Frustrated, the husband leaves the frame to search for a rubber tire tube, goes out to the porch, nails the tube to the porch beam, and stretches it around the cat. For a split second, we know what's going to happen, and the cat knows too. The cat gives a sheepish grin, hoping for a reprieve, but the husband ruthlessly lets go, sending the cat flying. That is the main gag, which is then enhanced by the sound of the cat crashing through a window, inflicting even more pain on it. Then, what is commonly called a "topper" is reached: After the husband has returned to his chair and baseball game, the wife reappears and asks him to clean out the fishbowl. The film fades to black with the sound of a flushing toilet.

Work hard on writing great, original gags. And make sure they are funny to people other than yourself! That is why it's great to work with storyboard teams— they offer valuable collaboration and feedback. If you are working alone, find an

Well, Yes. This series Looks pretty darn good

Writing Pyramid

Hilarity
(Gags)

Story
(3-Act Structure)

Consistency of Characters, Premise, and Ground Rules
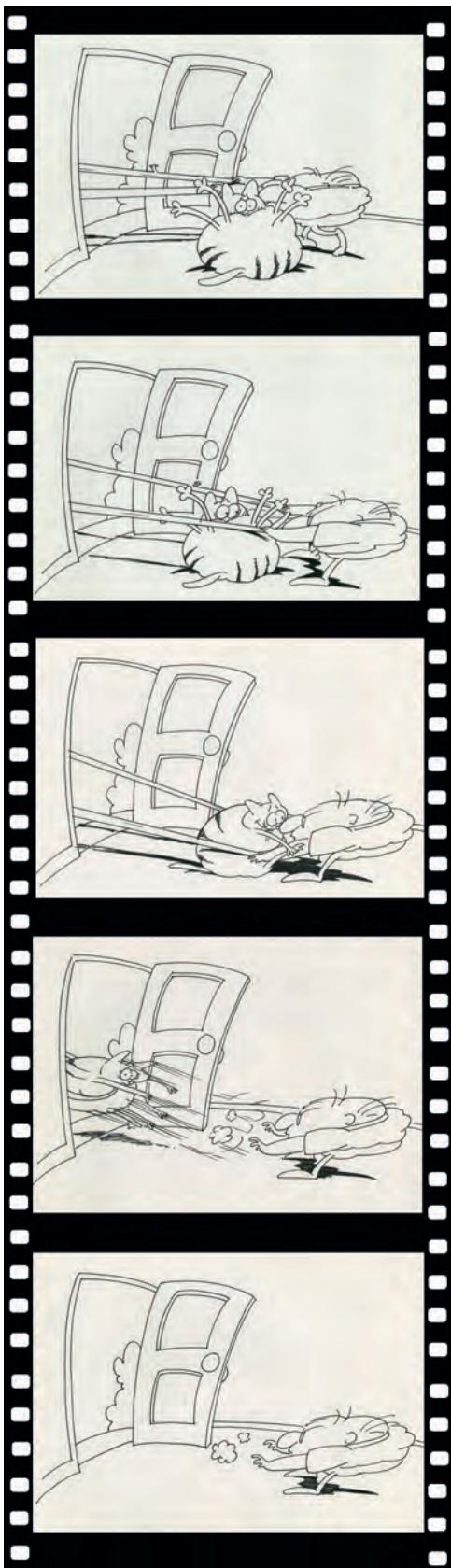
Don't sacrifice the bottom foundation to get to the top

My first film, *The Chore*, (1987) centered around the very simple gag of an overweight cat.

honest friend or relative to tell you if your gags fall flat.

Writing and Parents

If you are producing a series intended for an adult audience, your gags can be aimed at whatever level of humor you feel comfortable with, as long as they fall within the guidelines set up by the entity that is airing or distributing it. The same holds true whether you are producing for television, the Web, or film. Always keep your intended audience in mind. I liked creating series that work for all ages, where parents can watch with kids and feel entertained. I love a good edgy gag and finding that place where one can pull it off, just past the zone where it gets iffy. For *Lazlo,* we did a whole episode around Lazlo needing to pee but couldn't acknowledge that Lazlo had anything down there to pee *with*. We actually got censored in *Rocko's Modern Life* a few times, and we received some angry letters when we broached some taboo subjects. In particular, when Bev Bighead unsuccessfully tried to seduce Rocko in the episode "Leap Frogs," a la Mrs. Robinson in the film *The Graduate*.

So keep this in mind: If you are writing a show for kids, parents these days have a quick trigger finger on the remote. You may put out sixty amazing episodes that the kids love and the parents are comfortable with, but if a gag in the sixty-first show crosses the line, even if it's the only episode the parent has seen, you haven't just lost the kid for one episode—you've lost the parent and probably the child for the entire remaining series. Your show suddenly gets labeled as "inappropriate," and the offended parent starts spreading the word to any other parent who will listen. It's true that there will always be parents with overly rigid standards, and we'd live in a vanilla world if we catered to all of them. But if you want to hold a younger audience, do keep in mind the parental trust factor.

Storyboard
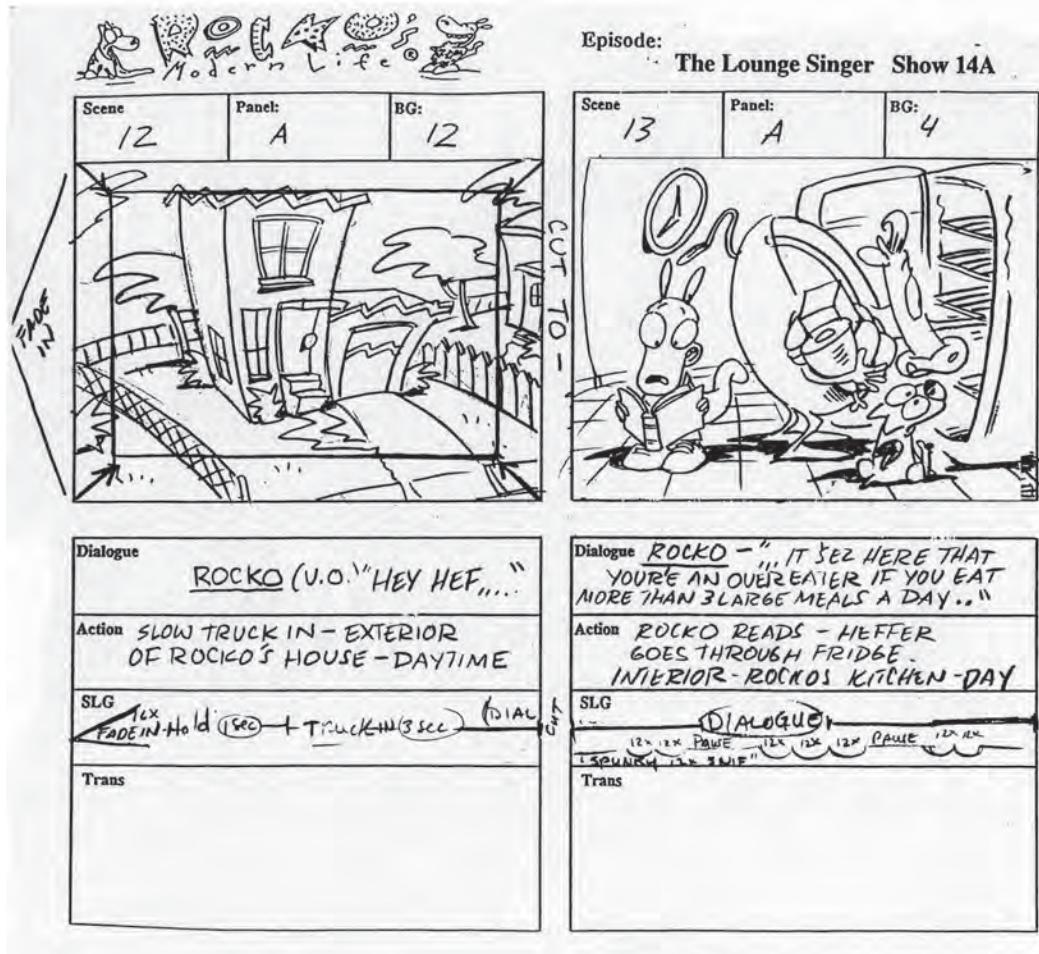
During the development process, a network or studio will often ask you to present a few premises to move forward to a script or outline, or they may ask for two or three outlines or scripts and choose one to move forward to a storyboard. The outlines or scripts you submit should always be your favorites, because you need to sell the series with this storyboard—in the world of animation, the storyboard is your series DNA. Whether it's done traditionally with pencil and paper or on the computer with a Wacom Cintiq drawing tablet, your pilot storyboard should be the most beautiful, posed-out, brilliant piece of work you have ever done, with lots of hilarious details. Really work on the expressions and the characters' movements, but refrain from making the layout so busy and complicated that the reader loses focus. Keep the storyboard as clear as possible, and don't muck up the backgrounds with so much detail that you lose sight of the action of the characters. The staging should be very simple—no need for fancy camerawork unless you are trying to cover up a weak scene. We didn't have the luxury of in-house layout (layouts guide the animator with the background and key poses in a scene), so we had to pay extra attention if our storyboards were going to be used as mini layouts. You may want to ask the network which storyboard template they are used to looking at. My pilot started out with the normal television aspect ratio (4:3), meaning it would fit a normal 25 1/2 x 19-inch television screen, but when we went into production we had to start boarding using the high-definition (HD) TV widescreen ratio (16:9), or 28 x 19 inches.

You should allow room under the storyboard panels for dialogue, timing, and screen direction. At the top of each panel should be boxes for scene numbers and panel letters. The scene numbers (starting with 1) will be referenced by everyone who works on the pilot, while the panel letters are used mostly by the sheet timer (they would often wait until after the animatic stage to put panel letters in to accommodate the editing process). We will talk more about sheet timers on page 143. It's *very* important to number all your storyboard pages to keep them in sequence. When adding in the dialogue, I suggest typed text rather than hand-drawn because you don't want anyone to have to work hard deciphering your penmanship. As a final step, I had both of my pilot storyboards copied and spiral-bound with a great-looking cover, for that special added touch.

Below are some storyboard guidelines that Mark O'Hare and I presented to our storyboard teams on *Camp Lazlo,* as well as some from the *Rocko's Modern Life* production bible. They may help you on your pilot storyboard, if your show and characters warrant them, but they are sure to benefit your storyboard teams as you go into production on your series. I once overheard a network executive talking about why he had decided to move forward with a particular show. His exact words were, "Because he gave me something funny to laugh at in almost every panel from his pilot storyboard." Just food for thought.

The storyboard panels read:

Episode: The Lounge Singer   Show 14A

Scene	Panel:	BG:
12	A	12

FADE IN

CUT TO

Dialogue
ROCKO (V.O.) "HEY HEF,,,,"

Action
SLOW TRUCK IN — EXTERIOR OF ROCKO'S HOUSE — DAYTIME

SLG
12x FADE IN • Hold (1 SEC) — TRUCK IN (3 SEC) DIAL

Trans

Scene	Panel:	BG:
13	A	4

Dialogue
ROCKO — ",, IT SEZ HERE THAT YOU'RE AN OVEREATER IF YOU EAT MORE THAN 3 LARGE MEALS A DAY.."

Action
ROCKO READS — HEFFER GOES THROUGH FRIDGE. INTERIOR — ROCKOS KITCHEN — DAY

SLG
DIALOGUE 12x ,12x PAUSE 12x 12x 12x PAUSE 12x 1x "SQUINT" 12x SMILE"

Trans

Storyboard Guidelines

- **Clarity is everything.** Don't make the person reading your storyboards work hard to follow your story and jokes. Go for clear acting and staging. Let the characters work for the camera.

- **Less is more.** Leave room for the reader to breathe and beats for the jokes to play out. Every moment doesn't have to be packed with gags, action, and dialogue; sometimes it's nice to just sit and look at a funny character moment for a bit.

- **Show the reader the story, don't tell it.** Chances are, if your characters are explaining what they're thinking about doing, and why they're doing it, you've already lost your audience.

- **Include all screen direction.** Whether a scene takes place during day or night, give camera directions such as "wipe," "dissolve," "trucks," "shakes," etc., and write them very clearly.

- **Use close-ups.** After you establish your scene with a long shot, cut in for a closer view. The audience likes to connect with the eyes of a character and may lose that connection if you use too many far shots.

Page: __

Scene	Panel:	BG:
14	A	14

Dialogue _HEFFER – "WHAT IF YOU JUST EAT ONE MEAL THAT LASTS FOR 12 HOURS?"_

Action C/U HEFFER – TURNS TO CAMERA – PULLING FOOD FROM REFRIDGERATION –

SLG (DIALOGUE) ————

Trans

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Guidelines to producing *Rocko's Modern Life* storyboards from the production bible, 1993.
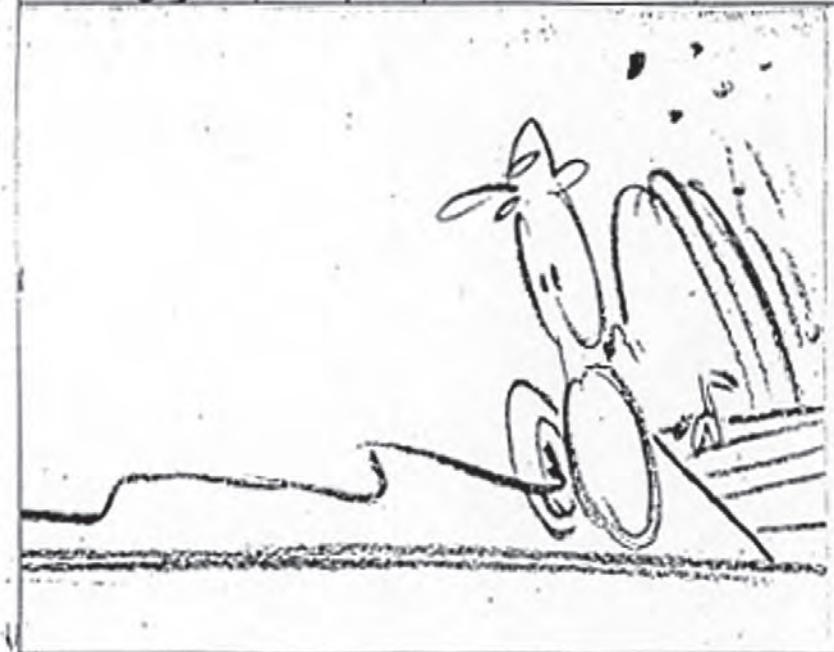
- **Do as much posing as possible.** To see more of your vision, show starting and stopping poses for each scene, as well as key poses. Draw exaggerated poses clearly.
- **Don't be afraid to be ridiculous and absurd.** As long as the story line and characters' integrity are not compromised, go crazy! Remember to make sure that your gags are funny to people other than yourself.
- **Stage in a consistent direction, when possible.** If you start left to right, continue left to right.
- **Add humor to facial expressions.** Staying on model is important, but adding a funny, extreme expression in keeping with the character's personality is great too. Everybody loves to see wacky drawings!
- **Pay close attention to the backgrounds.** Remember to draw them, at least in the first and last panel of a scene. Also be aware of what's happening behind your characters at all times (e.g., don't have a character stop in a scene with a plant sticking out of his head!).
- **Vary your staging:** One hundred medium shots can get boring. (Medium shots are usually straight on, centered shots of the character captured from the waist up with his or her head at camera level.)

Mark O'Hare's storyboard from the classic *Rocko's Modern Life* episode "Fish 'n Chumps."

- **Don't overuse the camerawork.** Unless it's used in a particular approach to selling a gag, a certain film genre, or for a one-time dramatic effect, overusing strange camera angles will only detract from the story.
- **Make sure the dialogue and camera/action directions are written legibly.** It helps to type out the dialogue, at least for the pilot storyboard, so that there's no confusion about your intentions. Also, if you are animating overseas, your screen and camera directions will be translated, so keep them simple.
- **For a pilot storyboard, go the extra mile.** Make it something truly beautiful to behold, as well as hilariously entertaining!
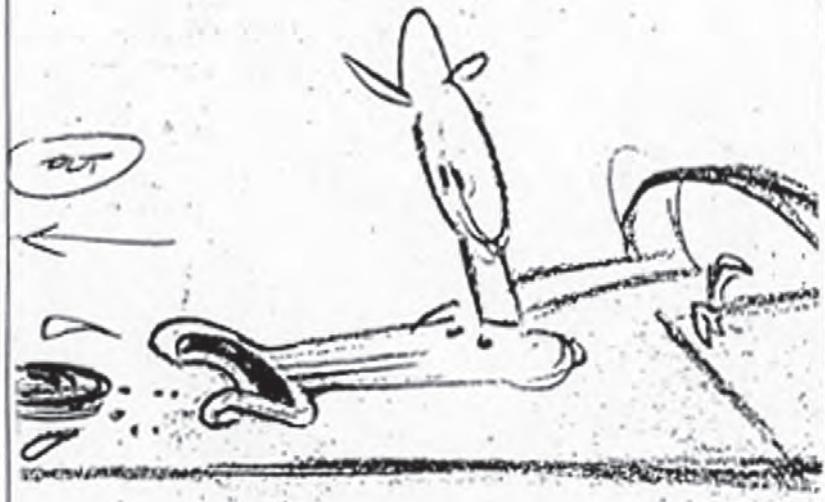
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Scene 65   Panel 3   BG
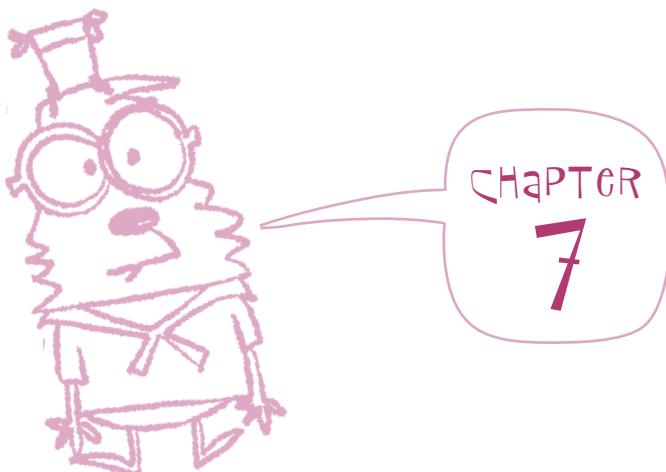
OUT

A Note on Presentation

You have worked very hard on these development elements, so I suggest you present them accordingly. I always present my series mini bible as a beautiful, spiral-bound piece of artwork with a very cool cover. I also include a title sheet, so the result is kind of like an elongated coffee-table book. One final piece of advice: *Do not ever turn in your development materials late!* You never get a second chance to make a first impression, so make every detail count.

Getting the Green Light: Producing the Pilot

"A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for."

—John A. Shedd, *Salt from My Attic*

"I don't hear the engine."
> —Elephant DMV instructor

"Uh . . . vroom vroom?"
> —Rocko
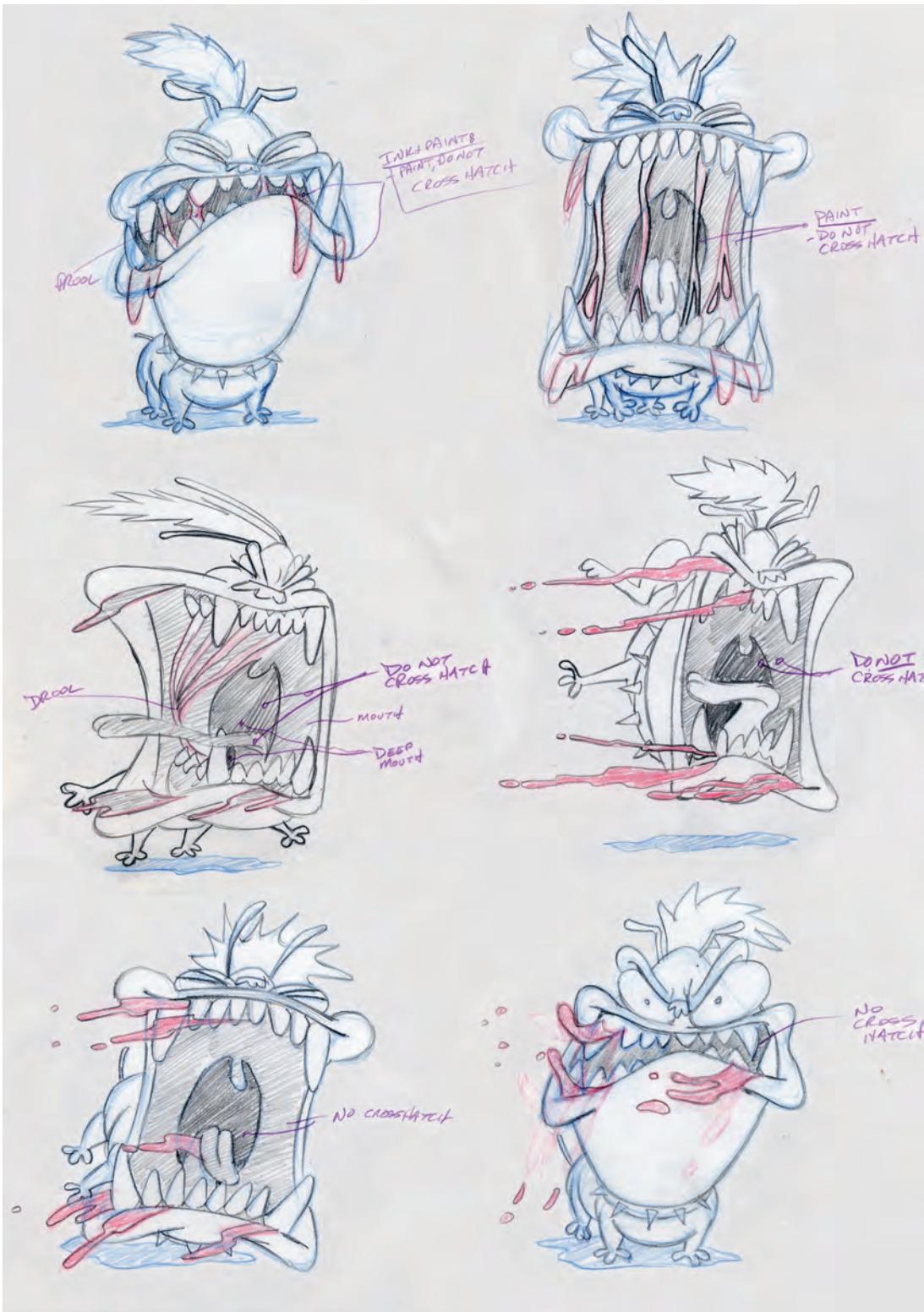
"Atta boy."
> —Elephant

—*Rocko's Modern Life*, from the episode "Skid Marks"

At this point, you've handed over your development materials to the animation gods and said, "I've done my best. Whatever is your will, I will accept it." Suddenly, there is a crack of lightning, and the will of the gods is satisfied to give you a green light to move forward with a pilot! (If this doesn't happen, don't despair. Chapter 10 is full of encouraging stories about those who refused to take no for an answer and pursued their dreams via other avenues.)

If you did get the green light to move forward with a pilot, you should feel great—it's a big step! Being offered a pilot is like becoming a top-ten finalist on *American Idol*. It means that your concept, your characters, and yourself are being considered a wise investment choice for this company and a possible new addition to their family. Your ideas have been opening the doors thus far, so stick with what

Animation from the *Rocko's Modern Life* pilot, animated at my studio in Saratoga, California, 1992.

you're doing. A pilot will breathe even more life into these characters, as well as entertainment value. Execute the pilot well, and you are well on your way to having your own animated series.

There are several different approaches to producing a pilot; which one to choose will depend on your previous amount of experience and the facilities available to you. When I prepared the *Rocko* pilot, I already had a studio and had done films previously, so I was better equipped to handle the pilot myself (with a staff expansion). We animated it all in-house and simply handed over the finished videotape.

At the time I was pitching *Camp Lazlo*, Cartoon Network had decided (for a brief period) that they could tell if a concept would work for a series only by seeing an animatic, which is essentially a moving storyboard with voices viewed on a screen. I was skeptical about whether focus groups and/or test audiences would adapt to watching animatics, so I went the extra step and prepared an animatic using Adobe Flash, with full sound effects, music, and painted backgrounds. I edited it in Final Cut Pro in my studio and handed over a DVD for Cartoon Network to screen. The network loved it, but I don't think the other animatic pilot producers liked that I had raised the bar.

If you don't have these types of facilities, the studio or network can often set you up to help prepare the pilot. If you don't feel confident handling certain jobs for the pilot production, definitely bring in others to take on some of the work. This will be your first test at guiding and leading a crew and communicating your vision clearly. It is also a good test to see whether you can spend money wisely and demonstrate responsibility for a schedule and budget. After all, your first step should be figuring out how much money you can spend and how to spend it.

Budget Allocation

If you are not familiar with entertainment production budgets, it's best to hook up with a good line producer to walk you through the process. There are software templates that break down each category into line items: "above the line" costs are the items that can usually be negotiated before production begins, such as salaries for directors and artists, royalties, fees for the rights to the project, etc. The "below the line" costs are usually firm and include overhead costs, such as use of a recording studio, that are not "seen" in the finished product. There is an average weekly salary range or freelance rate for each position that can be plugged into the sheet as a starting point. You can usually find a recent wage survey on the animation guild's website (www.animationguild.org). Producers for pilots will sometimes request a break in costs that will hopefully be paid back in the form of a full time job if the show gets picked up.

A line item for a typical budget could look something like this:

Account	Description	Amount	Units	X	Rate	Total
2212	Storyboard director	4	weeks		$2000	$8000

"Account" is the line item number. "Description" is the position, service, or materials needed. "Amount" is based on the units: if the units are weeks, then you estimate how many weeks it would take for this task to be completed (here it's 4). The units could also be "episode," in which case the amount would be 1, for the pilot. Multiply the unit (weeks) by the weekly rate ($2,000) and you get the line item total estimate for that function ($8,000). The budget breakdown may run to several pages, and you can even allot money down to the pizza you may need while working late (5 pizzas at $15 each . . . you get the idea). If you're new to the budget process, be sure to work closely with your line producer and communicate your needs.

Budgets for pilot production are usually pretty modest, usually with set parameters. Thus, I'm going to recommend a certain approach in order to see most of that money end up on the screen. (I recommend this approach for producing series as well.) In a perfect world, each department would have plenty of money to make their contributions to the best of their abilities, but in reality, you have to pick your budgetary battles. Money allocation usually also translates into time allocation, meaning the more money you set aside for a particular function, the more time and people you can put on that job to get it done right. Since this is an investment for you as well, it's better if you don't look at the pilot as a vehicle with which to make money; rather, it's a tool to help you sell your show. So don't sacrifice quality in the pilot in order to put a few more dollars in your pocket. It's a matter of setting priorities; I've seen shows struggle that have spent all their money on design and color and have little left over for writing and

timing. I can tell you firsthand that the most beautiful design in the world is not going to save a bad story or poor animation.

My priorities have always been:

1. **Story, character, and gags.** Give yourself ample time and budget to focus on these first.
2. **Animation.** Make sure you have the best animation timing and direction that you can afford.
3. **Design, backgrounds, and color.** These are very important, but not if the first two fail.

The Pilot Process

Once you are given the green light to move from storyboard to full pilot, several steps usually follow, which we'll cover one at a time.

1. Create cast sheet and script; cast voice actors and record dialogue.
2. Create an animatic.
3. Start timing direction, including timing sheets.
4. Design props and extra characters.
5. Design background layouts.
6. Paint backgrounds.
7. Design color for props and characters.
8. Ship off sheets, storyboard, and model packs for animation, or begin animation.
9. Complete final edit/lock picture.
10. Add sound effects and music.
11. Schedule final delivery.

Casting and Recording Voices

Casting and recording voice parts should be a lot of fun. I have always enjoyed the discovery of voices. The first step is to hook up with a great voice/casting director. For the *Lazlo* pilot, I had one of the best in Collette Sunderman, who went on to work with me for the series. You and your voice/casting director will go through the character parts that need voices; then you will break down this information to form a casting sheet. Add brief descriptions of how you hear these voices. You may not end up with those sounds, but you need a place to start. For example, for the Dung Beetles, I wrote down: "Very caveman-like, but not grunting. Almost "Valley" caveman. Very low IQ."

These casting sheets get sent to the various agents who handle voice actors. Your

Action/Dialog:

Skip
MONKEY AND SEA LAMPREY,

MONKEY AND SEA..

..UMF!

Action/Dialog:

Skip
OOOF!

PFFFFFFT

Skip
OOOH.
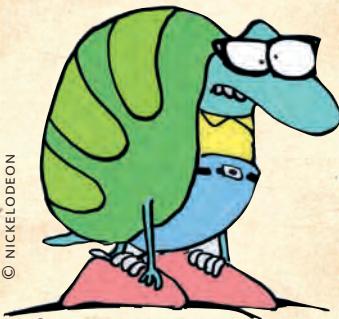
Voice actor Steve Little always
made recording sessions
entertaining.

Getting the Green Light

A Funny ROCKO Story

Filburt was a model of neurosis.

Since the pilot for ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE featured only Carlos Alazraqui doing the voices of Rocko and Spunky, we had to cast the rest of the series once the show was well into production. We had begun storyboarding the episodes, and Doug Lawrence (who was also an actor) came on to direct one of the storyboard teams. He took a particular liking to a neurotic turtle character named Filburt and felt like he knew what made him tick.

When we put out the call for voice auditions, I received boxes and boxes of cassettes (what we used back then). Unbeknownst to me, Doug Lawrence had stuck his audition tape in the box, most likely with help from Suzanne Benton, who was our voice and script coordinator. After nearly dozing off listening to audition after audition, I put in one more tape of someone voicing Filburt and quite literally jumped up, yelling, "THAT'S IT!" I didn't find out until later that it was Doug Lawrence, so I can't be accused of playing favorites. After he landed that role, it was funny how the episodes he directed always seemed to feature a lot of Filburt. . . . Doug went on to do Plankton on SPONGE-BOB SQUAREPANTS and Edward on CAMP LAZLO. He has one of those amazing voices capable of communicating so much character so clearly. It's been a pleasure working with him!

The extremely talented Doug Lawrence, or "Mr. Lawrence" to his legion of fans.

Creating Animated Cartoons with Character

voice director will probably have a few suggestions. Then, with your characters laid out in front of you, audition the MP3s and CDs that have been submitted to decide if any strike your fancy. Voice talent can come from many places. I personally love what comedians and improvisational actors bring to the mix. I believe that a great voice is essential, but so is great timing; a line can be read a thousand different ways, but it takes experience to know which way is funniest. Another benefit to using comedians is that their ad-libbing and improvisational skills offer unexpected moments of hilarity (hopefully while one is still recording). There are many voice actors who have such great timing and improv skills, to wit, Jeff Bennett, the voice of Raj.

Carlos Alazraqui was a stand-up comic in San Francisco when he auditioned for the characters Rocko and Spunky. Tom Kenny was an actor on *Mr. Show* and a stand-up comic when he auditioned for Heffer. For both men, it was their first voice-acting gig. Both went on to great successes, and both also voiced characters on *Camp Lazlo*. Steve Little was an actor who had me in stitches at a performance of the improv group The Groundlings in LA. I asked him after the show if he would be interested in auditioning for a voice on *Lazlo*. Voice acting was something he had yet to try, but his audition had me on the floor laughing. I hired him as the Dung Beetles, the Lemmings, and later as Mayor Pothole McPucker. He also came on board as a writer for us, and really helped shape the show.

When you find some auditions you like, bring the actors back for another read. Play around with different voice directions, even if you like what you heard at first. Why? To see how you mesh with this actor. Does he take direction well? Is she versatile? How many voices and styles does he have? Is she a team player or a prima donna? Most important, do you like him or her? If your show goes into series production, you will be spending a lot of time together in tiny, dark booths, and voice recording sessions can be a drag if you don't have the right mix of people in this setting. I used to really enjoy the voice sessions on both of my shows. I will not hire the greatest talent in the world for my actors and my crew if I don't feel I can have fun working with the person.

If you wrote a script for the network and they signed off on it, then that is what you will be using to record. However, if you have a storyboard-driven process in which the dialogue will be written when you produce the storyboard, then that dialogue needs to be transferred to a recording script. In either case, it's good to add as much detail as possible to guide the voice actor. For example, you can have an actor read the word "What?" a million different ways. If you add a written direction to it (highly anxious) or (shocked) or (excited happy), that saves a lot of time in the booth. Only contradict the direction notes verbally if you see that they're not working.

A recording booth can be a little intimidating. A sound engineer (the one who knows how to work all the buttons and recording software) and a voice director (who is often also your casting director) should be there with you. I like to record

ensemble, with all of the actors in the room at the same time, but for a pilot, it may be better to record individually. You want to be able to focus your work on each actor to take what you heard at the audition and polish it for the pilot.

I like to sit in the booth with both the script and the storyboard. I rarely look at the voice actor while he is reading the line, as I prefer to look at the storyboard to imagine the voice coming out of that character. The voice director will help you "slate" a take, which means referencing the line in the script and the take number; for example, "line twenty-two, take two." Communication with the voice actor is important. It's not constructive to say, "Could you be funnier?" Instead, you should be able to pinpoint why the previous take was not funny: "I don't hear the angst of your head getting cut off. Could you seem a little more nervous about that?" If you hear one take you really like, say, "Print that." If you hear two great takes and can't decide, print both and move on. You can choose later with your animation director. If a take makes you and the others in the booth laugh, it's probably a keeper! Have fun with the process.
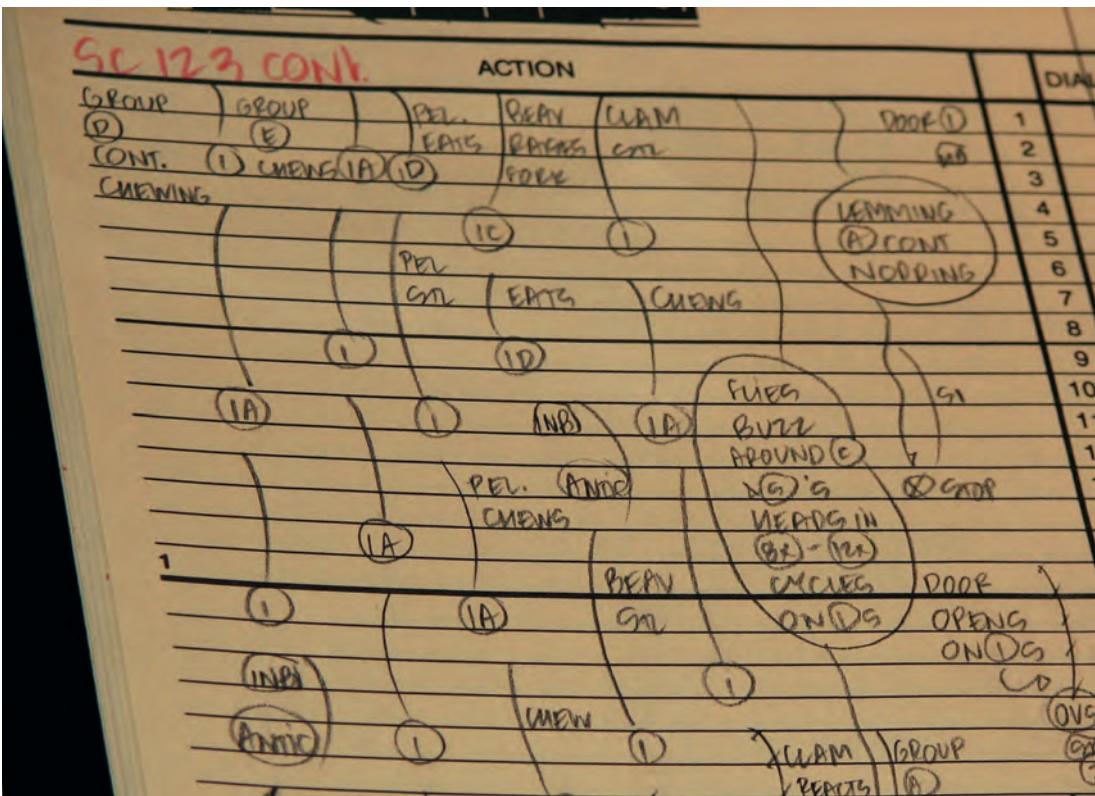
Animatics

After you record your voices, you will combine your storyboard panels with the new dialogue tracks and create what's called an "animatic," which is essentially a slide show of the storyboard with the dialogue added, played back with the timing you envision for the final cartoon. Animatics are beneficial on many levels, from seeing how a story unfolds to blocking out the timing. It's a good place to adjust the storyboard, do some major editing, or even record new lines before you let the episode proceed into the costly animation pipeline. I've used animatics on every project I've done, from the *Rocko's Modern Life* pilot to the final *Camp Lazlo* episode.

The process is simple: Import the storyboard panels by scanning them, and then add the voice audio files in a program such as Premiere or Final Cut Pro that can play them back in real time or as a QuickTime file. There are several programs that can be used. Some productions use Adobe Flash, or even an Avid editing bay (a suite of video editing equipment). Whether you are using a storyboard-driven method or a script, an animatic is an extremely valuable tool.

Timing Sheets

After you have blocked out the timing with the aid of an animatic, then it's time to transfer that timing into language the animator can use. Timing sheets (or exposure sheets, seen opposite) serve as the animator's guide to where things go and how fast they move, as well as camera direction. When you are working with an outside studio to handle the animation, an in-house team will define the timing of a show in detail, in timing sheet language, to the outside animator. Those sheets coupled with the storyboard give the animator a roadmap.
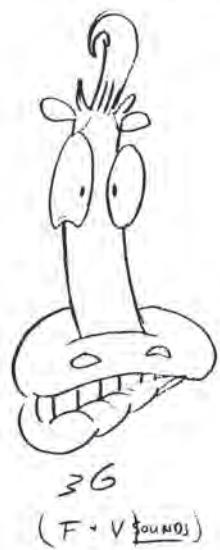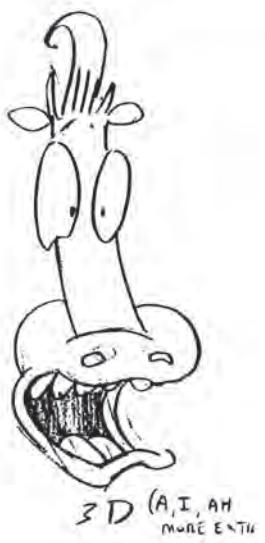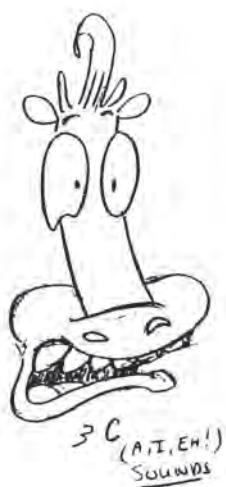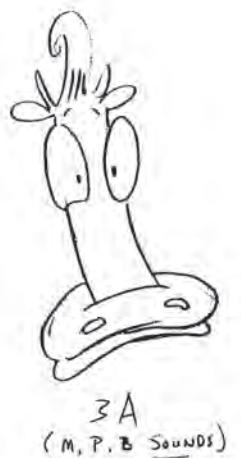
A timing sheet is a long sheet of vertical columns broken down horizontally into frame units (24 frames of film equals one second) and feet (16 frames equals one foot). One second of screen time equals one foot plus eight frames of film. Information for up to five feet of film can fit on one timing sheet, so a stack of sheets for one eleven-minute cartoon can be a few inches thick. A timing director and a sheet timer essentially use these sheets to animate, without actually doing the drawings. Through a series of numbers and panel letters that correspond to the storyboard, thumbnail drawings, and squiggly lines, the movement of each character, prop, and snowflake is carefully laid out, frame by frame, as well as the camera moves and mouth movement of each character. The mouth movements are laid in to the sheets using letters for each different mouth shape. A person known as a "track reader" will sit with the audio track of the dialogue, break down the mouth movements to these letters, and transfer those to the sheets. If this all seems overwhelming to you, don't worry—there are very good timing directors and sheet timers you can work with.
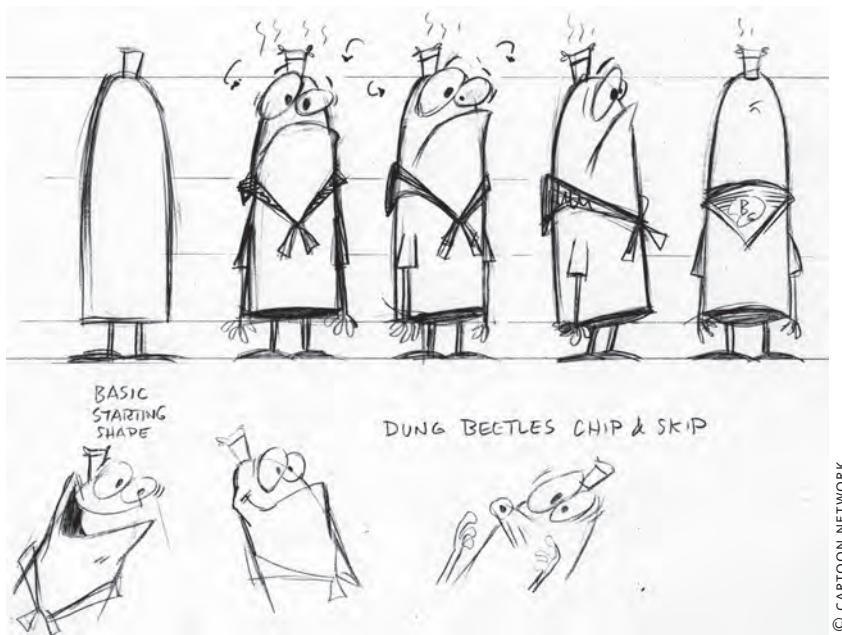
Prop and Character Design

You should have already designed the look of the show when you submitted your proposal, so your characters, props, and background designs should follow the same aesthetic. Every item that is picked up or carried by a character, every door that is opened, every piece of furniture in a room, anything that moves needs to

3 A
(M . P . B SOUNDS)

3 B
(S,D,GK.R Y Z.N SOUNDS)

3 BB
(ALTERNATE)

3 C
(A,I,EH!)
SOUNDS

3 D (A, I, AH
MORE EXTM

3 E
("ER")

3 F
(U,OOO, ŚW)

3 G
(F · V SOUNDS)

3 H
(L Ś TH SOUNDS)

"3 I" IS
AN INBEWWRI
MOUTHS

The Heffer mouth chart
for *Rocko's Modern Life*.

BASIC
STARTING
SHAPE

DUNG BEETLES CHIP & SKIP
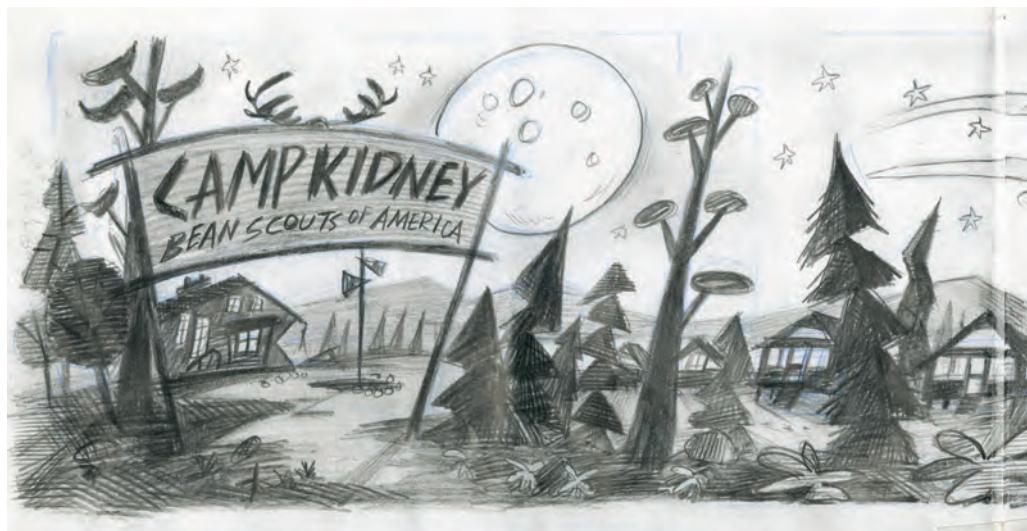
be designed. Go through the storyboard and circle everything that falls under that category. Then, if you have any background characters for which you haven't done designs or turnarounds, do those or have another artist do them. All the props and characters also have to be colored (though that usually happens after the key background designs have been established and painted).

Backgrounds

The style of the background is extremely important to the look of the show; it conveys the mood, the feel, and the direction of the characters and prop colors. It can be done digitally, with collage, airbrushed, or hand-painted (a method I prefer). By now, your scenes should be broken down in your storyboard. Every new location and every new room needs a key background design. From it, a key painting is done for production background painters to use as a guide, especially if you are using an overseas studio. It's considered a "key" painting because it can "unlock" the secrets of many other background production paintings that our studio did not do. For instance, when a scene happens in Scoutmaster Lumpus's bedroom, there will be many different angles—low shots, high shots, close-ups, and wide shots— needed for the actual animation. We would find one establishing shot of the whole bedroom and use that as a key background. Painting that background and sending it along with the storyboard gives the outside animation studio all they need to replicate all of the angles, colors, paint style, and lighting. If the lighting in a room changes (let's say Lumpus turns out the light and falls asleep) a new key has to be painted for "lights out, moonlight lighting." All of the outdoor background keys for the camp needed to be done in full daylight, morning, sunset, and nighttime. Since

Background layout from the *Camp Lazlo* pilot.

these keys were not usually used for production purposes, they could be painted smaller, thus saving valuable time.

On *Rocko,* the backgrounds were painted with Dr. Ph. Martin's color dyes because that was how I did my backgrounds on my independent films. By the time I designed the *Camp Lazlo* backgrounds, I had illustrated a few children's books and was really happy with a brushy style I had developed with acrylics and gouache. I painted quite a few of the production backgrounds for the pilot myself. When *Lazlo* art director Sue Mondt came on board, between my books and the backgrounds I had painted, she had ample reference to go by. For example, I always used green for my night skies and yellow for day skies, so that became the look.

One change we made to the background painting between the *Lazlo* pilot and the series production was a switch from acrylic and gouache to a new paint by Turner called Acryl Gouche. As the name implies, it's a mixture of acrylic and

gouache that imparts the great feel and look of gouache but is water resistant, so you can paint over it several times. It also creates a brushy appearance while keeping a matte finish. We would use Strathmore illustration board, transferring the drawn background to the storyboard using either indentation or transfer paper. The keys don't have to be as large as the actual production backgrounds, so painting on a smaller scale can be a time-saving device. When the background is finished, it's numbered and catalogued on a reference tool called a "lead sheet," which ties it to whatever scene it will be used for. If you need inspiration, I suggest going through old children's books or adapting a technique from your own style.

After your backgrounds are painted, the characters can be colored so that they "pop" off the background properly (you don't want a red character acting in front of a red wall). For *Camp Lazlo,* I created a color palette from old summer-camp colors, cabins, Indian blankets, rugs, and the like. The prop and character designs

Rocko's living room. The style for *Rocko* was much flatter than for *Camp Lazlo.*

are scanned or cleaned up digitally and then passed to the color stylist, who assigns them the appropriate look. A standard color reference for a character can also change depending on the time of day in the scene, and all of these variables should be taken into account by the stylist.

Ship It

After you have your storyboard, voice tracks, timing sheets, color packs, and backgrounds prepared, it's time to box it all up and send it to wherever you are doing your animation, whether it's down the hall to your in-house Flash unit or an off-site animation studio. The economic realities of volume television animation have made it commonplace to outsource animation to less expensive international studios. In the United States, deciding whether it's economically feasible to do your animation domestically depends a lot on the current market value of the dollar. Wherever you send your production materials, the artists who work in these studios—either locally or abroad—are fine craftsmen and women. The studio I used for *Camp Lazlo* was called Rough Draft Korea, and we worked very well together. Adobe Flash has become more common as a high-production animation method, so new, more economical options are opening up for domestic animation for television.

When your production studio receives the package, it's a bit like putting together a model—they have the directions and all of the parts, and now they have to glue them together and send back the finished product. In reality, of course, it's a lot harder than that (I animated half of the *Rocko* pilot myself, so I know). The average length of time needed to complete overseas animation for an eleven-minute episode is sixteen weeks, give or take a few. The Flash animation process can take less time, given how many elements you can reuse. *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* creator Craig McCracken said that, toward the final episodes of the show, his Flash team was turning out a twenty-two-minute episode in two weeks. It all depends on how many people you have working and how many episodes are in the pipeline simultaneously.

Editing and Lock

Optimistically, after about sixteen weeks, you will get an amazing film back from the animation studio that blows your mind. Unfortunately, it doesn't always happen that way; I can guarantee there will be mistakes, which result when the wires get crossed in following your instructions (the timing was wrong, the colors or backgrounds were off, a character pops on and off the screen) and you need your animation studio to redo the scene. Fortunately, these gaffes can be fixed with "retakes," Choose your battles carefully, though: Animation can be a very forgiving medium, but it's unrealistic to go through a film frame-by-frame and pick out every little thing that bugs you. Instead, focus on the big picture. These are usually my

The *Camp Lazlo* editing bay, which crashed far too often for my sanity.

priorities with retakes:

- Does the mistake affect the story?
- Does the mistake offend the eye so much that the viewer is distracted from the story?
- Is the mistake creating a glaring consistency problem?
- Has the mistake blown a great gag somehow? Could the animation timing be improved?

The wonderful thing about digital editing is that you can correct a lot of mistakes yourself without sending it back to the production studio, which is often overseas. On *Camp Lazlo,* I had an editor named Mattaniah Adams that I called "The Master"—he could fix anything!

When I was working on *Rocko's Modern Life* in the 1990s, the overseas studio had to shoot painted cels on film with a big camera stand, which could introduce a set of problems that today's shows don't encounter: Sometimes we would call so many retakes on one scene that the animation peg holes in the cel would start to tear, creating the need for a whole new take. Another challenge of working with film stock (as opposed to digital editing) was correcting timing problems while trying to "lock the picture," which used to involve physically

splicing each frame to get the timing on a sight gag just right. I don't miss those days. . . .

Once the retakes are approved, it's time for you and the editor to lock the picture, which in today's process means locking in film sequence and length so the sound crew can work with a final print that won't change. Locking the picture entails editing the film down to your final running time, rearranging scenes if necessary, correcting color, and adding effects. You also need to add the time code (the digital tracking code), which allows the sound and music folks to lock their equipment to the final picture.

Sound Effects and Music

After the picture has been locked, sit down with your sound-effects editor and spot the show. By "spotting" I mean to go through it together and discuss what sounds and/or music you are looking for in a given scene. The editor should take notes and write down the time code for each scene you discuss. I can't stress enough the importance of having great sound in your show and working with a good sound editor. It's a refined craft to sell an animated scene with just the right sound effect. You can't just say, "add a car horn here," because there are about a hundred different car horns that could sell it in different ways. Ask yourself, is it coming from an old jalopy or a new car? Is it a muscle car or a sports car? What would best sell the story or the gag—or both? Let's say, for example, that you want to sell the urgency of Scoutmaster Lumpus rushing somewhere in his Jeep. The actual engine sounds from that type of Jeep may not offer the urgency you want, so try adding a Hemi engine instead, and really blast it. To really sell a story point, I'll go over the top with my sounds to make sure they have a huge impact. When it comes to cartoon sounds, if you like the Hanna-Barbera library (which is brilliant), there are endless little squeaks and borks to choose from. Have fun with it! (My sound editor also boasted the largest collection of passing-gas sounds on the planet!)

After I spotted the picture with my sound editor, I would sit down with the time-coded work print and jot down the types of music I would hear in my head as I watched each scene and the mood they evoked. I would then write out spotting notes for my music editor so he or she could start adding this important element to the locked picture. Music for your series can be approached in several ways. For *Rocko,* I used a composer to create an original score for each episode, in this case, Pat Irwin of The Ray Beats and the B-52s. I would break down the scenes by time code and write down what I was looking for in the music. These are the actual notes for the *Rocko's Modern Life* episode "Junk Junkies" for just the first two minutes:

Pat would then get these notes, write original music for the scene, and then record it with a live band in New York. When you are working on the pilot, take the time to find the right style for your music. We will talk later about what it means to do this for every episode while sticking to a strict schedule.

For *Camp Lazlo,* instead of original compositions for each episode, I had Andy Paley of the Paley Brothers record a whole library of short and long cues with an old hillbilly-style live band, complete with jugs and washboards, banjos, spoons, ancient tubas, etc. He would do traditional camp songs as well as transitional quickies. After the *Lazlo* music library was completed, I had my music editor, Nick Carr, use the bits from the library as well as cues from a "needle-drop" stock library (music library in which each song or cue is leased on a nonexclusive basis) to create a score for each episode. I would do a spotting sheet for Nick just as I would for Pat, and he would cut together the music soundtrack from the two libraries to best sell the story and the gags.

The Mix

The last item in the daisy chain is the final mix. A mix is where you sit with a good sound-mixing engineer on a mix stage (a dark room with a big screen to show the video and a large console with faders and a zillion buttons and knobs), take the final sound effects, music, and dialogue, and blend them all together to match your picture so that it sounds beautiful. If you just dumped your effects, music, and dialogue in there raw, it would resemble a cacophony of jumbled sounds. A good mixer (like Eric Freeman, whom we used on *Camp Lazlo*) can weave the sounds throughout the music, emphasizing certain effects while making sure the dialogue can be understood at all times. The mixer can also do things like adding reverb to

a voice and sending it way off screen so that it seems like a camper is yelling from far away.

As the creator, it's ultimately your job to make sure the story points and gags are coming through. Sometimes a mixer will want to drop out an effect so you can hear the music. But what if that effect was vital to the story and he just didn't realize it? It's also fun to slip audio gags into the shows that many people won't pick up, but some will. For instance, usually once in every episode of *Lazlo,* if a character throws something off screen or someone out a window, it would almost always sound like the person or object landed on a poor sheep. I always wanted that poor, beaten-up sheep to finally make an appearance on screen, but he never did.

Final Delivery

Hopefully, everything went smoothly in producing the pilot, and you have a gorgeous, unique package to deliver to the network or studio. At this point, the network will usually test the pilot on a focus group to see how the intended audience feels about it. Some take this data very seriously, while others take it with a grain of salt. Craig McCracken's *Powerpuff Girls* tested horribly in the pilot, but it went on to become a great cartoon and a big hit for Cartoon Network. In the end, focus-group testing can sometimes be a flawed compass.

If you always do your best through every step of the process on a given project, then that's all you can do. There are many reasons why some projects don't end up as a good fit for a network, studio, or other investor, and none should be taken personally. What is meant to happen will happen!

If the network or studio decides not to move forward with your series after testing the pilot, you should take advantage of the turnaround option in your contract that we discussed in chapter 6. After the appropriate contractual period of time passes, you can pitch the show to someone else or find an alternative method of producing it (refer to chapter 10). It is possible that if another entity moves forward with your series, the original network or studio will want to be repaid any money it invested in the pilot; this scenario should be covered in your original contract as well. But we are going to think positively and move forward to the chapter on producing your series!

Q & A

with Jeff Hutchins

JEFF HUTCHINS has been a sound designer and editor for over twenty years, earning four Emmys and seven Golden Reel Awards. He is a graduate of Ohio University and was an Audio Production major at the School of Radio and Television. Aside from sound designing and sound editing on *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo*, as well as dozens of other shows and features, his most notable work can be found on Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In the past he has been employed by Saban and Warner Bros., and he is currently at the head of his own thriving sound company.

Q: *We know you worked as the sound designer and editor on* Rocko's Modern Life, Camp Lazlo, *and I'll even throw in that you designed the bubble sound (as well as the other sound effects) for* SpongeBob SquarePants. *Give us a rundown of your experience in your Emmy award–winning career so far. What prepares a person for a job like yours?*

A: The requirements of the job tend to mutate as your career progresses. The first and most important is creativity. Other important qualities are an eye for detail; the ability to handle stress and pressure; the willingness to accept responsibility for your actions and choices without trying to pass the buck; and the ability to continuously learn and develop new technical skills quickly. A person can be strong in some of these and have to work at the others. They're not all god-given character traits.

Usually, the lessons that a person needs to master in order to grow will find you. Multitasking is a great talent to have, but an eye for detail trumps it and needs to be maintained, no matter what. Early in your career, you may have to do all this in a dimly lit closet of a studio, then rise to a fully outfitted edit room on a studio lot, and then later end up on a laptop in your home studio. I like being a commercial sound artist, whose job is to help tell the director's story. The key is to have fun doing it without be-

coming grumpy or burning out or have technology leave you in the dust.

Q: *So let's face it—there are cartoon sounds, and there are Jeff Hutchins cartoon sounds. I know you take incredible pride in the quality of your work. What do you think sets a good animation sound designer apart from the rest?*

A: A sound designer for animation is an odd position to begin with—senior in some ways, and entry level in others. In this decade, animation has risen as an art form, thanks in part to some fantastic movies, such as *Toy Story*, *Shrek*, and *Cars*. Even a decade ago, there was little stature associated with the position. It really comes down to a core decision to match yourself with a pursuit that you can throw yourself into every day. It is a quest to find it, listen to it, and pursue it as if there is no second option.

Happiness in life is easier to find when your work is your passion and your passion is your work. I like telling stories with sound. I've enjoyed recording sound effects and have had great experiences recording odd and silly things. Animation is a blank

canvas, unlike live action, which usually has a production soundtrack—it's wide open. Generally, part of the job is to be funny. The show with the most interesting, funny, unusual, and most detailed soundtrack will stand out. This must be done in the style and taste of the show's creator, who is your boss and really deserves a lot of the credit for the show's sound. Joe—you and I were able to have a great working relationship because I felt I could try things with sound, even to the point of being really wacky, and I never got bashed if it wasn't right. The heart of the job is to match the style of animation and the director's thoughts with the type of sounds and details that make the show come to life.

Q: *How much do you owe to the sound designers of the past, who put together the Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros. libraries? How much is your own style?*

A: Without getting into the histories of both studios, the collections of sound that remain from the archives of the studios are mini–time capsules. The sound is a result of analogue equipment, mag film, and different ways the gear worked, in the days of sprockets, razor blades, and splicing tape. The days of ingenious sound departments custom-making props for shows is mostly gone. Today's sound is created by an editor who has all of the libraries. Figuring out which one is the best choice is one of the differences between designers and editors. Designers go beyond selecting the best choice from their library and artfully weaving CD tracks together. This is the area of new material, some of which may put a new face on an old classic.

I have a slide whistle next to me most of the time. Everyone knows what a slide whistle is. However, to have one in your show that fits like a glove and wasn't manipulated heavily is a mark of design. To have your own bell glasses, Sparkle FX, and pops is great; to create custom versions for each show you work on is better. Again, you find yourself re-creating yourself in each show: That is being a sound designer for television animation.

Being a sound designer for an animated feature film, or even a film short, expands quite a bit more on the brand-new-material philosophy. Today's sound was built on the shoulders of past giants in the field, like Sam Horta and Patrick Foley. I still wonder, how did they do that? In Mr. Foley's case, how did he dream up a process that would change the way the whole industry works? Everyone in the sound industry has benefited from that. My hat's off to you, Mr. Foley.

Q: *So, say a creator comes to you with a finished pilot with voice dubs only; he or she has no idea how they want the show to sound. How would you walk a novice through an experience like that?*

A: If a creator came to me with no idea about the sound for his show, I would be a bit surprised. Usually, the process of dreaming up an idea—creating a pilot, pitching it, and getting a studio interested—requires some thought on sound. I take my direction totally from the creator. However, if it were to happen, during the initial spotting session I would try to coax some response, asking some of the questions we have brought up already. Do you like the classic cartoon sounds? Is it a synthesizer-type show or more organic? Do you want to bring out realism (a Foley-based show), or is it more cartoony? Some of the 3-D computer-generated animation begs for realistic sound, while campy shows with a handmade, low-tech feel ask for the opposite. This is not to say you take your best first guess and the story's over—quite the opposite. You build the show's sound signature over time as you do each episode of the first season.

The first season is your time for sound design, experimentation, and exploration of the creator's tastes. Again, that person is your boss. If you are willing to present your material until the show's creator is happy, you have nothing to lose by going for it with every ounce of energy you can muster.

Q: I know you have a lot of patience for working with creators and producers to get the right sound they want. Let's face it, there are five thousand fart sounds out there and one thousand head bonks and eyeball wiggles. How do you find the right one?

A: Say you're in a review and almost done, and a client asks for a certain type of sound. They're anxious to conclude their sound review and go back to the million-and-one other tasks on their plate. So my choice for that moment would be to bowl down the center of the lane. There is usually a tried-and-true sound effect for most situations, and after a while in the business, you will know which effects your clients will usually pick.

If I'm by myself, hunting for the right sound, especially on a big show, it could stretch on for days, and I may go to extreme lengths if I can. I may remember a sound in my library that had eluded me through a word search, or I may find it online. The Internet provides a whole new way to obtain sounds outside your current library.

Q: How much do you rely on Foley (the art of recording natural sounds superficially in a studio to match the picture)? And when do you say, to hell with library sounds, I'm going out to record a grizzly bear in heat on my own!

A: Foley and field recording have some similarities but are different from one another. Foley is a recording process usually done in a studio during which a Foley artist watches the picture on a large screen and performs with a prop or maybe their feet to make a certain sound. It is not an easy job, and it takes years to become really good at it. It's very important to me to maintain good relationships with the most talented Foley artists around, because a good artist will make your show great, while a so-so artist will drag your project down (and at that point, a Hanna-Bar-

bera "valoop" effect will sound pretty good). So it comes down to the nature of the show: If it's very comedic and favors cartoon sounds, Foley is not the first choice.

As for field recording, sometimes there isn't enough time to do this, and time is usually my determining factor. The effort required for success varies with the subject matter; for instance, recording a hose turning on is a lot different than recording a road dragster or exploding cannons. I actually did sign on to a sound-design recording adventure that involved several brown and black bears. Foley can't provide for this—it's sound design and field recording in its purest form. The whole thing was quite an expensive venture. So when do I decide to go out into the field these days? Usually during my holiday or vacation time. I enjoy recording things, but my time has become very tight.

Q: Can you break down the average schedule when you are working on a show? From delivery of the first film to spotting, cutting, previews, and the mix—how much time do you allot, and how does it usually work?

A: This question has no one answer. I usually work the equation from the other side: "How much time do I have?" Then I'll assess the work required to make the show original and impressive-sounding. The delivery format is also a big factor. Preparing material for surround sound takes at least double the work. It can take days to spot, or map out, what will be needed for a big Foley show. It may also take days to edit it once completed.

Another big factor is where you are in the life of a show. The first season, in which you are experimenting and defining the show's sound, is far different from a show in its fifth season, where you're rolling along. Generally I would say I get a week per episode. Lately I've been getting two weeks to do a seven-minute pilot where most things are new. Sometimes it's easier, and sometimes it's very difficult. It's great when you're hired early in the project.

Q: *How much has the equipment changed over the years? I know we worked differently on* Rocko *in the '90s, as opposed to* Camp Lazlo *in the mid 2000s.*

A: There have been sizable advances in technology over the years. There were tasks that took days to do before that aren't even done today, even as recently as *Rocko's Modern Life* in the 1990s. For example, the show was built in sections and then recorded to 2-inch 24-track tape with noise reduction. In the nineties I rarely could play back more than 24 tracks at a time. Today, none of my shows are only 24 tracks. I rarely tell a director or producer that they must listen to the show in passes, because I can't play all the tracks at once.

Today's sound-effects work usually comes from editorial somewhat premixed. Levels are balanced between the backgrounds, the hard effects, the footsteps, and the Foley props. The material is usually planned to spread out across the sound field, so even some basic panning is the editor's responsibility. Reviews would take up big chunks of a day. Today, I mainly send a QuickTime video of my sound-effect work, married with the dialogue, to the director or producer. They can review it at their convenience and without having to leave the studio and drive to a post-sound shop. In the nineties, the picture was played from a 3/4'' video deck. Over the years, my job has gone from running a mechanical system that had components that linked together, to doing everything on a laptop computer. So now I don't need a staff of equipment technicians to keep me up and running, either. Thanks, technology!

Q: *What advice would you give to a fresh new creator of a show with regard to finding the overall sound style of his or her series?*

A: You may need to take a few chances with sound in order to stand out from the crowd. If your story, characters, and the look of your show are unique, shouldn't the soundtrack be, too? The time it takes to be different may not cost much, or anything at all. It just takes time. Find your sound-effects editor early on or in the middle of creating your show, so that person can get started sooner. If plugged into the equation at this early juncture, he or she can also supply sound for the various pitches to executives, thus maybe even helping to get the show picked up.

Next is how to find the right editor. Many creators will accept editorial services from a post-sound shop. But really, you want one editor on your show; a group approach to building the show leads to wide swings in sound on various different episodes. A single person helps to unify the sound and keep it consistent. It's even fair to ask for a small test. Plan early for the best results.

Q & A

with Tom Kenny

TOM KENNY is a celebrated actor and comedian most well known as the voice of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. His live-action credits include the *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, the cult movie *Shakes the Clown*, Fox's *The Edge*, HBO's *Mr. Show* and Disney Channel's *Sky High*. His animated voice credits are a mile long, including *Rocko's Modern Life*, *Camp Lazlo*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Dexter's Lab*, *Meet the Robinsons*, *Futurama*, *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, *Fairly Odd Parents*, and many more.

Q: *I wanted to talk with you not only about the cartoon voice business, but also about your views on the animated cartoon, since you have lived inside its walls for sixteen years. First, aside from being the voices of SpongeBob, Heffer, Lumpus, and many other lead characters in animation, you are also a successful stand-up comic and actor. Would you give us a brief rundown of your path to this career, including your background, education, and your big breaks?*

A: I grew up in East Syracuse, NY, Normalsville, USA. Two fairly stable parents, four siblings. I was definitely the "middle child." I loved comic books, monster movies, and animated cartoons, both the classic and not-so-classic. I was lucky enough to be a disaffected high school kid from 1976 to 1980. It was the perfect time for the "perfect storm" of early *SNL*, *SCTV*, punk rock, and the rockabilly revival to get me all wound up and provided a vague signpost for things I could maybe do in my life. After (and even during) high school, I played in a bar band and did stand-up comedy and sketch comedy for many years, first in Boston, then in San Francisco. I did lots of cable stand-up shows, from *David Letterman* to others best forgotten.

Animated voice-over was my dream job, though—Mel Blanc, Daws Butler, and Stan Freberg were my lifelong heroes!—and finally some joker named Joe Murray hired me to be a yellow steer raised by wolves on his series *Rocko's Modern Life*.

The experience, the series, and the people made a big impression on me. I felt like animation was the best place for my skill set, but after *Rocko* the voice-over well went dry for a while. I continued to do on-camera work in various things (including HBO's cult series *Mr. Show*) but my heart was always in animation and voice work. I kept auditioning for literally every voice-over job I could, and eventually voice-over work supplanted everything else, becoming almost 100% of my income. I felt like a lonely bachelor who'd finally found his soulmate!

Q: *For me personally, the background of a comedic actor, especially improv skills, has always been important when hiring voice actors. Some people think voice acting is just reading scripts, but I know from working with talent like you how much more it is than reading words. It's such an overlooked craft, in my opinion. Could you talk about that?*

A: I don't know if it's overlooked, exactly, but it's definitely misunderstood. You're right that some people think "voice-acting" and "reading aloud" are the same thing. It really all depends on the type of show as well as the creator's comfort level with playfulness and improv. Actors love to be let off the leash and run around. I got spoiled right out of the gate on *Rocko*, having Carlos Alazraqui, Charlie Adler, and Mr. Lawrence to bounce off of.

Man! Those were wild sessions. I take it seriously. I read every script and storyboard before I show up at the session, mostly because the more you know about the story, plot, and jokes in the script, the more thought you can give to tweaking things and making it the funniest (or most dramatic) it can be. To go off-book, you need to be conversant with the book. I'm always surprised at the voice-over actors who come to record and have obviously not even cracked open the script or storyboard that was sent to them. I'm too paranoid about looking unprepared. Comedy, improv, sketch, and a bit of musical ability as well as genuinely liking animation have all been helpful to me in the field. Everything you know how to do comes in handy at some point. A big part of it is committing to the "world" that the cartoon takes place in, and doing a performance that fits within the context of that world, whether it be *SpongeBob* or *Clone Wars*. It's part instinct, part calculation.

Q: *You started voice acting for animation around the time that creator-driven cartoons were making a comeback in the 1990s. Can you talk about the experience of working with a creator of a cartoon (many of whom direct the voice sessions) as opposed to working with a hired voice director? What is the difference?*

A: I've got great "right place, right time" mojo. Just when I started auditioning for animation, all these creator-driven shows were revving up. *Ren & Stimpy* had made it okay for cartoons to be funny again, after years of *Care Bears* and *Gummy Bears* and G.I. Joe Bears. I got to voice shows that had these strong, creative hands at the helm, all with very different sensibilities: you, Craig McCracken, Genndy Tartakovsky, Butch Hartman, Steve Hillenburg, Everett Peck, and the Cahills (just as Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Friz Freleng, Bob Clampett, and all those guys were each great in their own way). I love a show in which you can see the fingerprints of the creator all over it, when it doesn't seem like it was made by a boardroom committee. The creator's imprint is stamped so strongly on the show, and I

know what that takes and how hard these guys have to fight to preserve the idiosyncrasies and integrity that they want their show to have. Therefore, I see it as my mission to get what they are hearing in their heads into my microphone. I'm a "session drummer" (like Hal Blaine or something) and the creator is "Brian Wilson." My job is to bring the aural part of that creator's dream to the screen, and hopefully give it a little of my own DNA that "Brian" will like.

All of the people I've mentioned seem to be secure enough to build their team of artists and actors and then let them do what they do and bring what they can to the party. Ultimately it's not about the actor, it's about collaborating with all the show's makers to help bring off the illusion that these characters and their world (as wacky and surreal as they may be) reach the screen as the creator intended. Let's face it, most of these creators have been watching their show in their own heads for years, and nobody knows their characters like they do.

A hired voice director has the same job description. Sometimes a show creator doesn't know the linguistic shorthand that a voice-over director does, or he or she may need a third party to articulate to the actor what's needed. I'm never trying to please the voice director; they're just the mouthpiece for the creator, and I'm the mouthpiece for the creator's characters. We're all working together to make these drawings live and breathe.

Q: *You are the voice of one of the most iconic characters in the history of animation, SpongeBob SquarePants. How different is that gig from your other work? How has it changed your life, if at all?*

A: It sounds weird to say it, but the fact that SpongeBob has become this giant global iconic brand doesn't impact the work process at all! My job is the same as it was in 1999, which is to help make SpongeBob SpongeBob—do all his talking, laughing, crying, singing, or whatever. That's my responsibility. I feel I know the character well enough and for long enough (more than the writers,

sometimes) that I can channel him pretty convincingly. That's all due to Steve Hillenburg having laid all the necessary groundwork at the very beginning. SpongeBob was fully formed before I ever met the little guy (SpongeBob, not Steve!). The audience the show reaches is global and gigantic, which is a bit different from my usual experience. It's fun to be part of a show that has become a part of people's lives and routines, from the ''average'' family to the Obama family. I guess it's also made my name a bit more visible in the auditioning world, so that I'm not always completely unknown when I walk in the door. Unlike an on-camera actor, my face isn't identified with SpongeBob, so I never have that on-camera actor's conundrum of resenting Spongey as if he's my Gilligan, Captain Kirk, or 007. *SpongeBob* records on Wednesdays, and the other four days of the week I'm recording stuff that's not *SpongeBob*. I love the square dude!

Q: *You've witnessed many cycles and phases in animation over the past years, not only from the standpoint of a voice actor but as a writer and creator of characters yourself. You see firsthand what works and what doesn't. Can you talk about the nature of animation past, present, and future? Where do you see it going?*

A: Despite being on many series over the years, I still don't have any real idea or formula as to what makes a ''hit show.'' If anything, I'm more confused than ever. If there's a lesson to be learned by looking at the history of animation, it would be this: Good things happen when you let artists be artists: Winsor McCay, Disney, Max Fleischer, Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Jay Ward, John Bakshi, Ralph Kricfalusi… anything that has resonated since happened because the bean counters counted beans and the artists were allowed to let their instincts flow.

I like keeping up with what new animation is out there, and I know what I like. Despite the talents of Pixar, I still can't warm to 3-D computer animation; it's hard to warm up to, and is usually ugly… and not ugly in a good way! But that's just me. As for what

works or doesn't, I've been on shows that I loved that barely made a ripple and shows that I doubted the strength of, but that went on to be big hits. (For the record, I felt great about *SpongeBob* from the get-go.) I don't think there is a formula, except for a creator's passion.

Q: *If a creator of a new series wants to make sure the voice of his character matches the design and personality, what voice-over advice would you give that person, who is starting with a blank tape?*

A: Most of the creators I've known had a definite (or at least vague) idea of what they wanted their creations to sound like. If the concept and writing is strong, it suggests things right off the bat, like when you're reading a really well-written book and can ''hear'' the characters in your head when reading silently. When it falls together and the design, animation, and voice all work together and blend perfectly, it's a great magic trick. When I think of my favorite cartoon characters—Donald Duck, Daffy Duck, Bugs Bunny, Popeye, Yogi Bear, Top Cat, Huckleberry Hound, Ren & Stimpy, Rocky, Bullwinkle, Homer Simpson, and a thousand others I'm not thinking of right now—they're all about a great character design and a voice that fits, pulling off the illusion that these drawings live, breathe, think, and move. That's been the same since Gertie the Dinosaur!

Once in a while, the actor makes a choice in the audition that makes the creator rethink the characters. That's always fun. I always say that when you audition, you're hoping for one of two reactions: 1) ''That's exactly what I was hearing in my head,'' or 2) ''That's not what I was thinking of, but it's interesting; keep doing that.'' I'm happy with either reaction from a creator.

A: Every show is different, every creator is different, every voice director is different, and every session is different. The actor susses out pretty quickly which shows are open to a little adlibbing in the performance, or paraphrasing a certain line so that it feels more in character, and which ones are strictly ''by the book.'' Obviously the situation that's most enjoyable for me is one in which the creator and I (along with the voice director, if there is one) are all simpatico: I know where the show's coming from, and the creator knows that I ''get'' the aesthetic of the show and is trusting me to deliver comedy and personality, both on-book and off-book. You're riffing with other actors. That said, not all sessions are like that. Sometimes you're working so hard on the Rubik's Cube that you are just missing it by that much. That can be frustrating, but I mostly get frustrated with myself (although there are times when the actor is trying to roll with direction that's either inarticulate or impossible to decipher, through no fault of his or her own).

I love my job and don't want anyone else's, so I never think of making noise for money as a ''grind.'' Even the most horrific voice-over session—and in all my years, I can think of maybe two—is not nearly as bad as my worst night in a comedy club or my worst day at a ''normal'' job. You do your honest best to deliver what they're asking for. The union says that you're a hired hand for the next four hours, so suck it up!

Your wife, Jill Talley, is also an amazing voice and comedic actor. I had the pleasure of working with Jill a little on Rocko, *and then as squirrel scouts Gretchen and Nina on* Camp Lazlo. *What is it like having you two as parents? And what is it like as a married couple with so much talent under one roof?*

A: Jill is the funniest person I've ever met. She was on the main stage in Chicago's famed Second City. We met in 1992 on a failed Fox sketch show called *The Edge* and again on *Mr. Show.* She was doing voice-over (in commercials and the like) long before I was. She's a great character actor with a phenomenal ear for dialects and voices, plus she's a good improviser. When we get to work together, I know I'll be hearing something great. As for our kids, they were born into a world in which they're constantly in the presence of gifted and interesting artists, actors, writers, comedians, and musicians, so their upbringing is completely different from ours. My dad was an accountant in Syracuse, Jill's dad was a Chicago fireman, and our moms were housewives. I spent my youth dreaming of meeting a ''bohemian!'' As soon as we became teenagers, Jill and I sought out that world (independently). Our kids were birthed into it. Despite our ''cool'' jobs, our kids see us the way all kids see their parents—as uptight killjoys who spoil all their fun. Hey, that's our job!

Finally, what advice—from your animation wisdom of the ages—would you give someone trying to break into the business with his or her own show? Do you see mistakes that you feel are constantly being made?

A: Fight tooth and nail for your idea, and don't let the rejections get you down. Listen to advice from smart people, ignore advice from knuckleheads, and watch your back! I've developed some shows that have gone as far as the pilot stage, and it's brutal to even get that far! Long hours and long gestation periods with no paychecks coming in. It's a long, hard road to be the guy who creates a show, then sees it through pilot stage, production, post-production, cancellation, pickup, etc. I don't think I'm ''that guy,'' but hopefully ''that guy'' will need a guy like me once his show is up and running! I'm in the phone book.

Chapter 8

Series Production: Building the Team to Produce the Show

"Possibly the best day of my life . . . but also a scary one. Now I had to actually make a series—something I had never done before!"

—Tom Warburton, creator of *Codename: Kids Next Door,*
on getting his series picked up

"This machine is worth more than you."

—The Chameleon brothers, in *Rocko's Modern Life* episode
"No Pain, No Gain"

So your pilot has tested well, or you've found independent financing, and you've been given the green light to do your own show—congratulations! Now it's time to ask yourself some really big questions, to lay the groundwork, and decide how you will proceed. My advice in this chapter is based on my experiences producing *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo,* but I will focus more on how we worked on *Lazlo* because it was more recent and the technology more current than what we used on *Rocko* in the 1990s. Does that mean you'll be able to do it exactly the same way? Probably not, because technology and production processes are changing and being updated all the time; however, the overall lessons still apply.

Economic conditions also change, as do the business policies of those writing the checks—budgets can vary greatly. The one thing I always have hated hearing

when I questioned the reason for a particular method was, "That's the way we've always done it." One should always be flexible and search for the best methods available based on current conditions. So the way you go about producing your show depends on three important questions:

1. How much money do you have to work with, i.e., what is your budget?
2. How much time do you have to produce the episodes?
3. What technology is available to you to produce the show?

Scheduling and Budget

The first important position to fill is a great line producer (if you didn't already find one when you did your pilot). Your line producer is your traffic cop, budget surgeon, and magician who's able to pull just about anything out of a hat. He or she is your link to keeping the schedule, budget, crew, and network associates humming in an orderly fashion. He or she manages the overseas communication, in-house labor disputes, end and start dates, and salaries, as well as books and coordinates any outsourced work. I personally have a low tolerance for disorganization or the inability to problem-solve at the drop of a hat, so I lean heavily on my line producer and have high expectations of him or her. In the past, my line producers have had to endure my ranting and venting about things that have nothing to do with them, but a good producer will help you through the rough patches. You may be assigned one by the network, or you may have to hire one. Just make sure you click with him or her. I went through quite a few on *Rocko,* and a couple on *Lazlo,* before I found someone I worked well with. Sometimes the line producer is stuck in a hard place between the network and the creator, but overall you should see eye to eye. You don't want to find out you're not good partners after the bullets start flying in the middle of production.

The first task for you and your line producer is to create a schedule and a budget you and the network can live with. I have created a sample schedule that is loosely based on the structure I used to organize both of my shows (opposite). It is by no means complete and should be considered a rough outline.

Most series schedules are set up so that you work on several episodes at once. As I mentioned earlier, it is not a linear progression, where you do one episode, finish it, and then start on the next. You will notice that storyboard team number one turns in a storyboard on Friday after four weeks, then picks up the new outline for a new board the following Monday to start the process all over again. This means that, in any given week, various teams and departments will be in different stages of several different episodes. You, as the creator, should be in touch with all

SAMPLE EPISODIC ANIMATED SERIES SCHEDULE (ABBREVIATED)

week	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
episode 1	Writing	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic	Timing Sheets	Timing Sheets	BG's & Art Direction	BG's & Art Direction	Ship Overseas
episode 2		Writing	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic	Timing Sheets	Timing Sheets	BG's & Art Direction	BG's & Art Direction
episode 3			Writing	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic	Timing Sheets	Timing Sheets	BG's & Art Direction
episode 4				Writing	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic	Timing Sheets	Timing Sheets
episode 5					Writing	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic	Timing Sheets
episode 6						Writing	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard	Dialog Record	Animatic
episode 7							Writing	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Team 3 Storyboard	Dialog Record
episode 8								Writing	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard	Team 4 Storyboard
episode 9									Writing	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard	Team 1 Storyboard
episode 10										Writing	Team 2 Storyboard	Team 2 Storyboard
episode 11											Writing	Team 3
episode 12												Writing

* The weeks allowed for these various stages are not necessarily realistic. The purpose of this sample schedule is to show the overlap of stages and episodes on any given week.

An Insight into the Cartoon Factory

Production on both *Rocko* and *Lazlo* resembled an assembly line.

When Chuck Jones and the Warner Bros. crew were making the Bugs Bunny shorts and other brilliant animated films, they would start one cartoon, write it, storyboard it, animate it, finish it, and then move on to the next one. The shorts were originally created to be shown in movie theaters before the feature film (though they went on to entertain and influence an entire generation of new fans on TV, such as myself). The environment for making contemporary television cartoons is more than a little different. When we were producing Rocko and Lazlo, it resembled more of an assembly line than anything else. We would have many episodes in different phases of production going on at once (I would often be working on three different "seasons" at the same time; a season for us was thirteen half-hour episodes, with a short break in between for every-

of your departments at all times. Notice on week 12 of this schedule, the creator/producer of the show should be:

- Meeting with the writers for episode 12
- Meeting with storyboard teams 1 and 2 on storyboards for episodes 9 and 10
- Directing a dialogue record for two eleven-minute segments for episode 7
- Going over an animatic with the animation director for episode 6
- Approving models and color for episodes 2 and 3
- Signing off on timing sheets for episode 4 and shipping episode 1 overseas

Later, when footage starts coming back from overseas, on any given week you can add these tasks: going through retakes, editing a show, spotting a show for sound
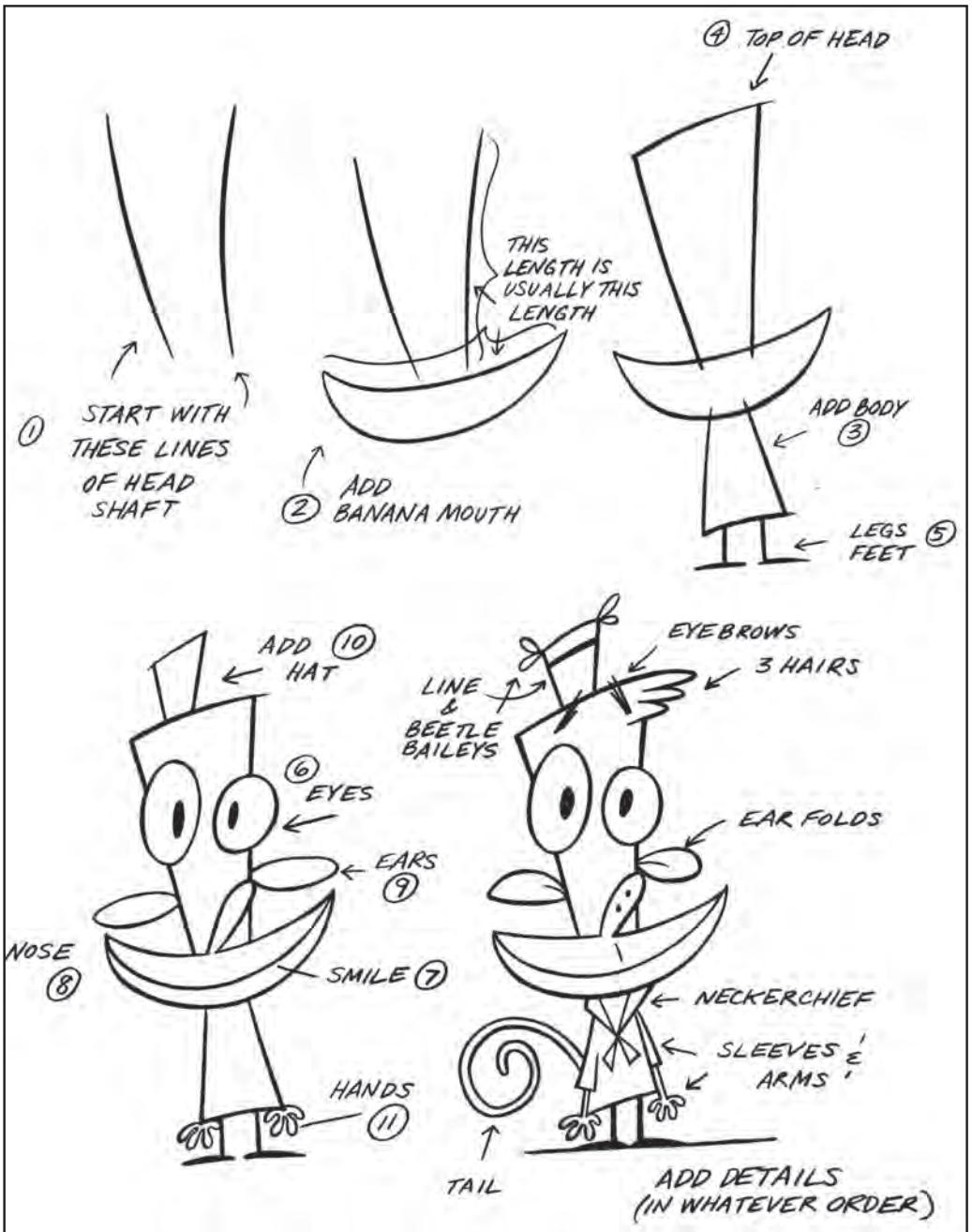
one besides me and my line producer. With the overlap of shows, this got very confusing). The trick was to get a finished episode "pooped out" the back end and on the air when the network needed it, which was usually nine months from the start of the process. It was definitely what I called a "high-fiber" production, because if something got held up at any point on the line, it would create a bottleneck for everything else coming down the pike. Picture someone stopping at the top of a crowded escalator and having everyone else smash into them. The best analogy is the famous *I Love Lucy* episode in which Lucy and Ethel are wrapping candies on a conveyor belt, and as the belt moves faster and faster, they start stuffing candy into their mouths and shirts because they can't keep up with it. You get the idea.

As a result of this emphasis on speed, there is a "burn rate" in animation, both in the product and among the people making it, just as there is in rocket fuel. The fuel used per second to get a rocket into space increases along with the rocket's speed—the faster it goes, the quicker it burns fuel. The ratings for each new episode can start dipping after a few airings, so you have to have a new episode ready to replace the old one, and so on. Today there may be better, faster, and more effective technology to help you do your show than I am describing here, which means the pressure is on to keep up with it and the pace it sets. So do some research.
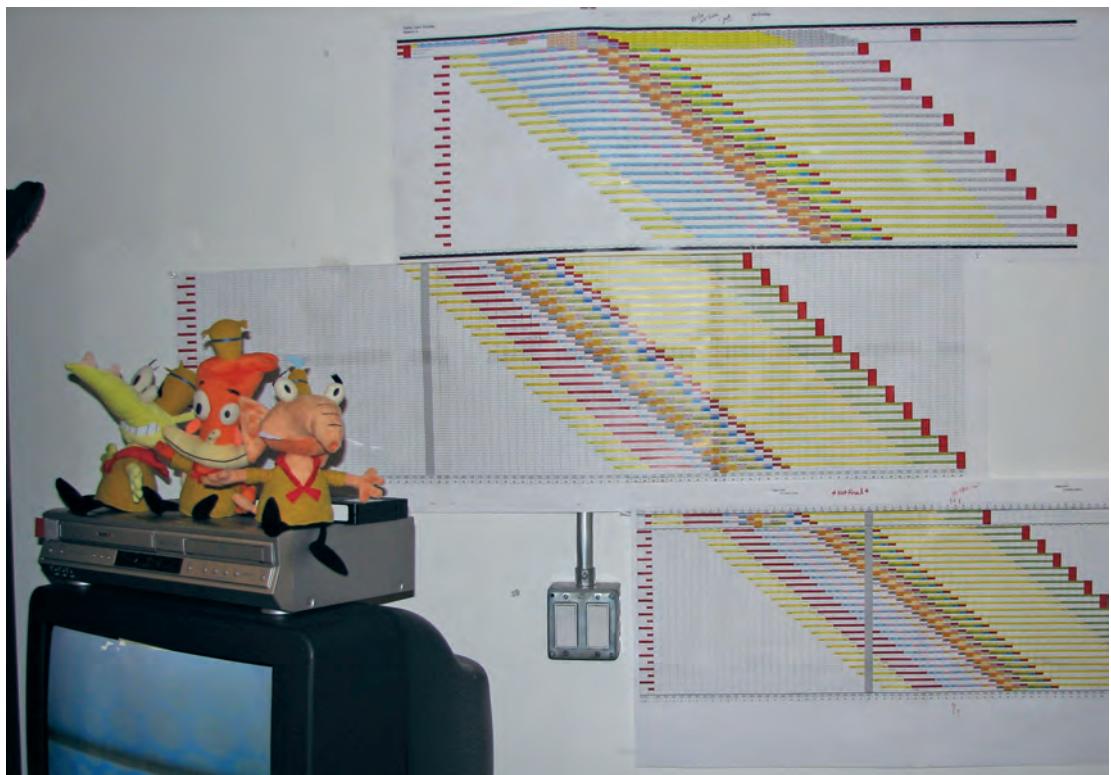
effects and music, directing a final mix, and signing off on final delivery. I will go into greater detail on these stages later, but I want to introduce these concepts while you are designing your schedule.

Basically, the faster a show moves, the larger the crew you will need to produce it. Sometimes this is dictated by the amount of time you have until the network wants to launch the series on the air. But the old sign you used to see on the wall of your neighborhood dry cleaners tends to apply here:

Speed
Quality
Cheap
Pick any two.

④ TOP OF HEAD

① START WITH THESE LINES OF HEAD SHAFT

THIS LENGTH IS USUALLY THIS LENGTH

② ADD BANANA MOUTH

③ ADD BODY

⑤ LEGS FEET

⑩ ADD HAT

⑥ EYES

⑨ EARS

NOSE ⑧

SMILE ⑦

HANDS ⑪

EYEBROWS

3 HAIRS

LINE & BEETLE BAILEYS

EAR FOLDS

NECKERCHIEF

SLEEVES & ARMS

TAIL

ADD DETAILS (IN WHATEVER ORDER)

This is a quick-draw Lazlo model sheet from the production bible meant to help the storyboard artists pump him out quickly. A more detailed model sheet is of greater help to the animators.

If they want it fast and cheap, then quality will suffer. If you want quality and speed, then it will cost a little more. I like to think that my process did a good job of balancing all three. And I have to boast that my shows never missed a deadline or went over budget. A good way to achieve this is to start with a realistic budget and schedule for the type of show you want to deliver. And here's a reality check: If you ride your staff hard while paying them little and giving them unrealistic deadlines, you will hit a wall very quickly.

Budget size ebbs and flows depending on the economy and the financial health of the parent company or network (read chapter 9 for more about working with networks and money). A standard budget can range anywhere from $250,000 to $450,000 per half-hour episode. A prime-time series can run into the seven figures per half hour. A budget will be determined by the funding source (usually the studio or network) based on their projections about the amount of money that episode will generate. If they feel it's a good bet that your show will bring in strong ratings, they are more likely to give you a larger budget, knowing they will recoup the investment, and then some. If your project seems to have merchandising potential (I never recommend creating a series with this in mind, but networks do consider it), then they may be able to supplement the budget with money from the licensing department. I have always believed that, the more wisely you spend money, the higher quality the product, which will generate more revenue for longer periods of time, and this argument has proved persuasive in generating greater up-front investment for

great returns down the road (but you really have to work it!). The executive who oversees your budget will need a good reason to go above what they normally pay for a series, so be prepared to state your case and demonstrate how your schedule and personnel needs will give them the show they are looking for.

Along with your initial budget notes, try to work out a rough initial schedule. Then sit down with your department heads and break down a realistic, humane production schedule based on the number of people needed for each department to do its job well. Then hand over your budget and schedule notes to your line producer, whose job it is to develop a more substantial budget based on those projections. In my experience, it's best to have each department supervisor sign off on the schedule and deadlines they are meant to enforce.

Hiring the Best Possible Team

If there is any one principle that should stick with you from this book, it's this: The creator of the show cannot do it all. Although it might help the budget if the creator performed a hundred different jobs on the show, it's just not possible, and you will only hurt the show and yourself trying. When working on *Rocko,* even though I surrounded myself with great people, I still tried to do too much myself and went crazy in the process. So I advise you to save your sanity. If you are creating a series for the Web (and not for television), and you have more time at your disposal to attack more jobs—and far less money to work with—then by all means, do as much as you can. My advice here speaks more to producing a show in volume, in an assembly-line environment.

Mark O'Hare and me, joined at the brain.

Once you get into series production, you are only as good as the people you surround yourself with. The biggest change I made from solo-producing *Rocko* to doing *Camp Lazlo* was hiring a coproducer to help carry the burden (I learned this from Steve Hillenburg, who hired *Rocko* alum Derek Drymon for *SpongeBob SquarePants*). I asked *Rocko* director and comic-strip artist Mark O'Hare to be my coproducer and gave him the power of approval in almost all departments. He also helped me direct voice sessions, oversaw the storyboard artists, and was one of the main influences in the story room.
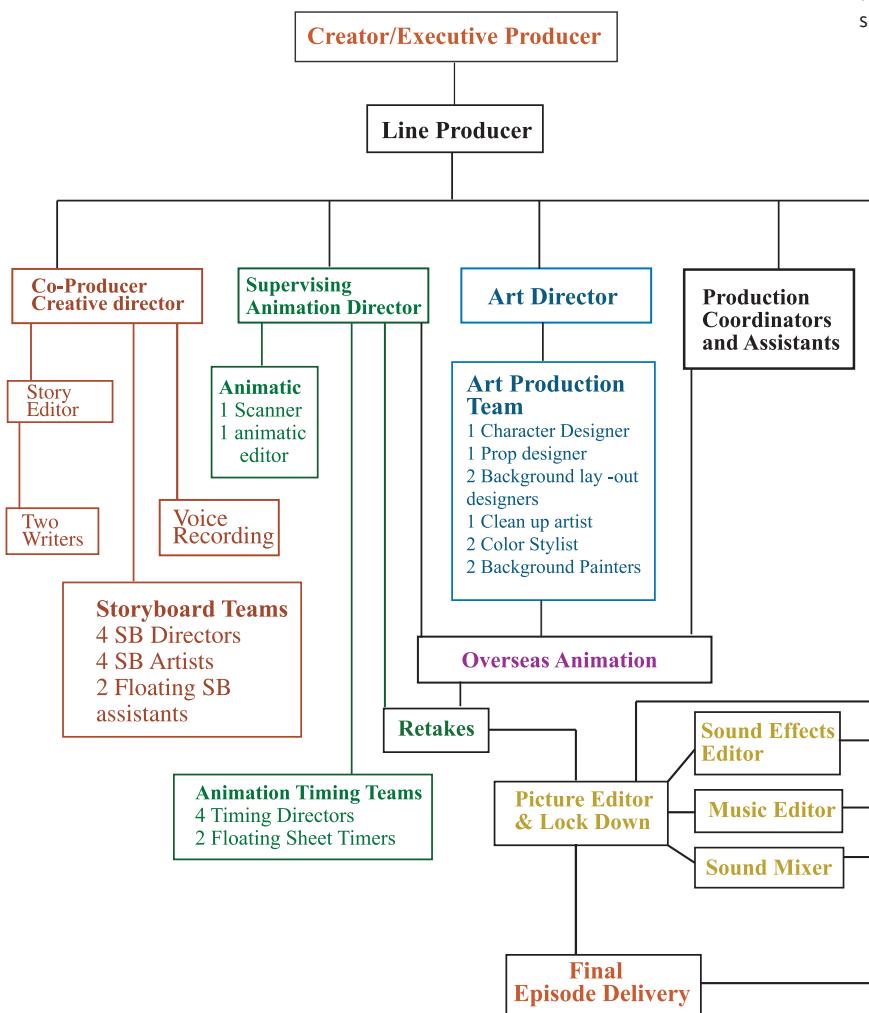
After hiring the coproducer, I broke down the production into five departments (and if you're *not* doing animation overseas, that is also its own department):
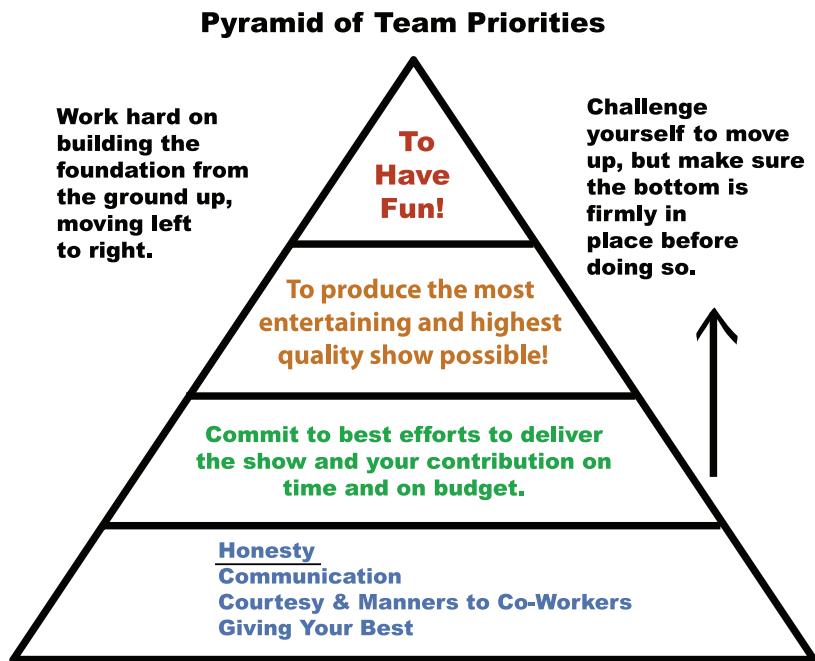
- Writing
- Storyboarding
- Timing (Animation Direction)
- Art Direction
- Production

I was personally involved in and approved everything that came out of each department; however, I still hired someone more talented than I was to head them up. I chose people who had the specialized skills to head and supervise these departments: story editor, storyboard supervisor, animation direction supervisor, art director, and line producer. These people not only have to be talented experts in each of the jobs within their departments, they also have to be extremely organized and good managers. I would have production meetings with all the department heads to find out how things were going and to offer a place for open dialogue among all of us. For instance, the art director could ask the storyboard supervisor to get the board artists to put more information in their boards.

This is how I like to arrange my staff and its supervisors.

Creator/Executive Producer

Line Producer

Co-Producer / Creative director

Supervising Animation Director

Art Director

Production Coordinators and Assistants

Story Editor

Animatic
1 Scanner
1 animatic editor

Art Production Team
1 Character Designer
1 Prop designer
2 Background lay -out designers
1 Clean up artist
2 Color Stylist
2 Background Painters

Two Writers

Voice Recording

Storyboard Teams
4 SB Directors
4 SB Artists
2 Floating SB assistants

Overseas Animation

Retakes

Sound Effects Editor

Animation Timing Teams
4 Timing Directors
2 Floating Sheet Timers

Picture Editor & Lock Down

Music Editor

Sound Mixer

Final Episode Delivery

Pyramid of Team Priorities

Work hard on building the foundation from the ground up, moving left to right.

Challenge yourself to move up, but make sure the bottom is firmly in place before doing so.

To Have Fun!

To produce the most entertaining and highest quality show possible!

Commit to best efforts to deliver the show and your contribution on time and on budget.

Honesty
Communication
Courtesy & Manners to Co-Workers
Giving Your Best

Once you've hired your department heads and worked out a schedule and a budget everyone can live with, it's time to start hiring your team. Here's more sage advice: The time to save your sanity is when you are hiring! As I said before, you're only as good as your production team, so in order to prevent future headaches, follow these hiring tips: First, hire team players. You may think so-and-so is the greatest, most insanely talented person who ever walked the planet, but if that person is an egotist and does not want to be a part of a collaborative effort, you will have nothing but problems working together. You can usually spot this type in a job interview—he can't stop talking about himself. Second, refrain from "favor hiring." Just because you are in a hiring position, it's not a good idea to give positions to your friends and family unless they are exactly right for the job. It's a surefire way to ruin a show, and more importantly, friendships and family ties. It also forces other crewmates to work harder to reinforce the weak links.

When it comes to hiring, I can't stress enough the importance of each department. Any weakness in a particular area can create a problem that affects the whole crew. If the writing and storyboarding are weak, the whole show will suffer. If the timing of the animation (the movement and acting of the characters) is off, it deadens the story, the gags, and the characters. And no matter how good the color looks, if the backgrounds are poorly done, you won't be able to see the acting or tell what the story is about. It helps to think of your characters as resembling a human body that relies on a heart, a brain, strong lungs, and a unique personality in order to survive. Make sure you hire all the necessary specialists to keep your characters healthy!

I personally like to meet with each final job candidate so that I can fill him or her in on what to expect. It's important to do this at the very start so that you are

both on the same page. I developed a pyramid of team priorities that, if followed, usually makes for a great crew environment. Trust me, it works. I ride my crew pretty hard on quality, but focus equally as hard on the work environment.

To keep the pyramid stable, you can't sacrifice the bottom blocks to move up: The foundation has to remain solid. Being on schedule or producing a funny show doesn't matter if you're accomplishing it in an abusive or demeaning workplace. It's also easier to have fun if one is on schedule and all the departments are meshing well and working as a team. So now that your all-star team is in place, let's look at how to get them flying in the same direction.

Preproduction: Creating a Turnkey Operation

There are many challenges to putting an animated show into production. You've created an idea—an animated world with a unique cast of characters living in it. Aside from the mini bible and the pilot, this world still lives in your head. The trick now is to get the crew (as many as fifty people) as well as the overseas crew (sometimes two hundred) to all think, draw, color, write, and animate as close to your style as possible and to realize your vision. Of course you will hire amazing artists and writers who will be adding a bit of their own styles to the mix, but overall the show needs to look the same every time someone sits down to watch it. Since you can't be in all places all of the time, you have to slowly work yourself out of a job, piece by piece, thereby creating what is called a "turnkey operation." What this means is that you're turning over specific duties to be mastered by your crew but without diluting the overall vision of the series. For example, let's say a famous chef with his own chain of restaurants creates an amazing gourmet pizza with special ingredients that are all his own; he also has a special way of dropping the toppings onto the pizza and spreading the sauce. This pizza bears his signature, and he wants all of his restaurants to make it the same exact way. Since he cannot be in every restaurant to personally make every pizza, he needs to rely on each cook to follow his precise steps using the exact same ingredients, so customers in every chain location can get the same gourmet pizza the chef himself makes. How does he do it? He hires the best staff; gives everyone the same ingredients, with personal "how-to" training; and puts someone in charge of each phase of the operation to oversee quality and consistency. This is roughly how I was able to produce well over one hundred half-hour episodes, bring them in on schedule and under budget, and be proud of almost every single one. Not to mention having a good time doing it!

Here I am teaching the artists at our Korean animation studio about the *Rocko's Modern Life* characters.

The Assembly Line

Look at your crew as a group of craftsmen and women who are working on an assembly line, building a high-quality bit of machinery. Each person has his or her specialty. Each piece already has a unique design, but it's up to each crew member to put the right screws in the right places, and sometimes to rework a piece so it runs better or smoother and to carefully craft it. If something gets forgotten, or more importantly, something could be done to improve the quality, the assembly line is stopped and put into reverse. The new part or idea is put into place and then production resumes. I've been known to stop assembly lines, run downstairs to record a new line that would make the scene better, rework it, and then start production back up again.

Preproduction is exactly what it sounds like: all of the groundwork you do before you go into full-scale production. Just like on an assembly line, it's not the job of the person who puts the bolt in the nut to build the conveyor belt. All the machinery should be in place, and the design of the key components should be ready so that they can be plugged into place when the time it is right. The smoother, more thorough your preproduction work, the smoother your production will run.

The Production Bible

By the time the main crew came in for their first day of work on the *Camp Lazlo* series, they were handed what I called "The Camper's Ultimate Field Guide to Producing *Camp Lazlo*." Others refer to it as the series production bible. This
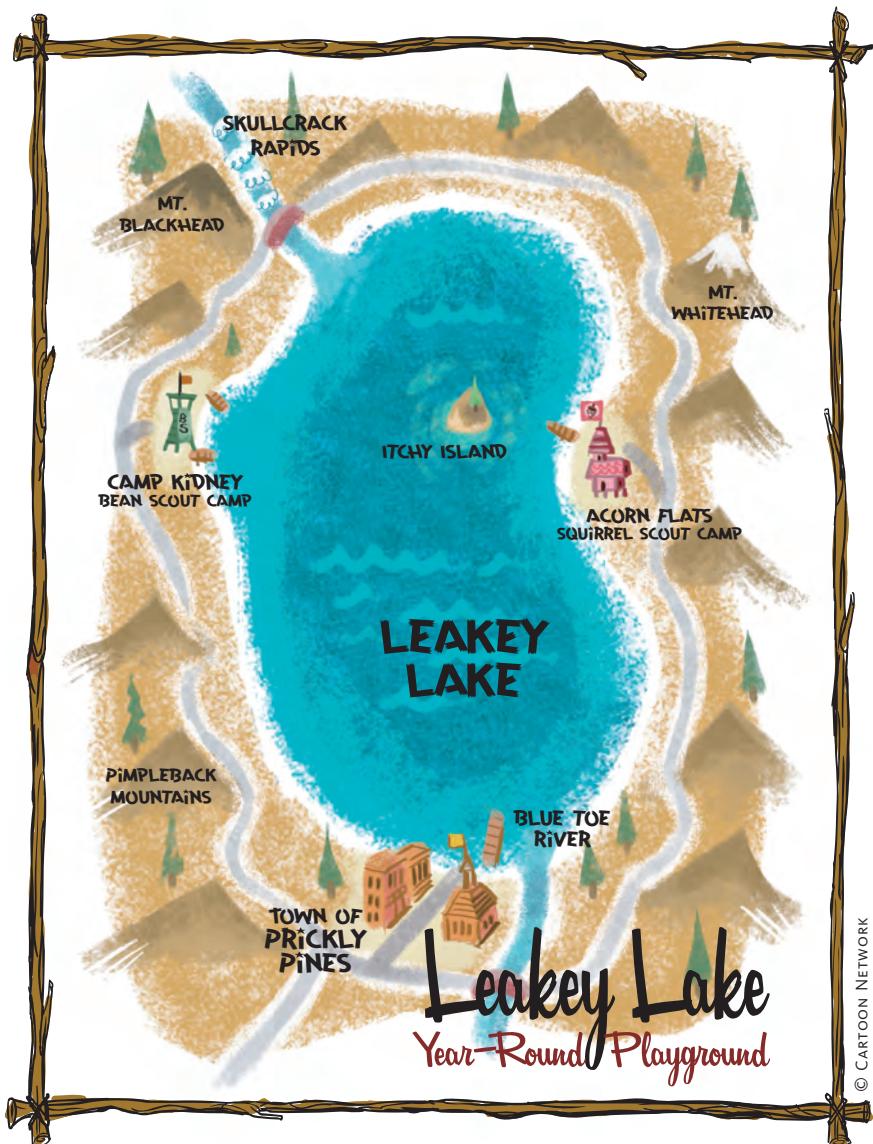
volume is much more detailed than the mini bible we used when developing the show. The production bible should give enough information so that anyone on the crew can get into the head of the creator and know the details of the world they are entrusted with bringing to life, from model sheets that specified how many eyebrow hairs Lazlo has (three) to what shape and style of clouds are okay to use in background drawings. There were floor plans for every structure the characters lived in, played in, ate in, and even went to the bathroom in. (Yes, even cartoon characters have to use the loo at times.) These detailed production bibles are common for any animated series. On *The Simpsons,* for instance, the writers need to know such things as, if Bart came out of his bedroom, how far down the hall is Lisa's bedroom so he can go torture her? Does he have to turn left or right? Everyone needs to be on the same page.

Here are a few details found in the *Camp Lazlo* production bible:

- Full descriptions, turnarounds, model sheets, and expression sheets for each

Camp Lazlo art director Sue Mondt provided some pre-production paintings for the production bible as guides for the background painters.
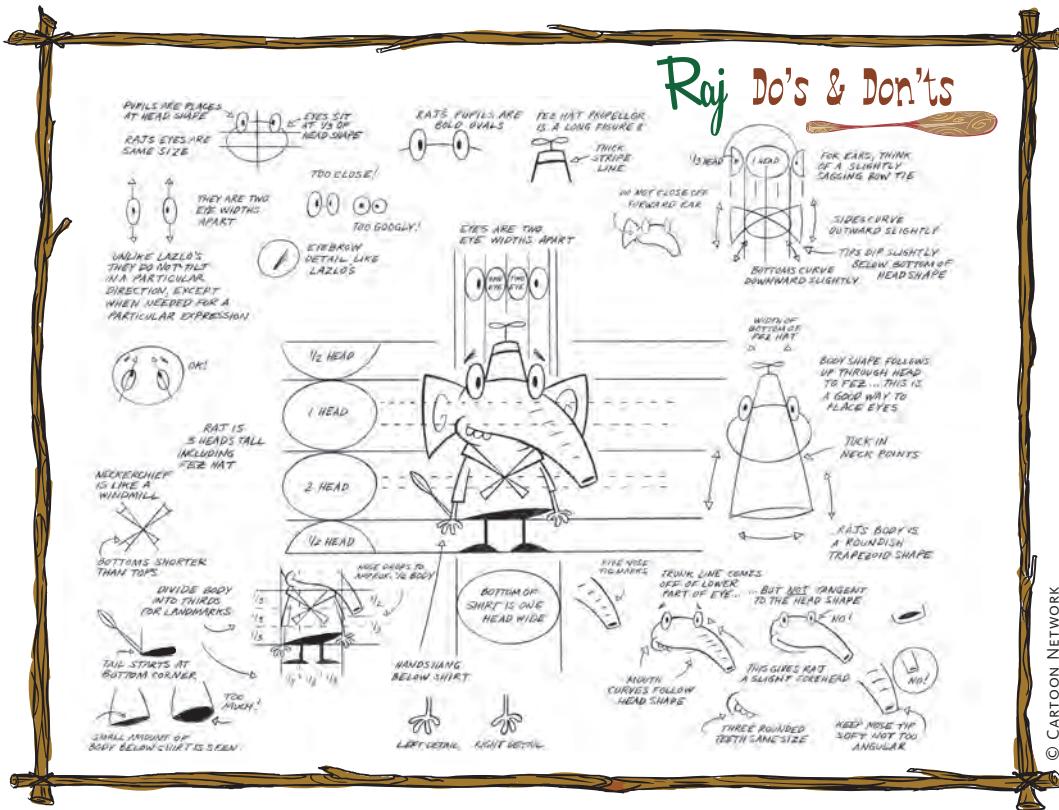
A detailed bird's-eye map of Leakey Lake, showing where to find Camp Kidney, Acorn Flats, and the town of Prickly Pines.

© Cartoon Network

major character, down to the smallest detail

- Full-color designs of every character, from the Squirrel Scouts to the smallest background character, so they could be included in any background scene of any storyboard
- Size comparison lineups (which look like police lineups) of every major character and every background or incidental character, showing their size relationships to each other
- Do's and don'ts on writing and storyboarding (aka, the rules of the universe)
- Background styles, including pages of different trees, shrubs, and cloud designs that could be inserted into any background design or storyboard
- Signage and lettering styles
- Full-color palette presented as squares of approved colors
- Specifications on the show's logo usage and a collection of cel setups for press or production reference

Raj Do's & Don'ts

© Cartoon Network
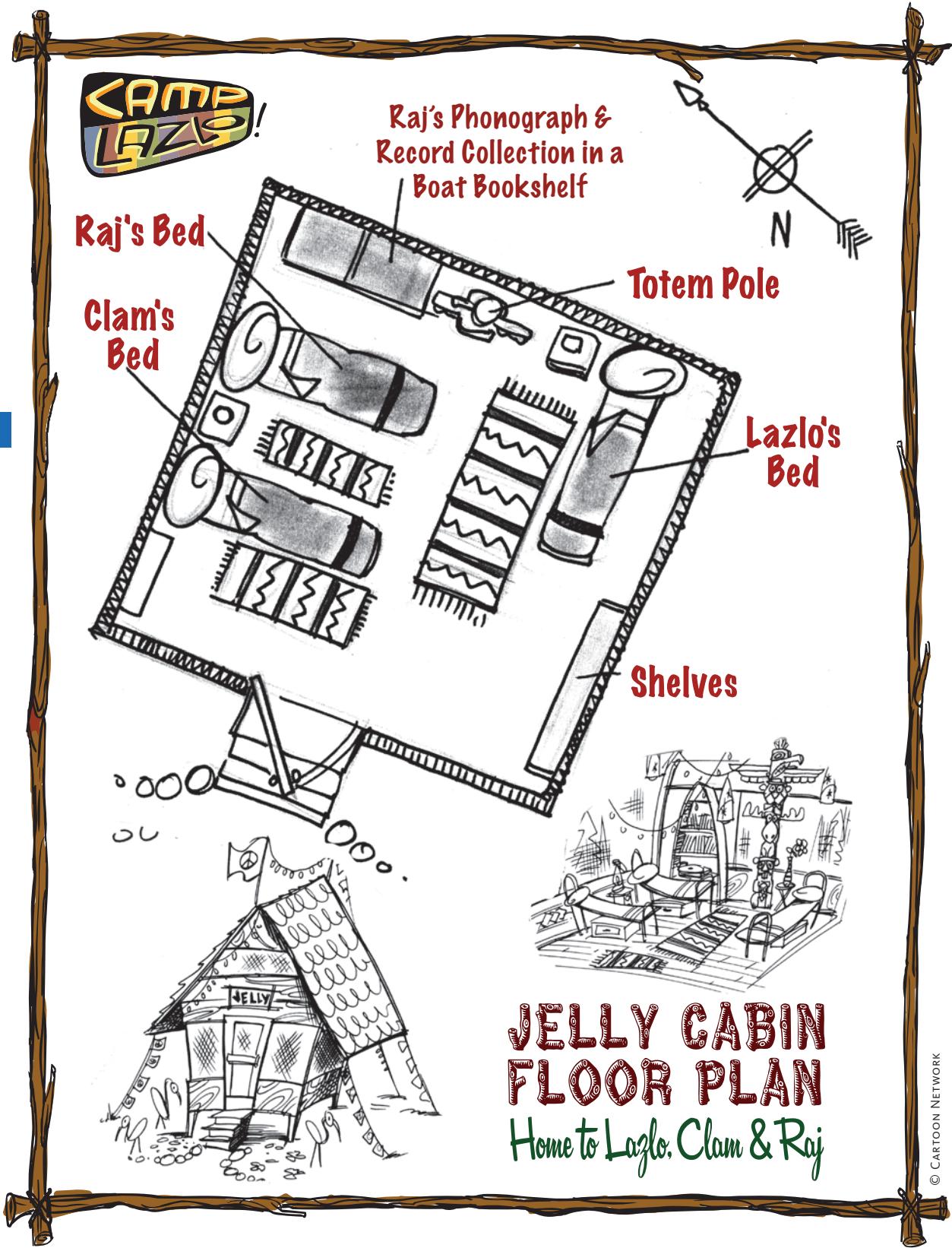
Why is all this detail necessary? Imagine someone rushing through a storyboard where they need to have a character leave his cabin and walk to Jelly Cabin. Where is it? In which direction does he walk? Which direction is the lake? Is there a dock he can jump off? What does the tree he just walked past look like? If a killer squirrel attacks him, what will his reaction look like? If this artist makes all of these decisions by him or herself, the result will surely be different from the board done by the artist in the next office, who's wrestling with similar problems. They may seem like small details, but cumulatively they make a big difference to how the viewer's mind perceives consistency. Plus, the storyboard artist and director have enough on their plates trying to bring the story and gags to life—they shouldn't have to guess at the particulars. It's important to leave the fewest

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Raj's Phonograph & Record Collection in a Boat Bookshelf

Raj's Bed

Clam's Bed

Totem Pole

Lazlo's Bed

Shelves

JELLY CABIN FLOOR PLAN

Home to Lazlo, Clam & Raj

N
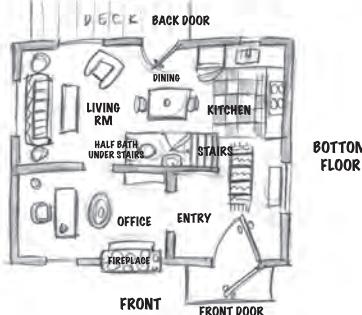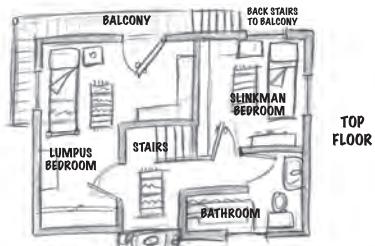
Scoutmaster Lumpus Cabin

BALCONY

BACK STAIRS TO BALCONY

SLINKMAN BEDROOM

LUMPUS BEDROOM

STAIRS

TOP FLOOR

BATHROOM

Back of House

D E C K   BACK DOOR

DINING

LIVING RM

KITCHEN

HALF BATH UNDER STAIRS

STAIRS

BOTTOM FLOOR

OFFICE

ENTRY

FIREPLACE

FRONT

FRONT DOOR

Full designs and floor plans of the Jelly Bean Cabin, Lumpus's Cabin, and the Mess Hall, including the location of every piece of furniture.

Kitchen Doors

Fireplace Hearth

MESS HALL FLOOR PLAN

Flag

Buffet Cafeteria Line

VIP Table

Kitchen

Freezer

Opening to Kitchen

Wagon Wheel

Front Doors

Buffet Line
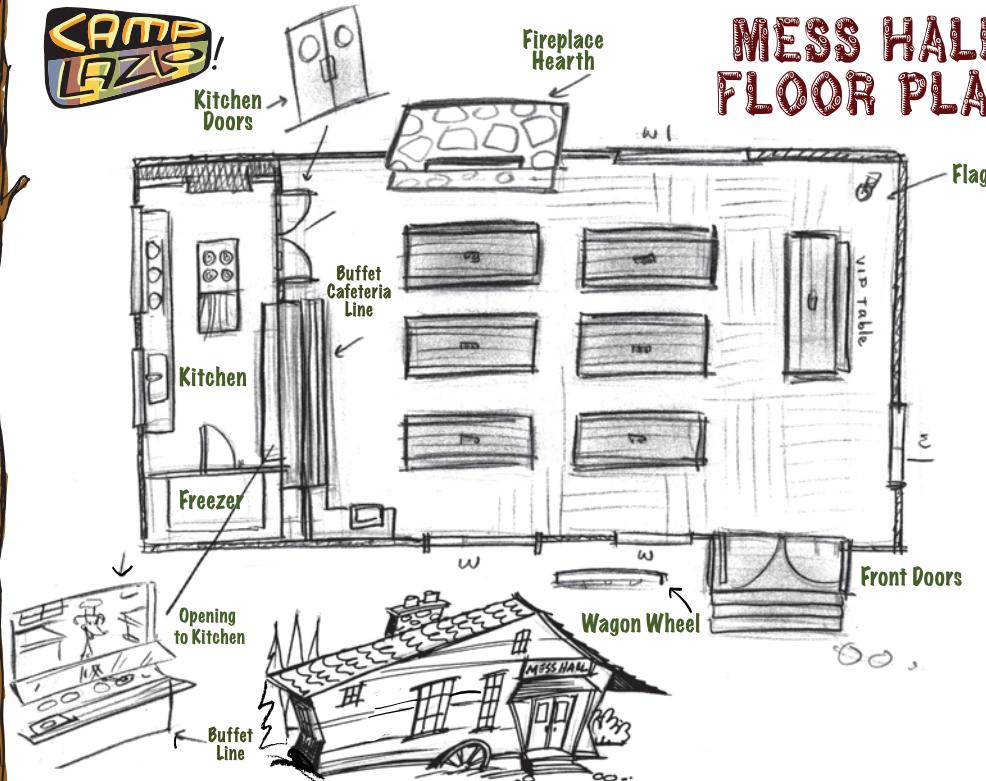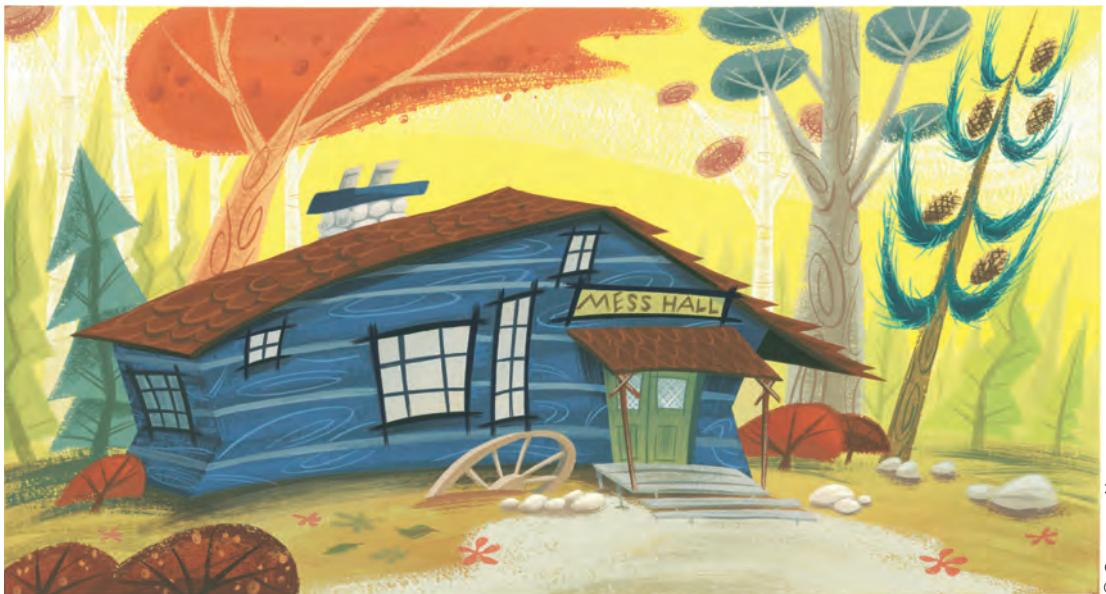
MESS HALL

Series Production

© Cartoon Network

number of questions unanswered by the time production starts, because after that, there will be a million more questions to answer. Consistency is the key, so make sure everyone is on the same page.

I have worked with people who came to television from feature-film animation who talked about the pace of working in that medium. There they could sit for hours, days, and weeks discussing and rehashing one gag and re-boarding it again and again. Although much about that pace I find very appealing, there is such a great rush to be had while making one hundred decisions a day and not having the luxury to question whether they are right or wrong because there is no time. We have to shoot from the hip and trust our gut. Do we make mistakes? Sure! But my adage is, "If you don't strike out a few times, you're not swinging enough."
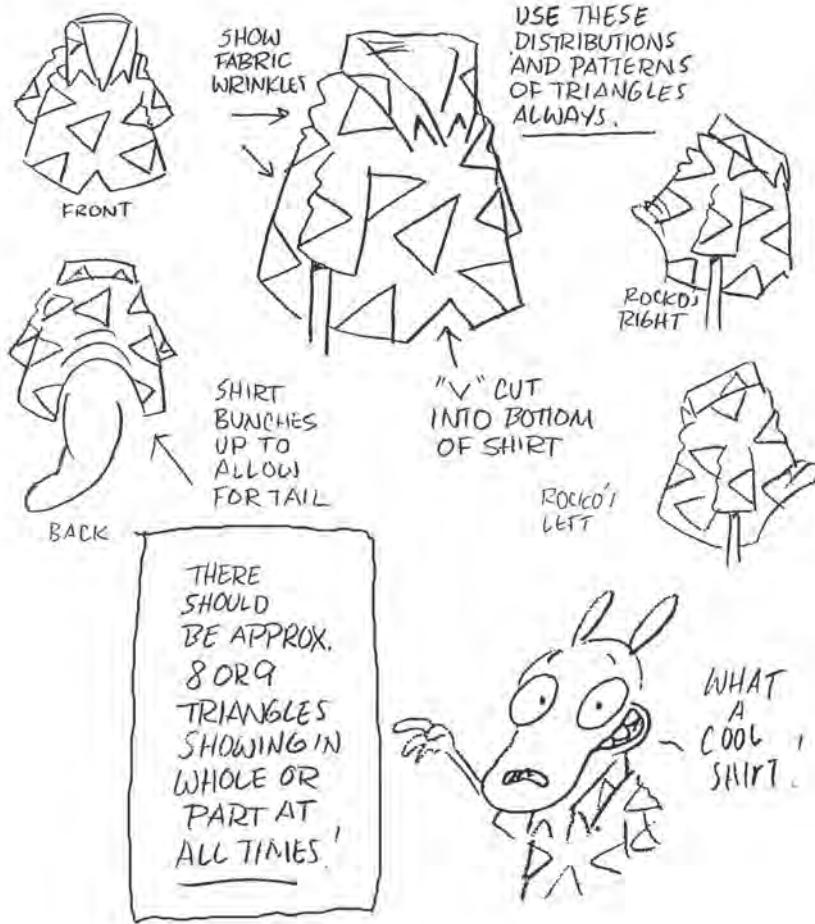
© Cartoon Network

Acorn Flats — Home of the Squirrel Scouts

Series Production

SPECS ON ROCKO'S TRIANGLE SHIRT —

FRONT

SHOW FABRIC WRINKLES

USE THESE DISTRIBUTIONS AND PATTERNS OF TRIANGLES ALWAYS.

ROCKO'S RIGHT

BACK

SHIRT BUNCHES UP TO ALLOW FOR TAIL

"V" CUT INTO BOTTOM OF SHIRT

ROCKO'S LEFT

THERE SHOULD BE APPROX. 8 OR 9 TRIANGLES SHOWING IN WHOLE OR PART AT ALL TIMES!

WHAT A COOL SHIRT.

Tracking a Whole Episode

As discussed at length in chapter 7, there is a big difference between producing one episode and producing fifty. Think about having eight different episodes going at the same time, all at different stages—it can be overwhelming! So in this section, I'll track just one from start to finish, focusing more on adapting the creative process to a high-volume assembly line.

Premise

Every episode starts out as an idea, the raindrop that starts the stream. Sometimes the writers and I would go off-site for a change of scenery to drum up new ideas. We would all try and come into the writing room with kernels of ideas, such as "Edward gets caught playing with a doll." We already knew the characters, who they were, and where they lived; then it was a matter of discovering the main idea or conflict that would become the episode's premise.

Outline

If we thought the premise was working, we would start to write an outline, or a "story beat sheet." We tried to keep it to a few pages, mapping out the three-act structure in a simple A, B, C format. For a script-driven show, this is where the script would be written. We would keep working the story outline until we cracked it; sometimes this process would go on for weeks, with various outlines in different stages. If a premise was not "gelling," we would send it to the "Crock Pot" to simmer and work on another one. Some of those premises made it out of the Crock Pot, but most did not. When we believed we had a solid story in the outline, we would send it off to the network for approval.

Storyboard

Next we handed the approved outline to the best storyboard team for the job. They all had different strengths, so we would try to make the story a good match. A storyboard team consisted of a storyboard director (who also boarded) and a storyboard artist (I preferred having two on a team because they always tried to outdo each other!). After a week, we would cautiously open the door and hope by then they had thumbnail drawings of the rough board showing the direction in which they wanted to take it. The outline showed that point A needed to connect to point B, but it was up to the artists to figure out how to get there, and to do it in a funny way. Sometimes they wanted to stray from the outline, and if Mark and I felt their way was stronger, we would give them the go-ahead. After another week, a rough storyboard would emerge. After Mark and I approved or reworked it, the board would get pitched to the crew by either tacking it to the wall or

giving it a table read (in often theatrical fashion). The crew pitch was important for several reasons:

- We could gauge a response to certain gags. (Did they laugh?)
- It got the storyboard teams out of their rooms so they could perform.
- It gave the rest of the crew a heads-up on what was coming down the pike, so they could start thinking about the story and whether they needed to design an important prop for it.
- If there was a new background or dozens of new props to create to support a gag or story point, we would weigh the importance of that gag or story point against the work it was going to create for the crew. If the story line wasn't worth it, I would toss it out.

If the storyboard team survived the pitch, they would get assigned an assistant and spend two weeks cleaning up and finalizing the board. If there were new characters or locations, we tried to design them during this time so they could be used in the board. Finally, a finished storyboard would get plopped on my desk and my co-producer's, and we would go through it with a fine-tooth comb, tweak it, and edit it some more. Then we would send it off to the network for approval and usually get only minor notes in return. (Or we'd get notes from the legal department, such as "You can't use Hairy Bob's Bait and Tackle shop as a name because there's a 'Bob's Bait and Tackle Shop' in Lake Blister, South Dakota, owned by a guy named Bob who's a little hairy.")
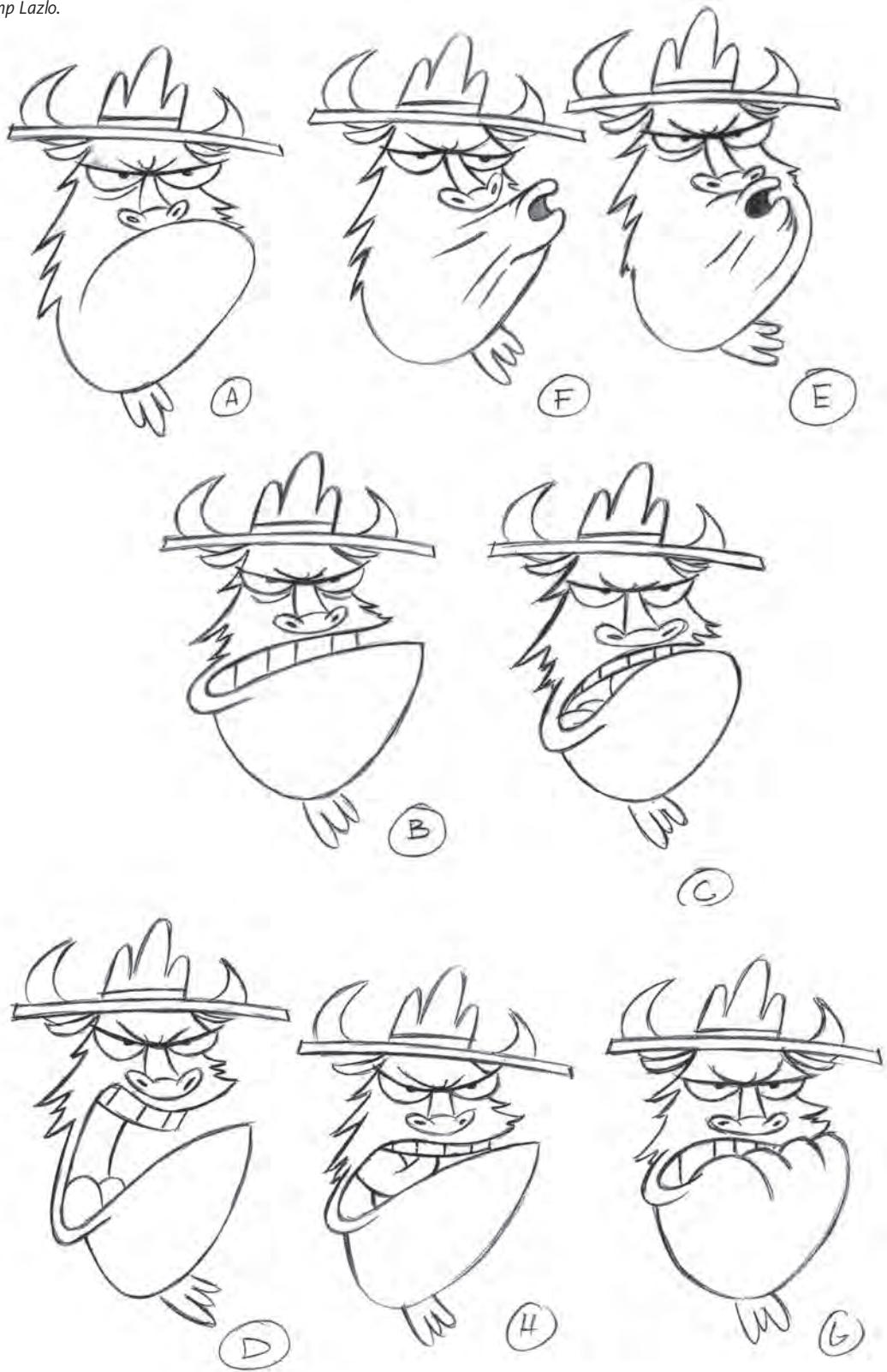
Voice Recording

The dialogue from that finished storyboard would then be transferred to a script, and a casting sheet made showing which characters would appear, thereby determining which actors needed to be called in for that recording session. We recorded on the same day every week, so the regular actors knew there was a good chance they were working that day. I preferred to record "ensemble" whenever I could, with all the actors in the room at the same time working together to perform the show. Although it made for a lot of chatting between takes, it helped them draw energy from each other's reads, which I think improved their acting. Both Mark and I were usually directing the recording, unless we had a scheduling conflict.

Animatic

While the voices were being recorded, the storyboard was getting scanned so that the panels could be imported into a computer program to make the animatic. An animatic would then be designed to combine the storyboard art and the dialogue tracks, so we had a rough idea how the episode was going to play out. The animation director (who was also the timing director) would then sit down with

This is a mouth chart for
Commander Hoo Ha from
Camp Lazlo.

the animatic editor and spend a week getting the animatic ready for me to review. If the episode was running too long, we did our editing at this stage, before doing costly animation. If for some reason the animatic was showing us flaws in the story, we could make changes, sometimes creating new drawings or recording new lines, to fix them.

Sheets

As discussed in chapter 7, the animation director and a sheet timer produce timing sheets for each episode using the animatic as a guide. When I set up my staff, I would have four storyboard teams on rotation and four animation directors, to whom the storyboard director would hand off the storyboard. I would have two floating sheet timers alternating between animation directors. Before the sheet timers would do their job, a track reader would assign a mouth position to the sheets with the appropriate timing so that the dialogue would be in sync, making the character appear as though it were talking.

Art Direction

In series production, we have the advantages of reusing a set location as well as recurring characters. A set collection of background layouts are given to the storyboard teams with the hope of incorporating these previously designed elements into the board. This saves the art director a lot of time when the volume of episodes is overwhelming the department. We tried our best to reuse key backgrounds, but the art director and staff were always busy designing new elements as well. Another time saver was waiting until the animatic was edited

Here's an example of how a penciled background layout (right) gets transferred to a color painting (facing page). These are of the exterior of Scoutmaster Lumpus's cabin in *Camp Lazlo*, 2004.
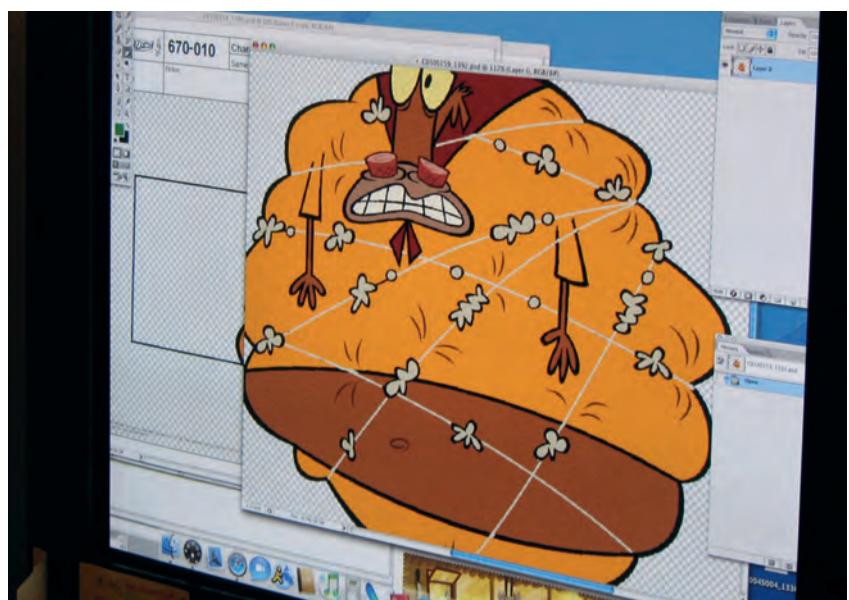
and a new board conformed (removing the edited scenes) before we figured out what was needed in the form of art direction. This eliminated unnecessary work on elements that would be cut out of the board. Once my art director had a final board, she would sit down with the storyboard director to figure out what props, characters, and new backgrounds were needed, and whether the board was properly labeled "day" or "night." Sometimes a character wore something different than their standard clothes—like a hula skirt—and this meant a new costume had to be designed, cleaned up, and colored.

After prop, character, and background designs were drawn, the props and characters were scanned and cleaned up digitally, then moved down the pipeline

Computers were used for both color key and cleanup on *Camp Lazlo*.
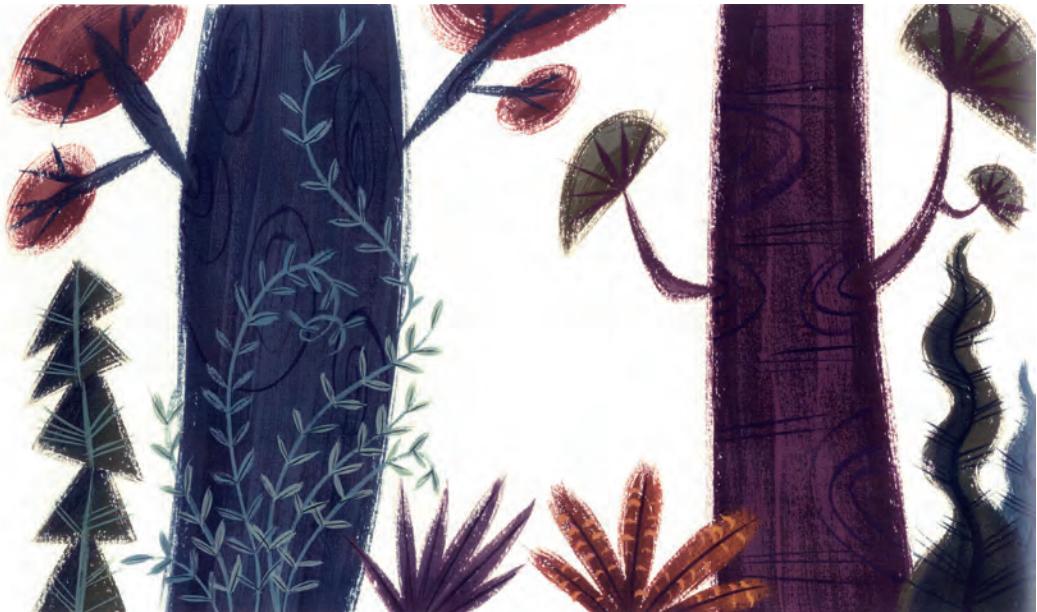
to the color-styling department, where they were colored on the computer. The background designs were handed off to the background painters. Only background keys, which were guides to help the overseas painters to paint production backgrounds, were done in our studio. Once the designs, backgrounds, and color models were finished, the art director would create what is called a "lead sheet" for the overseas animation studio, detailing which prop or background was to be used for each scene. Each background key, prop, or character design was given a number to correspond to the scene it was intended for. These numbers and art were logged by the overseas studio so we could reuse them if needed simply by referring to the number.

On *Rocko's Modern Life*, the art director and painters were also in charge of producing the beautiful title cards we used at the start of each episode. These cards were often designed with input from the storyboard director and were masterpieces in and of themselves. They were even featured in their own *Rocko* calendar in 1995. We were not able to retain the title cards for *Camp Lazlo* due to time and budget constraints, but the *Rocko* cards remain treasured jewels.

Shipping and Overseas Animation

As we discussed in chapter 7, all the final ingredients are put into a box and shipped off to the animation studio. It's kind of like putting the cake in the oven and setting the timer for sixteen weeks. Except there was no sitting around, smelling the baked goods and waiting for the timer to go off, because another box shipped a week or two later, and then another a week or two after that, so the assembly line was always busy. Often, the day we shipped one show, a show we had sent sixteen weeks earlier would come back. On both *Rocko* and *Lazlo,* the animation was done traditionally, with pencil on paper. For *Rocko,* the drawings were transferred to

I always felt the trees in *Camp Lazlo* backgrounds were a beautiful sight. Some were placed on an overlay, like these, to allow for a pan with depth.

cel, painted, filmed, and sent back. For *Lazlo,* each drawing was scanned, inserted into an animation program, colored digitally, and shipped or emailed back via an ftp server. Some productions are now using Adobe Flash, which can sidestep the overseas studio experience, but drawing is still mandatory.

Retakes and Editing

The retake and editing process was the same as it had been on the pilot (see page 148) , except in this case it was done in a high-volume environment. That meant

that in any given week, you might be calling retakes, editing, and locking three different episodes.

Sound Effects and Music

Optimally, you will have already set up your style and methods for sound effects and music during the pilot stage. In series production, this is a fast process, with little time for pondering choices. After the show is locked, a copy is sent to the sound editor and music editor (sometimes within hours). I would spot the show with the sound editor, and then he would run off to his secret sound lab to put all of the ingredients together. He would come back to play everything for me, I would make any changes, and then it was ready for the mix.
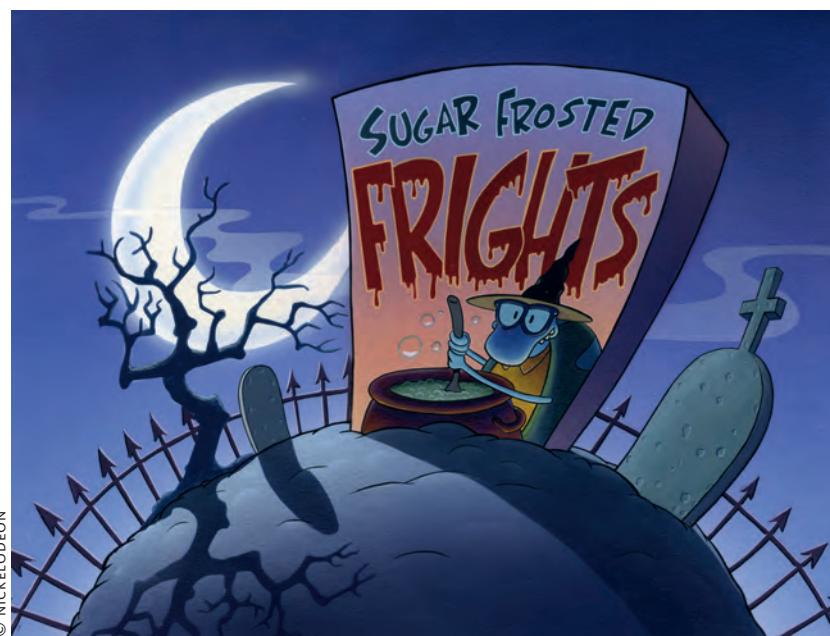
While the sound editor was working, I was making music-spotting notes for my sound music editor or my music composer. For Pat Irwin, my composer on *Rocko,* I would send my notes and he would send back scratch tracks for approval. Then he would record them with a live band in New York and supply final tapes in time to plug them into the mix. On *Lazlo,* we used prerecorded tracks. The music editor Nick Carr would pull cues from this library and others, as well as record original tracks, to create the score. I would sometimes make changes, but more often I just kicked back, listened, and laughed.

Mix

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the mix is where you combine the picture with music, sound effects, and dialogue. We always did something at the end of

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Two amazing examples of *Rocko's Modern Life* title cards, one from the episode "The High Five of Doom" (written because I forbade characters to high-five each other in my shows) and from the Halloween episode "Sugar Frosted Frights," which showed how the over-consumption of sugar can lead to monstrous results.

each mix that cracked me up: After listening to the playback through amazing, high-tech speakers, the real test came by playing the same mix through an old television. This is the equivalent of a stage actor playing to the back row. The test of playing back the mix through the TV ensures that even the worst audio system will be able to deliver your story and your gags.

Final Delivery

Once we had the final mix and the locked picture, we slapped the opening titles onto the front and the all-important credits onto the back and sent if off to the network. Sometimes on *Rocko*, we were still mixing and editing an episode on Friday that was meant to air that following Sunday. Then, through the magic of cable satellites, the cartoon appeared on your TV . . . which hopefully caused you to convulse with laughter.

Licensing, Press, and Other Mayhem

As if producing the show were not enough, merchandising, public relations, and dealing with the press are other aspects of having a show that will demand your attention. For me, *Rocko's Modern Life* had greater ancillary needs than *Camp Lazlo* because it was riding the wave of the new Nicktoons' popularity.

Meeting with the press in Italy after *Camp Lazlo* won three Pulcinella Awards.

Although it never came close to the tidal wave of licensing that hit *SpongeBob SquarePants*, we did our share: *Rocko* had its own comic book, calendar, greeting cards, toys, and the like, all of which I tried to stay actively involved with (down to redrawing art for the comic book and writing greetings inside the cards). *Lazlo* was much more low key and didn't need that much merchandising attention. Likewise with press attention, *Rocko* had much more than *Lazlo*, to the point where I decided to hire my own publicist just to deal with the Nickelodeon publicist.
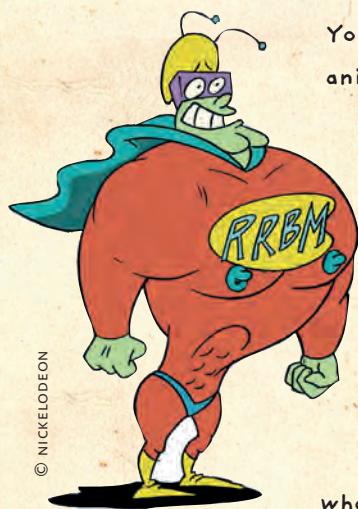
My advice to any show creator (other than to protect the time with your family and friends) is to keep this "outside" stuff where it belongs: outside. Don't let other time demands distract you from your primary job, which is making a great show. You will have to "play the game" to a certain extent—it's part of the job to participate in photo opportunities and create press packs for the launches—but choose your battles. Because of ethical reservations, I would not participate in a partnership Cartoon Network had formed with a fast-food chain that requested all the network's creators to appear in television commercials pushing the sponsor's "Happy Meals." Although I had no say about how my character was merchandised, I did have a say in whether *my* image would be used in such a way.

Which brings us to another important point: A network or studio will rarely give a creator final say on licensing decisions. They will give "consultation," which is a nice way of saying, "Thank you for your opinion, but we are making it this way regardless." I'm sure if you asked any group of show creators if they were totally happy with the quality of the toys and other products derived from their show, you would get an earful of stories. The bottom line is, the network owns the show, and they profit the most from its acquisition. The quicker you make peace with that fact, the easier you'll sleep at night.

This shows a small sampling of the *Rocko's Modern Life* merchandise available in the 1990s.

The Nipple Update and Other Mayhem in the Cartoon Factory

© NICKELODEON

You can probably imagine that putting crazy animation people together in close quarters to create cartoons can lead to strange behavior. It was our way of relieving stress. A reporter who came through the ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE production offices described it as "walking into a preschool without supervision." It was a bit like that . . . except I was supposed to be the supervisor. I like a relaxed atmosphere, and I'm proud that most people who worked on my shows have said it's the most fun they've had working in the industry.

For ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE, we labored in small offices on Vineland Avenue in Studio City, not in the big Nickelodeon Studios. On our floor we had an "all page" PA system that let anyone pick up

the phone and make an announcement. This was used primar-
ily for comedic monologues as well as non sequitur pages. When
we were producing the episode with "Really Really Big Man" and
his "nipples of the future," the network was balking at giving us
permission to discuss nipples. I would bounce around to different
executives, pleading our case, and then give a "Nipple Update"
over the PA system to the crew each day charting my progress. Of
course, when the network finally approved our psychotic request,
it was met by a big cheer.

Walking through the Rocko offices, you were as likely to step
over an artist's kid on the floor coloring as to find Doug Lawrence
in bed on a fold-out couch, eating cereal in his pajamas (Doug
wore his pajamas to work quite often). Each afternoon at 4:00 P.M.
was time for headstands in the hall or crew members filming them-
selves as human bowling pins with a stop-motion video camera or
singing Brady Bunch songs for Tom Yasumi's tape recorder. Practi-
cal jokes ranged from stolen chairs and phones to gym socks in
the coffee filter. Believe it or not, even with all these antics going
on, we still produced everything on schedule.

Q&A

with Sue Mondt

SUE MONDT is an Emmy and Annie Award–winning animation art director, painter, and color stylist, whose work experience includes Walt Disney Television and Cartoon Network. As a graduate of Otis-Parsons College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, she is also a noted illustrator, with her work appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* and other publications. Her most recent animation work can be seen on *Camp Lazlo*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*.

Q: *You were the art director for* Camp Lazlo *(for which you won an Individual Achievement Emmy), but you have also been a background painter and color stylist in animation, as well as an accomplished illustrator. Can you give us a brief rundown of the shows you worked on and all the experience (including education) that led you to art directing on* Lazlo*?*

A: I graduated from Otis-Parsons in 1987. For the next ten years, I worked as an illustrator for editorial magazines, newspapers, record companies, and more. During that time, many of my friends from college had started working in animation. As time went on, I saw what fun animation was, and I decided to try to get a job in the field. My first job was as a background painter on *Nightmare Ned* for Disney TV. I was hooked from the beginning. When that show wrapped, I moved over to Hanna-Barbera to paint backgrounds for *Dexter's Laboratory*. I stayed with that group of artists for the next several years and worked on *The Powerpuff Girls, Whatever Happened to Robot Jones?*, and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*.

During the time I was working on *Foster's*, I started thinking about art direction. I had worked under so many talented ADs at that point and it seemed fun, so I started to look around for opportunities. Luckily for me, *Camp Lazlo* was a pilot at the time and I was able to meet with you, talk about the project, and eventually come on board. It was an amazing experience that I will always be grateful for. Since *Lazlo* wrapped I've art directed *The Powerpuff Girls 10-Year Anniversary Special* and worked on various freelance projects.

Q: *I've spoken a little about the responsibilities of an art director (AD) on an animated series—in essence, you're the conductor of an orchestra of specialized artists that all need to come together to help tell the story visually. Can you break down the list of jobs you need to do as an AD on a show?*

A: The most important job of an AD is to create the mood and themes of the story through color and design. During the development phase, I work with the creator on creating the color palettes, designs, painting style, and the main model pack. I also use this time to hire the artists that will work with me throughout the season. After development is complete, we begin to produce art for the individual episodes. I start the process by reading the storyboard and making design lists for all the art that we need to create. I also meet with the storyboard director, animation and timing directors, and of course, the creator. We review any questions, go over important story points, and resolve any loose ends. If there are any new locations or special color needs, I will work on paintings for those areas.

Next I give the artists their design lists and go over any special instructions. Everything starts in black and white. We have character, prop, and [Flash ActionScript] f/x designers, and background/layout

designers. After the designs are completed and approved, the character, props, and f/x go to a cleanup team. They also work in black and white, but they take the rough designs and "clean them up" in the computer. The layouts go to the background painters, so I meet with them to review the color themes for each of the paintings they will be working on. After the paintings and cleanups are complete, they go to the color stylist, who colors the characters, props, and f/x. This is the point at which everything comes together. I work with the color stylist to make sure all the elements we have created work to support and enhance the story. And finally, I do the lead sheets, which are scene-by-scene instructions for the overseas studio. We get eight weeks for each episode to go though that process. But here is the crazy part: The production schedule is staggered. Every week I get a new storyboard, which means I am always working on eight episodes at the same time. That is why an art director is a crazy-busy person!

Q: It's my opinion that the animation industry is still too much of a "boys' club," with not enough women working in the creative positions. What is your opinion on that, and how was it, rising through the ranks of testosterone, to find your rightful place in the industry?

A: I agree—there are far too few women in animation, especially in the creator role. I'm not sure why that is, but my own experience has been great. I've always felt included in the club and respected by everyone that I work with.

Q: I feel many viewers don't appreciate the beauty of the color and background work on a show. On Lazlo, we had traditional painters actually painting with paint (a dying breed in animation). I have to say that one of the biggest compliments I've received is about the beauty of the look of the show. Other shows from the Cartoon Network family that you worked on, like The Powerpuff Girls, raised the bar for design and beauty in animation art. What are your thoughts on that?

A: Yes, I think that so many of the shows made at Cartoon Network are beautifully designed. I feel lucky that I have been able to work on some of them. And yes, I do agree they have raised the bar. Regarding the viewers not appreciating the art, I think that the art in animation has a subliminal effect on the viewer. They may not be aware of the beauty of the artwork, but I think it's part of the reason that they enjoy the shows. In the design and painting areas of animation, we get most of our accolades from our peers, and that's fine with me!

Q: Tell us about the importance of choosing the right colors for characters. Is it affected by their personality, or is it just a visual choice to go with the background and the look of the show?

A: Ideally, it's both. Colors can evoke feelings, and characters have personalities. If you have a good color scheme on a character that enhances its personality, then I think you have a more successful character. But it's also important for the characters to read on the backgrounds while maintaining an overall color harmony.

Q: *If a new creator of an animated series wanted to have a great and fruitful working relationship with his or her art director, what advice would you give that person?*

A: I would say that communication and open dialogue are the most important. Since an art director creates the environment for the story to be told, the more information a creator can share, the better opportunity he or she has to enhance and develop the ideas. Plus, as I said earlier, animation is about collaboration, so the best results are achieved when everyone is communicating.

Q: *What is the biggest frustration of doing your job? I know that trying to figure out the scribbles of board artists (or sloppy creators) is a struggle. Are there others, like not having enough time?*
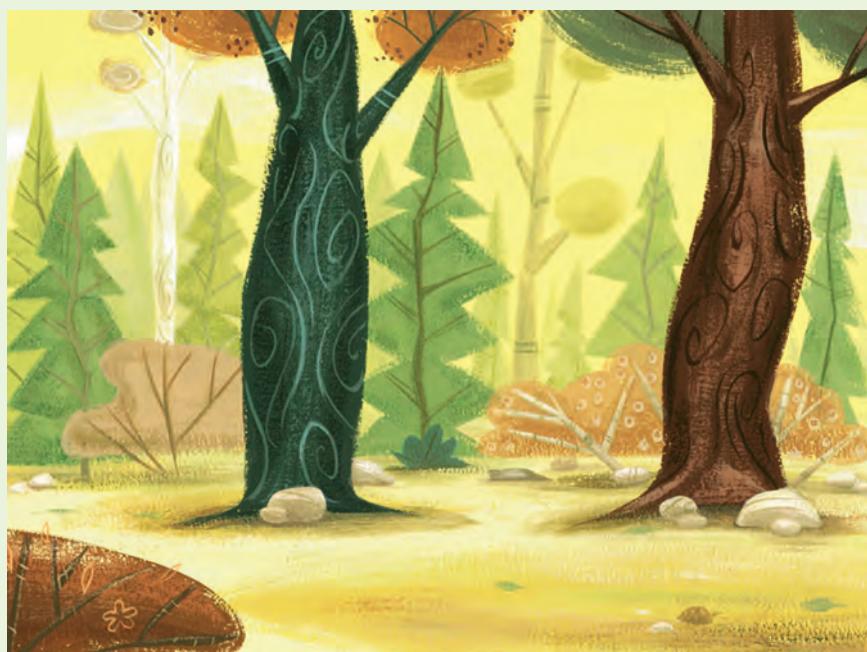
A: Definitely, without a doubt, not having enough time to do your job as well as you would like is a big frustration. Television production schedules are brutal. I always wish we had time to do more art. But you are also right about breaking down the board and trying to interpret scribbles. It ties into the same difficulty—spending time trying to figure out what is going on in a storyboard takes away from time we could be making the artwork.
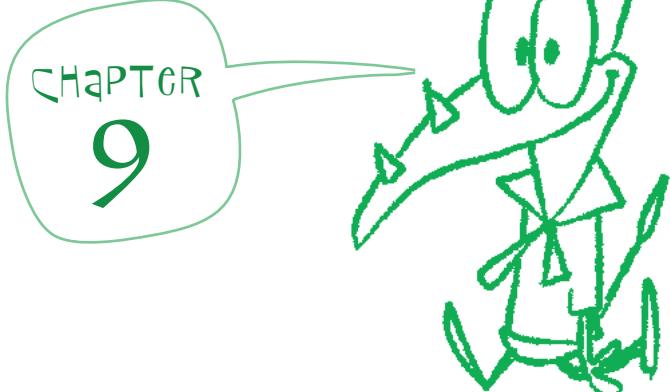
Q: *What advice would you give anyone (especially women) wanting to carve out a creative career in animation?*

A: I would give the same advice to anyone wanting to get into animation, which is to work on your craft. For painters, I call it ''brush mileage.'' Being an artist is like being a musician—it takes practice, lots of practice! The more time you spend, the better you will be, and your portfolio will reflect that. Also, try contacting some working artists that you admire. Maybe they will review your portfolio or give you suggestions on where you can improve. Also, most studios have internship programs for art students, which is a great way to meet working artists. And specifically for women, I would say, don't be intimidated by the overabundance of men in the business. Just go for it!

CHAPTER 9

Network Relationships: Saving Your Sanity
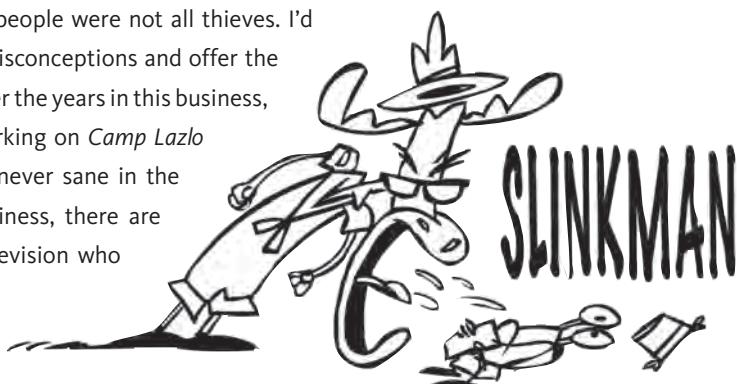
"You just have to realize that the pendulum between art and commerce will be constantly swinging every step of the way, and if you're not careful it will crack your skull."

—Tom Warburton, creator of *Codename: Kids Nextdoor*

"The TV business is [like] a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free and good men die like dogs."

—Hunter S. Thompson

I used to have this Hunter Thompson quote tacked up on my wall in the production offices for *Rocko's Modern Life*. I was going through a hard time making the transition from independent animator to television series creator, and my attitude was becoming dark and cynical. However, I soon realized you didn't have to "die like a dog" and that TV people were not all thieves. I'd like to address some of those misconceptions and offer the "sanity savers" I have learned over the years in this business, especially by the time I was working on *Camp Lazlo* (though some might say I was never sane in the first place . . .). As in any business, there are plenty of people working in television who don't function with honesty and integrity. But that does

not mean that if you work with a network to air your show that you are making a pact with the devil. However, if you believe that working in television will be like working for the evil empire, then it will be a self-fulfilling prophesy. Sounds too simple, but I believe it to be true. You could replace the word "television" with any industry, and this observation would still hold true, because whatever you choose to believe will eventually become reality. Your personal mindset and the way you conduct your life define who you are. So let's take a closer look at the possibilities when working with a network or studio and define every player's role.

The Role of the Network Studio

As you hopefully learned in the "Dawn of TV Animation" section of chapter 1, television networks have long served as the conduit between a cartoon and its audience. They have been the gatekeepers, making it possible for kids everywhere, including me as a young boy sitting down in front of my 1960s television set with a bowl of Rice Krispies, to watch our favorite cartoons. The realities of the marketplace sometimes made predicting the tastes of the cartoon fan challenging. But it was CBS, Fox, and new cable channels like Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network that started pulling us out of animation's dark age. When the networks couldn't find adequate programming offered by other content providers, they started commissioning the cartoons themselves, putting up millions of dollars to fund the visions of these crazy cartoon creators.

(Nickelodeon invested more than twenty-five million dollars in *Rocko's Modern Life* alone, for which I am very grateful.)

Although the network may try to make you feel that they are doing you a big favor by choosing to acquire your cartoon and put it into production, owning your show could be a very lucrative business investment for them. In many cases, in exchange for their investment in your project, the network, the parent company (if they are different), and usually all its affiliates will gain the exclusive right to use those characters in any way they can successfully exploit them. Beyond the show's initial run on TV (which can be infinite, if they so choose), the network earns income from commercial sales, syndication (a huge business), DVD sales, iTunes downloads, podcasts, books, and licensing deals for toys, products, and music. They can take your property and make as many animated episodes as they wish and air them as often as they wish, or—conversely—not make them at all (and also prevent others from making them). They can also create feature films, video games, comic books . . . you name it. Character properties are big business: For a "breakout show" (one that features memorable and standout characters that can be marketed separately), they can earn billions of dollars (yes, billions), and the corporate powers that be all have a certain barometer for what makes a successful show. I like to give Steve Hillenburg a hard time because *SpongeBob SquarePants* raised the bar exceptionally high for how a breakout show is defined.

For every cartoon series that makes it, there may be five or ten that don't. Although most can at least earn back their investment, that is not what the corporate brass wants—they want a moneymaking hit. That's the hatchet that hangs over the head of any executive in charge of making the decision to pick up a show, or who holds the responsibility of making sure the show gains the expected ratings. Keep this in mind when dealing with the executives in charge of your show: Yes, they are representing the corporate side of the business, but cut them some slack personally. They are frequently put in very difficult situations, such as being the messengers of bad news. Ultimately, they're trying to make a living and keep their jobs just like everyone else.

Your Role with the Network Studio

Your contract with a network or studio can stipulate various levels of your involvement and input, depending on your status going in and how well your lawyer represents your interests. Remember, there's no such thing as a "standard" contract. Unless you bring in some of your own cash or a financing partner, a large company will not give the creator of a show final say on anything. I personally feel that the show idea itself has huge monetary value and should be viewed as such when negotiating the deal, but that's another battle. Quite often, a contract will offer the creator "consultation" in

some categories, which basically means they let you offer input (for instance, giving feedback on a toy design) but then do what they want regardless (see the *Rocko* sidebar on page 204). You will have the most input on the episodes themselves, but even there, the network or studio reserves the right to reject story ideas and other creative contributions if they don't feel it fits their investment.

Keep a watchful eye on money matters. You may have signing bonuses and acquisition fees (the money paid to buy your creative idea and property) coming to you, and you should make sure you are being paid for all the hats you will wear when producing the show. Under one arrangement, you may be paid by the week or by the episode, with completion bonuses when the show airs. For the most part (although not always) a network or studio will share the show's profits with you, as a percentage of income derived from the performance of the show. Sometimes this sum will be paid after the initial investment has been recouped (net) or as a separate pot gross (adjusted gross income). It's more beneficial to the creator to negotiate a deal based on gross income. Cable networks are still not in the habit of handing out residuals to creators as the traditional networks are, and cable outlets are still reluctant to share advertising revenue derived from the initial run of the program; however, licensing and syndication rights are usually negotiable.

With all of that said, does it mean a network will stand over you holding a big stick? For the most part, no; a network doesn't want a strained relationship with a creator of a show any more than you do. Just because they have final say and are funding your show doesn't mean you have to do whatever their agents demand, no questions asked. That model doesn't serve anyone's interests. But I'm also not suggesting you become an outright dissident. If you have entered into an agreement with a network or studio to fully fund your show, a good first step is to start making peace with the concept of their ownership. The Golden Rule applies here—that is, the one holding the gold makes the rules!

In the end, it's your vision, and the characters come from your imagination. Even the network, with its financial interests, will want to support you and your concept and make sure that remains the focus. So always stand behind your idea and have a clear direction, and you'll have an easier time bridging the gap between your artistic expression and the realities of making a commercial cartoon series. If you are on a crusade to do away with any commercial attachments to the art of the animated cartoon, you need to take that to a different battlefield. I'm not judging the worthiness of that battle, which I think has validity. In fact, I don't always find myself in alignment with the goals of the conglomerates that own my cartoons, but you need to choose your battles, or find alternatives to getting your series out there to your audience. The networks I've worked with always knew where I stood— at times all too well. But I learned when to say my piece and when to move on to the business at hand, which was making a cartoon both the network and I could be proud of. I also learned some very important sanity savers, which I offer you here, that kept me on track and focused through all the challenges.

Sanity Savers

1 **Research a network, studio, or other independent company before you go into business with them.**

Some people don't think about this and are just happy to have someone interested in their show. But if you move ahead, you are entering into a partnership with them, placing your baby into their hands, as it were, and investing as much in them as they are in you. Think about it: By the time a network or studio wants to move forward with your idea, you have already done quite a lot of work without payment (and likely spent plenty of your own money). There is a tangible value to your show idea and the characters. If a network owns your show, you have to accept their marketing department, licensing department, legal department, distribution strategy, and much more. I found out firsthand that a network can enter into a merchandising agreement without your knowledge that can directly affect your royalties. So ask a lot of questions of anyone who expresses an interest in your work to make sure they will be the proper stewards of your project. The more you know who they are, the more you can make an educated decision. What is their overall philosophy? Where do they expect to be five years down the road? What age-group are they targeting? What drives their merchandising decisions? Will they release a DVD of your show? How long have the key people been in their positions? Do as much research as you can. It will save you unpleasant surprises and heartbreak down the road. If you decide to move forward, do it with your eyes open.

2 **You both have the same goal: to make the best show possible! Approach as much of the process from that perspective as you can.**

Sometimes there will be friction between you and the network executives, but friction polishes stone. Sometimes if you're both pushing for the same goal but from different angles, it can make the show better in the long run. Try to stay focused on the same agenda even if you have different methods of getting there.

3 **There will be rules. Television itself has rules. Standards and practices and the legal department of a network all have rules. It's okay to challenge them, but again, pick your battles. Like Jerry Seinfeld used to say, "It's all a game. What good is a game without any rules?"**

Quite often a network will step in with many variations on the same theme: "This or that isn't working for us/We can't say that on the show/We can't take that action." They even

Network Relationships

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may offer a solution or two. You don't necessarily have to adopt their solution, or argue about it, but you should at least try to understand the problem. Listen to the objections with an open mind. While doing that, find your own solutions that acknowledge their conflict and solve the problem while maintaining your vision of the show and its characters. Sometimes working through a problem can actually make for a funnier situation or gag.

4 **A network or studio is not in the business of handing out art grants; they are in the business of making money for their parent company and/or the parent company's stockholders.**

As I said earlier, the network is looking to your project as an investment, so you need to frame your artistic needs within the language of business. There are executives whose sole job is to make sure the monetary investment remains as low as possible in order to minimize risk; he or she usually signs off on all expenses. There is often another executive who is in charge of making sure the show recoups the money spent on it; he or she is often the one looking at the TV ratings and wondering how they can be boosted. The magic formula remains the agenda: Make as much money as you can while spending as little as possible. Sounds logical . . . except when you are so passionate about your idea that the veins in your neck bulge at the slightest interference or disagreement. Sometimes the two parts of the magic formula work against each other, but that is the nature of the game. I don't mean to be cynical; after all, there are plenty of folks within the networks and studios who are big fans of cartoons, but they too have to grit their teeth at times because they know what fuels the machine of TV production.

In my opinion, if you place yourself in the shoes of these executives while acknowledging their concerns, you will be in a better position to communicate with them while standing behind your interests, and ultimately, finding a solution to most problems or hurdles. It's all about creating win-win solutions.

5 **Television is a rough canvas. Understand that from the start, and you will be able to use the medium's texture to your advantage.**

Let's say you are about to create a painting, and you have a vision of it as a beautiful, smooth, flawless oil painting. Then you attempt to paint it on the bark of an old oak tree. You probably won't be happy with the results. In fact, you'll probably be so frustrated that you start throwing fits and threatening to give up painting altogether. Now let's say you are given the bark of an old oak tree on which to make a painting. You look at it for what it is and envision a painting that will take the materials into consideration in the final product. You know that the imperfections of the wood may offer some artistic surprises you couldn't have imagined. Suddenly you are more at peace with the process.

These are two different approaches to painting on the same material. An animated television series can be like painting on very rough tree bark. Look at all

the production challenges—from the high-volume assembly-line environment to the network relationship—as part of the project as a whole.

6 **In many respects, a network is like a client. As an added bonus to achieving your own artistic expression, you are providing a service to them and become an important part of their team in achieving their goals.**

Once I realized that it was up to me to provide the network with the product they needed to be successful in the marketplace, this perspective greatly helped maintain my sanity. It's liberating to know that as long as you keep up the funny, entertaining part of the bargain, the network will keep up their part. Ideally, your research will have assured you that they will keep up their end of the bargain, at least enough to minimize your anxiety.

I remember a trip I took to the Cartoon Network offices in Atlanta while we were producing *Camp Lazlo*. I sat down with the people there and said, "Okay, what do we need to do to knock the competition out of the way? What can I do to help?" Many of them were shocked; they were used to being viewed by creative people as the enemy. It really helps to realize that you are all on the same team. If your show does well, it helps other shows and the art form of animation as a whole. If the network does well showing animation, it provides jobs and outlets for other artists.

A note to the networks (if you're listening): It can only help for you to look at the creative people behind your animated shows with respect, as part of the team, and not as expendable machines. Not everyone thinks that way, but for the ones who do, you know who you are.

7 **Don't take corporate politics personally. That goes for any changes in policy or personnel at the corporate level that may affect you but that is out of your control.**

Even if you did your homework on a particular company before you went into business with them, sometimes things happen that really suck, things you couldn't foresee. Do not take it personally if the network you first partnered with is not the same network a year or two down the road. Things happen. Executives at the top move around, resign, and get promoted. Agendas and goals may change. The parent company or stockholders may start putting on the heat in areas they hadn't put pressure on or even noticed before. You or your show may be affected by these changes, but remember—nobody is doing anything to you personally. You are an artist, hopefully with a good head for business—not a victim. They are a big business that sometimes changes as fast as the wind, or sometimes moves as slow as a glacier. Be flexible. And if certain changes are so great that you feel that you can no longer deal with the situation, potentially you need to make an honorable exit. Just do the best you can do under the circumstances. To paraphrase a self-help maxim, recognize the things you can and can't change, and have the wisdom to know the difference.

Did I say battles? I meant differences of opinion. Choose the right time to defend your position, and know when to let it go. If not, you may end up winning the battles but losing the war, meaning cancellation, or worse—a bad show! Sometimes fighting small fires can divert your attention while the whole forest burns down.

If I honestly felt that having your own show on television was the quickest way to a life of misery, I would never write a book recommending it or offer ways to go about doing it. That said, if you don't go about it properly, it can be miserable. Don't let the nature of the business get you down. Networks and studios are composed of people trying to do their jobs well, just like you, so keep the lines of communication open, state your needs, and understand theirs. Set your goals, and then ask yourself: How is this show fitting into my goals? How am I conducting my affairs? Am I keeping my side of the street clean? In place of the Hunter S. Thompson quote that started this chapter, consider this one, by Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see in the world." This will go a long way toward your reaching for the light as opposed to cursing the darkness.
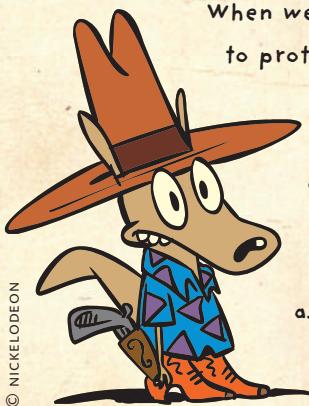
A Funny Rocko Story Involving Networks

When we did ROCKO'S MODERN LIFE, it was important to me to protect my crew. I didn't want them being affected by corporate interactions and demands—it was my job to deal with that stuff. When we moved to our new building, I liked to limit how often network executives roamed among the creatives. To the executives I often portrayed the ROCKO crew as a gang of desperados, not the types they would want to be around anyway. It was, after all, the Wild West of the 1990s animation era.

One day, a high-ranking Viacom/Nickelodeon executive came to town from New York and wanted to take a tour of the Rocko production offices. So, as usual, I accommodated him. The office doors of the various storyboard teams were often closed so that they would have the quiet they needed to do their maniacal work. I would knock, enter, and then introduce the various members of the crew to the executives. When we entered the office of one of our well-known directors, he stood up from his desk to shake the executive's hand, revealing an old Western-style six-shooter in a holster strapped to his waist. I didn't notice it at the time, but when we came out of the office, the executive was visibly shaken. He pulled me aside and whispered to me, so as not to upset any of the production crew milling about, "That last director, in that office? He . . . he had a gun." I casually turned and kept walking, saying, "Yeah, sometimes things get crazy around here. They have to defend themselves, you know." I don't think that executive ever came back to our offices again. Upon further investigation, I found out that the director brought the unloaded piece for show-and-tell with his fellow storyboarder. The ROCKO offices were home to a few legends like that.

Network Relationships
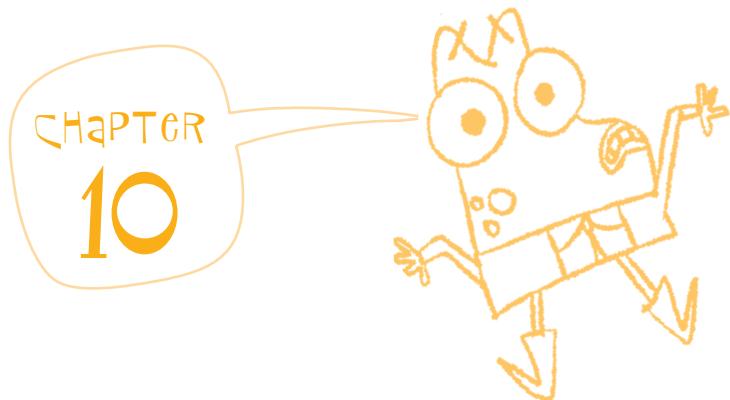
A Not-So-Funny Rocko Story Involving Networks

When I originally designed Rocko, he was an eye-popping lemon yellow. Very appealing, I thought. So did Nickelodeon, so I produced the pilot with that color scheme. When we started producing the series episodes, however, the newly formed Nickelodeon licensing division was hard at work trying to sell Rocko to toy companies before anyone knew who he was (I don't fault them for this, and we were all inexperienced at the time). They approached a well-known plush-toy company to do a soft, fuzzy stuffed Rocko. The company told Nickelodeon they were interested, but that they already had a property that was yellow and looked similar to Rocko's design. They offered to carry the Rocko line, but only if we changed his color. When the network first mentioned this to me, I thought it was absurd to even consider, as they had told me earlier that these cartoons were not "toy driven." They tried to convince me to go along with it, but I was I strongly opposed. I vowed to take it to the highest court—after all, the whole look of the show was designed around Rocko sporting yellow, so changing that would mean changing everything. I fought and fought, until it came down to sending off the first episode to Korea. Did we have them color Rocko yellow or some other color? I sat in an office in LA with a high-ranking executive on speakerphone from the New York Viacom offices as they pulled rank, insisting that Rocko's appearance needed to be changed. I was crushed, but knew I needed to come to terms with who really owned Rocko. It was no longer me.

The very sad ending to this story is that after we changed the color to a—cough, hack—golden-brownish-beige (which I hate to this day) and produced all the episodes that way, the big toy company pulled out of its agreement to produce a Rocko toy line. In the end, the big color change had been for nothing.

Thinking Outside the Box: Getting Your Series Out There Without a Network or Studio

"Today, with a great idea, some neat camerawork or animation, and a copy of Final Cut Pro, a really talented creative person can become a global star."

—DAN HAWES, PRESIDENT OF MARCH ENTERTAINMENT

"When it comes to achieving your goals, there is no lack of resources, only lack of resourcefulness."

—TONY ROBBINS, INSPIRATIONAL AUTHOR AND SPEAKER

There are many reasons why you may want to look outside the box—that is, the television box—for alternative models to getting your animated series to its intended audience. Although following the traditional route with a network or studio has many upsides, there are also many reasons it may not be the best fit for you. Maybe you've been thinking beyond network TV from the get-go because you don't click with that business model or the perceived ethics compromises of television; or maybe your idea doesn't fit in with the TV medium. The good news is that there *are* alternatives. I'll explore them in this chapter, offering as much

information as is current at the time of this writing on the various models and staking signposts to some of the paths not yet well traveled.

To begin, let's sidestep animation for a moment and take a look at your characters and series concept. Just like the syndicate editor who suggested that a comic strip was not the best vehicle for my characters, I would propose that your characters might want to start out in comic books, children's books, or toys instead of animation. Character properties are big business. San Rio, the company behind Hello Kitty, built a whole empire around characters that never had a show or book to begin with, only cool designs. It was the same with Paul Frank, the Ugly Dolls, and David and Goliath properties. If you take existing characters and make them come alive by building a series around them, then you have a franchise. Many children's books have built a following first, then ventured into film or TV production, as have such comic strips as *Dilbert* and *Over The Hedge*. This approach has many benefits, but a big one is that, if the deal is done right, you can retain ownership of the property. The first *Wallace and Gromit* installment was actually a student film project by Nick Park, which was picked up by Aardman Animations and later by the BBC. The fact that it started as an independent film helped Park and Aardman retain greater ownership of the characters when they entered into a deal with Dreamworks to create a feature-length film.

I'm going to assume that, since you bought this book, your heart lies in animation, and that's where you want your characters to live, particularly in the larger market of television. So, why haven't you broken through just yet? One of the most common reasons is that the networks feel your work lacks mainstream appeal to the broadest demographic audience. Does that mean that your idea

From my Web series *Le Family Pop*, starring the voice of Tom Kenny.

doesn't have an audience, or that you don't have something vital to share? Of course not! Television is currently going through many changes, mostly as it adapts to the realities of its biggest competitor—the Internet. Just like when everyone thought television would ring the death knell of the movies, some "prophets" are touting the demise of TV. I don't subscribe to that gloomy prediction and instead choose to believe that, just as movies and television managed to coexist, so too can television, movies, and the Internet. One thing is for sure, however: The film industry had to get used to the reality that it was no longer the sole star-making medium, and the television industry has to accept the same reality and share the stage with the Internet.

The Internet is one alternative approach, but there are several others. But to pursue them is to step off the well-beaten path and forge some less explored, riskier trails. If you believe this is your destiny in life, and you don't want to give up on the great characters and the series idea you created, then press on.

Are You a Maverick?

If you are a maverick, you are in good company. Many great names have achieved success by not taking "no" for an answer. Did you know that Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* was rejected by both CBS and ABC before he decided to venture into the uncharted waters of "made for syndication" television in 1976? What followed was greater financial success and longevity than what he could have derived from a network deal. Consider John Lasseter, who got fired from Disney Studios and then moved on to a small upstart company named Pixar. Now he's not only Chief Creative Officer at one of the most successful feature-film studios in history, but also heads Walt Disney Animation Studios, since Disney purchased Pixar in 2006. C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was rejected over eight hundred times before he found success as a novelist. And perhaps the most popular rejection story of the past decade is J. K. Rowling, whose first *Harry Potter* book was rejected twelve times before a publisher reluctantly gave her a three-thousand-dollar advance, along with a dire prediction that there was no money in children's literature. Now, thanks to her determination to bring the magical world of Hogwarts to life, she has become the twelfth wealthiest woman in Britain and the *Harry Potter* books have sold more than four hundred million copies, not to mention achieving the highest level of success as a major motion picture franchise. Many of these highly successful artists could be considered mavericks.

So what does a maverick do? He or she usually believes so fervently in his or her ideas that the strength of that energy overcomes all obstacles. He or she often stands alone in the belief that they offer something of value, especially after countless rejections and negative feedback, even from peers. One such figure is George Lucas, who was told by many that *Star Wars* would be a failure. Often, rejection by those holding the purse strings can be the most potentially damaging,

"One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time."

—ANDRE GIDE

as creatives are apt to take this to heart and don't realize how much power they themselves actually hold. The people with the money may think they have all the power, but money alone cannot create a successful cartoon (or film, or novel, or comedy series . . .).

As niche markets expand, more portals are opening, particularly via the Internet; these venues offer animators and cartoon creators a direct link to their audience. Independent projects that have been rejected by a larger distributor can get exposure via the Internet and thus begin making financial sense to a smaller company. Film festivals are also on the rise, offering opportunities for animated feature-length and short films to reach a wider audience. For example, the 2007 alternative animated film *Persepolis*—done mostly in black and white and politically oriented—was taken from the festival circuit and launched in the mainstream, where it gained critical success and now shares shelf space at Blockbuster with Pixar/Disney films. As Dan Hawes says in his Q & A on page 215, "with the teardown of this infrastructure, the gatekeepers are having their value-added belief system challenged."

The Internet

During the dot-com boom in the late 1990s, there was a lot of talk about the Internet drawing neck-and-neck with television in its entertainment delivery capabilities. Many millions of dollars were invested, but the technology was not quite up to the task. By around 2005, however, the number of households with high-speed Internet access had grown rapidly, enabling bigger, faster downloads and a rise in the accessibility of video streaming; these advances made online videos vastly more watchable and less frustrating to view. As a result, sites such as YouTube became the go-to source for new and recycled video content, and online viewership began blasting television numbers out of the water. Mondo Media (a YouTube-branded channel partner) boasts more than thirty million views per month across all platforms (making it the fifth most viewed YouTube channel partner). According to the Mondo Media website, its animated series *Happy Tree Friends* has topped five hundred million views, sold over a million DVDs, and remains one of the most popular podcast downloads on iTunes. Worldwide merchandising sales for *Happy Tree Friends* are also skyrocketing.

In 2007, the website Hulu was created to offer advertising-supported streaming video of television shows; the site was funded by NBC, Universal, Fox, and ABC Disney, all of whom recognized and wanted to capitalize on the powerful reach of the Internet. In the fall of 2008, Seth McFarlane, creator of *Family Guy*, launched www.sethcomedy.com, offering one- to two-minute cartoon shorts made for the Web called "Seth McFarlane's Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy." The launch of these shorts, released through YouTube, achieved more than three million views in three days, which is astonishing (although it does help to be the creator of a very successful series on Fox!).

My new Web cartoon *Frog in a Suit*, starring Pete Moss.

© Joe Murray Studio Inc.

How Do I Make Money from the Internet If I'm Not Seth McFarlane?

It is possible to achieve success on the Internet even if you have little name recognition. First, your idea and characters need to be so breakout and original that they scream out from the monitor and attract droves of viewers. Sometimes when artists are looking to attract a network buyer, they don't push the riskier examples of their craft. This is the time to push them, though, because as Picasso said, "You've got to give them images that they don't accept." Video cartoons on the Internet offer a blank canvas without the interfering hand of network executives. Have fun with it! Web cartoons gain audience mostly through word of mouth, or the number of times they're forwarded—in other words, they need to go viral to really take off, passed one from viewer to the next with the subject line, "You've got to check out this cartoon!" They don't usually have the benefit of a television marketing blitz of billboards and commercials to push their premiere, so the eyeballs need to be glued there from the get-go. And of course, the show has to be high-quality, because attracting a wide audience is the core reason your show will generate income.

Building a presence with a Web cartoon can offer some short-term debt relief, but the biggest returns are potentially long term. A large audience can offer wide exposure, which can result in merchandise sales, DVD sales, and iTunes downloads—and maybe even a television contract. The current short-term moneymaking model is much the same as it is on TV: via advertising. Most

commercial online video content is tied in with advertising. Quite simply, the more times your video is watched, the more money it makes. In network television, when an advertising salesperson sells a thirty-second spot on *Camp Lazlo,* for instance, he or she essentially has to guarantee how many eyes will watch that commercial. If 3.5 million viewers don't all tune in to Cartoon Network at that time, they have to do a "make good" back to the client or business that bought the ad, because the ratings aren't available until a few days following the air date (a "make good" is a kind of refund, often in the form of free commercial time). On the Internet, a video does not make money until after someone watches it. Although a big site like Hulu can offer alluring contracts to various properties that will lend prestige to its library, most new Web cartoons won't have that luxury. (But it's always good to try!) Seth McFarlane's exclusive Web cartoon, *Cavalcade of Cartoon Comedy*, is sponsored by Priceline, for instance.

Although you could try to find your own sponsor for your show, most animators will need to rely on outsourcing of ad sales and distribution. How does that work? Right now, through YouTube and Google AdSense, you can essentially become your own cartoon network, without the executives and fancy lobby. With Google's AdSense, if you embed your Web cartoon into your website, you can host ads placed there by Google and make money through click-through advertising. Thus, if a viewer goes to your site to watch your cartoon and clicks on an ad, you'll receive a small fee. The viewer does not have to buy anything but simply click on an image to find out more information. Google will automatically try to tailor the ad it places to the content of your site. Another method that is more targeted to video content is through YouTube's Partner Program. Basically, YouTube (which is owned by Google) will go into partnership with you to target advertising to the viewers of your cartoon. Much like AdSense, the program will place a short video commercial tailored to your demographic at the beginning of your cartoon, and you will generate income based on how many times someone watches your cartoon. No one needs to click on anything; they just have to watch the ad. So if a cartoon gets a hundred hits, its creator gets paid for a hundred views of that commercial. If it gets a million hits, well, you've upped your income substantially. The YouTube Partner Program does have qualification guidelines, and you don't have much control over what gets advertised before your cartoon, but it will put money in your pocket if you successfully bring in an audience. It's up to you to market and push your cartoon, though; your core idea, characters, and entertainment value will substantially determine the viewership, marketing, and support of your property. You may also want to investigate other forms of syndication in Web formats, because different platforms for this are available around the world.

How Do I Create My Web Cartoon Without the Benefit of a Studio?

If you have followed my advice in creating the characters and idea for your series, then I can guide you a bit in creating your own small animation studio that can bring those characters to life. Start out small initially. As your cartoon becomes more popular, you can add staff and set up in fancier digs. First details come first. Most Web cartoons are usually shorter than television cartoons. The theatrical shorts were seven minutes; for TV we produced either twenty-two-minute episodes or two eleven-minute episodes. In contrast, most Web cartoons are three to five minutes long, so for these you may have to pare down the story structure (I think eleven-minute Web cartoons are fine, but you might not need to start out there).

It's easier now than ever to build what is, if not exactly your own animation studio, then your own personal animation station. Several animation software companies offer smaller, independent versions of their software, such as Toon Boom Studio, which, for a reasonable price, gives you animation capabilities for 2-D: from digital drawing, audio tracks, and final publishing to QuickTime files that are tailored to the Web. I prefer to animate in Adobe Flash CS4 Professional with a Wacom Cintiq tablet (the kind where you can draw directly on the screen). Flash has been successfully used in producing full-series television animation, like *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* on Cartoon Network. I won't go into too much detail about working in Flash (there are several books that do that very well, listed in the appendix on page 229), but I will briefly go over my process in this form of animation.

Let's say you have developed your characters and written a short episode. The next step is to produce a storyboard, the way you would for a TV pilot, using scene and panel numbers. Decide on your framing format: If you have the possibility of transferring to TV later, a standard TV format is 4:3; widescreen and HD TV use a 16:9 ratio. On the Internet and in digital output, pixels are the units of choice. I like to work in a 720 × 480-pixel screen, which is an NTSC ratio (NTSC stands for National Television System Committee, a U.S. broadcast-standardizing body). Do some research on this subject before setting up your format.

After producing the storyboard and animatic, I usually add a scratch track of voice dialogue with a microphone attached to an Mbox 2 and capture it in Pro Tools. I then create dialogue tracks to input into Flash. You can record the final tracks first, if you like. Maybe you could persuade a recording studio to record your dialogue on the cheap, or build your own booth and ask your friends to come over. (Personally, it helps when one of my friends is Tom Kenny, voice-over artist extraordinaire.) I like to start with a scratch track because I end up changing sound while I'm animating, and it saves money to record later.

Once you set up your background layouts and import your dialogue, you can
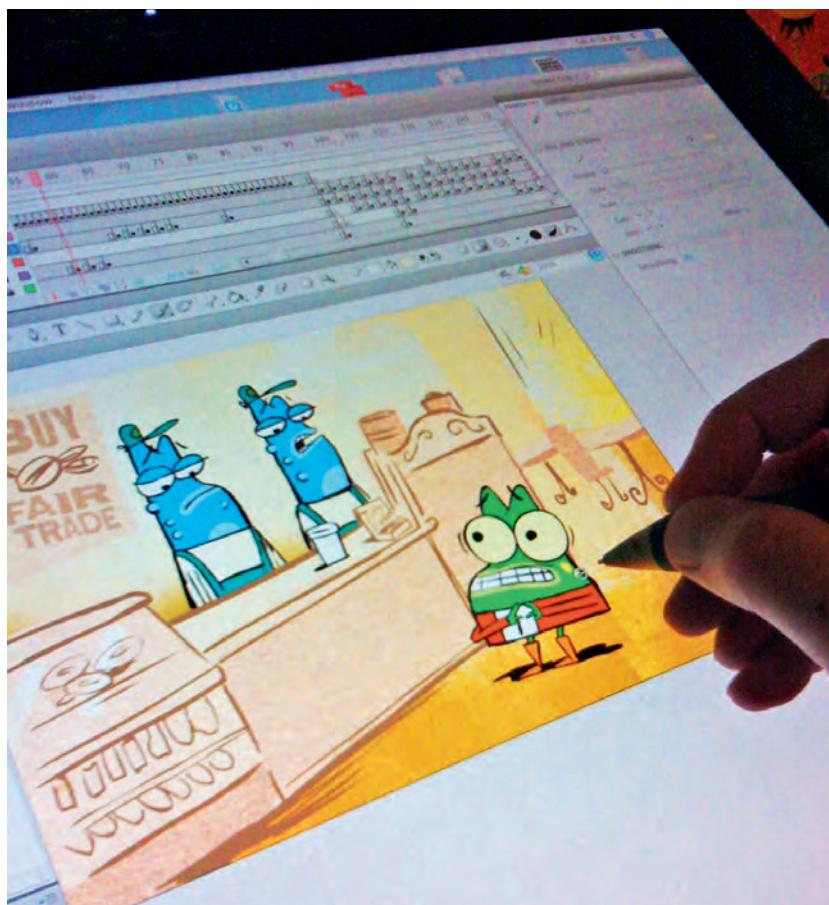
You can begin animating in Adobe Flash with little equipment or training.

start animating. I like to work pose-to-pose, using key poses. Later, when you color your cartoon, you can also add different hues to your backgrounds. I usually paint my backgrounds, scan them in Photoshop, and then import them into Flash, but backgrounds can also be drawn in Flash. When your animation is done, record the dialogue, if you have not done so already. Then tweak the lip assignment. Next I export my Flash animation to Adobe After Effects, for a few reasons: After Effects can give you some cool camera moves (if you import in layers) and some special effects, but it's also needed to export into QuickTime files. Depending on the size you are working in (my size of 720 × 480 is very heavy), Flash sometimes can't output QuickTime adequately without skipping frames. I then export my QuickTime files (separated into scenes) into Final Cut Pro (or other editing software program you're comfortable with). I use Pro Tools to bring in sound effects (here, too, a few different audio programs are available). I happen to have a library of sound effects from my sound designers, but I also have the full Hanna-Barbera and Warner Bros. libraries, which are available for sale to anyone. There are also several websites where you can download just about anything for a small fee. Royalty-free music is available as well, but please take precautions here: If you are placing any cartoon on the Web and earning money, or selling it to a TV market, make sure you secure

all rights to any music and dialogue you use. It would be preferable for you or a friend to write original music for your cartoon, but if not, you can buy preexisting royalty-free music. Remember, you cannot plug a song by the rock band Coldplay into your cartoon and sell it professionally without the risk of getting sued. The same holds true if you plug in any live-action or pre-existing video. Neither can you cover a Coldplay song on your guitar for the soundtrack without first securing the rights to do so. Be vigilant about copyright—ignoring it is not worth the risks.

It's preferable to put out a new webisode every week, if possible. So if you decide to pump up the frequency of your cartoons, then at some point you will need help, and maybe even have to hire a staff. Eventually you may get some funders interested in your property who will help it to take off; I have spoken to many producers of Web cartoons who have been approached by television networks after a series begins getting attention.

Let me also offer a prediction: I believe the melding of the Internet and television will continue. The number of cable channels will keep increasing and their formats breaking off into smaller and smaller niches, while the Web will grow to include niche offerings from artists. As average viewers get more accustomed to watching what they want, when they want to, they'll get to a place where TV channels will become website URLs and they can turn to the show creator's channel and log on or download the series and enjoy it at their leisure. Why not be in a position of readiness with your own material when it's time for viewers to switch to your channel?

Global Syndication

Another avenue to consider is global syndication. This can be a little complicated and tricky, but with so many hours of programming to fill for thousands of channels around the world, everyone is always looking for good content. A way of breaking into this market is to create a pilot on your own, or partner with someone to fund it and make it, then go to conferences such as MIPCOM (in Cannes, France) that deal with the worldwide syndication market and try to get orders for your show. If you can get enough pre-sales to fund the episodes, you are in business. Often, however, you may have to bring in other backers, who may want to invest with the prospect of earning a return on ancillary merchandising of your story's characters. Look into different global distributors of cartoon products and query them on their processes.

I know I make the process all sound easy, but it's actually quite challenging, with many hurdles. You would retain more ownership this way than with a network deal, as well as more control, but you may be getting notes from several more investors or coproduction entities than you would in a network deal.

Film

As I mentioned in chapter 1, some animated series, like Mike Judge's *Beavis and Butt-head*, started as independent films. Craig McCracken's *The Powerpuff Girls* was originally a short independent film called *Whoopass Stew!* that appeared in the Spike and Mike's Festival of Animation before it went on to become a cornerstone of the Cartoon Network. Every year hundreds of film festivals are held around the world, as well as events like the international animation film festivals in Annecy, France, and Ottawa, Canada. These venues play host to the top animated films and the distributors who buy them. My independent films, which have been screened at the Ottawa, Annecy, and Sundance festivals, were what sparked the interest of the networks in creating my television series. And I should mention again that Nick Park's *Wallace and Gromit* was originally an animated student film that went on to become a short series on the BBC, achieved enormous merchandising and DVD sales success, and later became a major motion picture through Dreamworks.

Creating an independent animated film is much more feasible these days. All the processes I mentioned can be transferred to a theatrical short, if you take into consideration film ratio and resolution at the start of your project. Although many festivals are accepting digital formats of your film to decide whether they want to include it and/or enter it into festival competition, many will want a film print of your piece for theatrical viewing as well. For this you will need to find a company that transfers digital content to high-quality 35mm film or higher. This can be a pricey option, so do your homework. Many festivals are starting to include "made for Web" content in their categories, but many others will accept only films made with theatrical intent. Find out ahead of time what each festival is looking for before you submit your work.

Creating your own independent film is one of the most educational and challenging creative endeavors you can embark on. Whichever path you travel in order to bring your cartoon series to life can be a good one. The important thing is believing in your heart that this cartoon has to be made and find its audience. Know that I will be cheering you on in the process.

Q & A

with Dan Hawes

DAN HAWES is President and founder of March Entertainment, an Ontario-based digital entertainment company. Dan and his team produce animated series, films, and games for TV, the Internet, and mobile platforms. He is the co-creator of *Chilly Beach*, *Becoming Georgie*, and a host of online shows and games, as well as executive producer of March Entertainment's vast slate of content.

Q: *Fill us in on the business of March Entertainment and how it all came about. What are some of your projects, and where can readers find them?*

Q: *I know that you hold the future of Web-animated entertainment in high regard. Could you explain in more detail? How do you see other forms of animated-entertainment distribution developing?*

A: March Entertainment strives to use a combination of technology and creativity to create compelling experiences. That may sound all ''sciencey,'' but really it's about using new tools to tell our stories. We like to make people laugh and connect to our characters in a more direct way. With creativity, properly applied technology, and a dose of ingenuity, the Web can facilitate that.

We started off by doing Internet webisodes in the mid 1990s and were immediately hooked by the possibility of connecting directly with our audiences. Though we weren't animators at the time, it was the most effective way to entertain our audience. The direct audience link was—and is—both humbling and exhilarating. If you create something great, you'll know it immediately. If it sucks, you'll know that too. Most of March Entertainment's development projects are on the Web. If you visit www.ilaugh.com, you'll see many of them. Some shows are better than others, but the Web truly does serve as a wonderful canvas for ''getting it out there'' and gaining the rapid feedback required.

A: Today we can honestly say that ''talent is talent,'' and talent will find its way to its audience, eventually. This wasn't always the case. In the past, there was a huge infrastructure required in order to bring that experience to the audience. TV, film, and even music production was a multimillion-dollar business that excluded all but the elite. Because of technological innovation, these barriers are rapidly eroding and making the audience accessible to anyone. Today, with a great idea, some neat camerawork or animation, and a copy of Final Cut Pro, a really talented, creative person can become a global star.

With the teardown of this infrastructure, the gatekeepers are having their value-added belief system challenged. Currently, three or four buyers in the U.S. television animation business control the destiny of what gets aired on TV, which in turn hugely affects decisions in international markets. Unless these people are the smartest in the world, with an innate sense of what everyone wants, there will be unmet needs in the market. And even then, taste is subjective. The truth is that the current model of one buyer making decisions for tens of millions of people is completely antiquated. A more democratic method of audience-driven content production will supersede this model; it's apparent already.

YouTube easily defeats most major networks, and audiences even choose to watch shows with poorer production values because they are what they want to watch.

Eventually, the power will be in the hands of the creative folks who will be able to directly gather and meaningfully interact with an audience. Don't be fooled by this abyss, or ''starve-out,'' period that we're in. The guardians of the old model are holding on to what they have, in some cases very aggressively, and the new model of democratic, user-driven content will take some time to fully mature. But make no mistake: This ship has sailed. Five years from now, the exception will be the rule and the rule will be the exception.

Q: How do you feel about podcasting as a platform for animation?

A: Podcasting is a great option. Frederator.com and a number of other online entities have chosen this method of digital distribution and have done quite well. Podcasting is a very simple way to get your content to the audience, on their terms, and to allow them the freedom of viewing it on their schedule. As the dominance of the iPod as the king of MP3/MP4 player continues, podcasting will come more into the mainstream.

Q: We know about the process of pitching an animated series to a TV network, but not much about getting your own Web series out there. Could you shed some light on that?

A: With a TV network, it's all about finding the key decision-maker and pitching your product and your vision of the characters and stories. In a sense, you do the same thing for a Web series, but to an audience. There are two ways of achieving this: (1) Setting up your own site to directly facilitate webcasting, streaming, or podcasting is very straightforward. There are a myriad of freeware tools available to allow you to do this. (2) If you want a less hands-on meth-od of distributing, there are hundreds of sites that are looking for content and will agree to share revenue with you. I would suggest looking around at video-sharing sites that have (a) good numbers, (b) similar genres of content, and (c) good communication. As you become a more well-known Web entity, sites like iTunes or Amazon become the destination of choice. I might also add that existing TV networks are looking for partners to share cost and risk and can be viable partners, as long as deals remain nonexclusive.

Q: What is the development process for a Web series? If you need outside funding, how does that work? How do you make money?

A: In our development world, there is a bit more orientation toward action and moving based on your first instincts. Because the road to development is always under construction, it's best to get early-stage development out on the Web and then secure feedback. This can be done in a contained forum, on a limited basis at first. As the product matures and finds its audience, then a more widespread deployment makes sense.

On the topic of ''first instincts,'' I love the fact that the *South Park* guys turn around a full episode in seven days. As a result, episodes are far more relevant, and although they haven't ''baked'' as long, there is something raw and authentic about what they've managed to do since moving to this model. The Web certainly leans to that method of ''Ready, Aim, Fire, Aim, Fire, Aim, Fire, Aim…''

As far as funding, there are really two challenges: The first challenge is de-risking the initial production; the second phase is the general monetization. Let me try and break it down. Much like in TV, before something goes into production, there has to be a fully committed production budget, but unlike TV, where volume rules, the Web can be more gradual. The first plunge doesn't have to be twenty-six 30-minute episodes for ten million dollars. This financing process is onerous at best and can take years. As the brand develops on the Internet, investments can be much

smaller and more gradual. For example, a show may start with six 5-minute episodes. With a leaner, meaner process, you can produce less expensively and start to improve during it.

So let's say your first thirty minutes of content will cost you $400,000. This includes all of the initial development and production. In Canada, we're fortunate to have a tax credit system where we can assume that fifty percent of our development costs will be funded with tax credits. Many regions have similar incentives in place. Some development partners may assume the entire cost of production, or small companies may be able to step in and fund the $200,000. If not, a small creator/producer can bring in international Web partners to fill in the gap. YouTube and a number of YouTube channels already do this. Mondo Media is a great example of an American company that actually funds development on the Web. There are literally hundreds of online video portals, including the broadcasters, who are also starved for content. Most regions around the world can be GeoIP-restricted to ensure that content boundaries are maintained, not unlike traditional TV markets. [When a person visits a website, GeoIP can determine which country, region, city, postal code, or area code the visitor is coming from, as well as the ISP, company name, domain name, connection speed, and more.] There are hundreds of video Web portals and as many digital content distributors. Take some time to search around the Web.

Generating-income methods can change as a show begins to build an audience. Subsequent investments become larger no-brainers. Money is generated by these partners through straight advertising, or, in other cases, on a pay-per-view basis (e.g., iTunes) or occasionally, even straight sponsorship. This is actually how we started *Chilly Beach* in the mid 1990s, and it was far less fertile than today. By having international partners on the line with you, you can be assured much better positioning and some marketing thrust within their broadband sites.

Over time (and it may take a couple of years for partners to recoup), you'll be able to share monetization of the content that you created in a major way. In all likelihood, if your library is good, it will continue to generate money over time. Your shorts may not cost $400,000 to produce. In fact, in the early days, individ-

ual sweat equity may be all you need. The more Spartan method would be to create and host your own boutique site. This requires more technical know-how and likely a bit more investment up front, but sites like www.askaninja.com have performed admirably and made more than enough money to live by.

This isn't necessarily easy—it never is. If your name is Seth McFarlane, these deals can be done immediately, with many partners chomping at the bit. If your name is Fred Smith and you've just graduated from college, with no credits to your name, it will take some time, and there will likely be some bootstrapping involved. Either way, there is a path that allows the most motivated and resourceful people to gain access to a global audience in a sustainable manner.

Q: *In our conversations, you've talked about the importance of Web interaction, i.e., some sort of Web game presence to accompany a Web series. Why is that? And is it essential or just preferable?*

A: The more ''touch points'' a brand has, the better the connection. In our experience, people really like to interact with the characters and the worlds, so incorporating an interactive element into a storytelling brand can be highly effective. All that said, don't do it without the proper creative bandwidth. If the creator of the show doesn't have the time to imbue the same care and love that the show is created with, the platform will likely have a poor impact. It takes time and money to create multiplatform content, like games and apps, but if done correctly, it can have a great impact.

Q: *I love your motto for March Entertainment: "Keep it simple. Make it great!" Can you talk about keeping it simple and how one does that in a complicated medium?*

People are inundated with so much information and clutter that it's important to simplify the value proposition: Pick one thing and do it better than anyone else in the world. The iPhone is a perfect example: They provided something with far less functionality than previous PC phone products but made it very simple and easy to use. People need solutions that solve problems for them, not things that make their lives more complex. From a content creation and delivery perspective, that means a few things: Make the content easy to access and simple to use. If you look at our ilaugh.com site, you'll notice that you're two clicks away from viewing the content and that similar content is presented alongside the existing choices to make it easier for the viewer. Storytelling should also be straightforward. Most Web-based successes that I've noted have had very simple value propositions. Take Ask a Ninja, for example: It's the simplest concept in the world but super funny, and people get it right away.

Q: *Can you discuss the tools and software your company uses, such as Adobe Flash and Adobe After Effects? And how do you distribute the final cartoon?*

A: The tools change with time, but we've always been big users of Flash. In the early days, we delivered SWF files, as these were very light. Today, with more bandwidth, we can put more production value into our shorts and still have a very reasonable download/viewing experience. We do try to keep the files light and optimized and deliver them as MP4s or M4Vs. We're getting away from Flash MP4s (FLVs) and moving more to an H.264-compliant MP4 format, in large part because of the success of the iPhone/iPod. We do use After Effects and CGI (Maya or 3DS), but these tools are still more common with larger productions. That said, the rendering and processing power available today is making tools like After Effects fairly easy to use and deploy, and they'll become increasingly so over time.

Q: *I recently heard a musician discussing the smaller versions of new album releases that are resulting from the new distribution methods of music on the Web. How does that translate to Web entertainment? We see huge promotion and marketing efforts to kick off a new animated series on television, but is that necessary for a Web series?*

A: Absolutely, there's a need for marketing [on the Web] as there would be in any medium. As the Web has become more competitive, gaining ''mind space'' has also become more competitive. There are a number of things that you can do to optimize your Web marketing, including:

- Optimizing your site for search-engine hits
- Securing as many links to your site as possible, preferably from larger players
- Using social-networking sites to ''create a buzz''
- Buying ad words
- Getting online media coverage

We aren't marketing experts, but there are lots of Web marketing companies that can help with this, and in some cases they'll share the revenue.

Q: *To hold the interest of an audience, how often should a new webisode come out? Can you continue to hold that audience with downloads and DVD sales alone?*

A: If you have something new every week, that would be ideal. If not, I recommend that you provide something fresh at least every month. Failure to do so could result in a loss of interest.

A: I know it sounds clichéd, but just do it. You learn as you go, and if you have considerable talent, you'll find an audience. The time invested in learning to be Web-smart is time well spent that allows the artist some level of control. Be authentic, and don't be afraid to do what you desire. There are a lot of people watching and, likely, enough of an audience for even the strangest and most unique stories. This is a bold new world that lends itself to creativity and development. A direct conversation with your audience will also help you develop and better understand your marketplace. Finally, share what you've learned with others and be open—it's for the good of all.
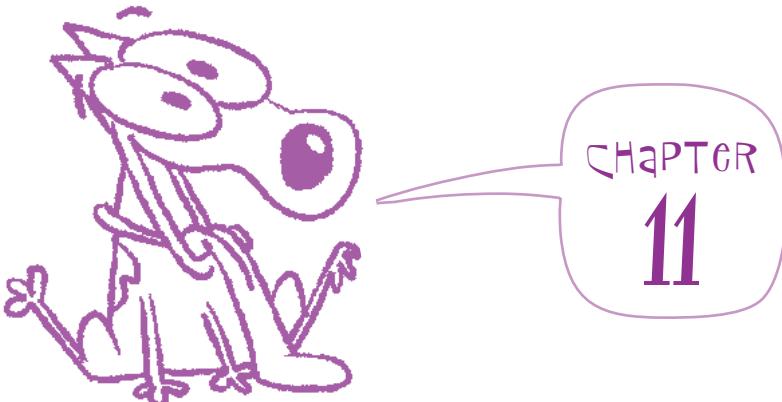
Art from the animated series *Dex Hamilton*, designed by Matt Fernandez and March Entertainment.

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Making a Difference: How to Work in TV Without Losing Your Soul

"We have created in our culture an institution called 'art' for the sake of commerce and economy. Let us not confuse this with the art of our lives. Let us not be limited in our self-expression by those whose work it is to judge or profit from the creations of a choice few. That is only one aspect of a multifaceted jewel."

—Jan Phillips, *Marry Your Muse*

This may be one of the shortest chapters in the book, but perhaps the most important. Within the core of everything you do there is the artistic self. This self nurtures your creative output and the way you do business. Look at it as though you are watering some amazing flowers and making them grow. If suddenly the water stops coming from the hose, the flowers will begin to wilt, maybe even die. You struggle and assign blame. You might even get angry. Then you look down and realize you've been stepping on the hose this whole time. Know that you have the power of lifting your foot and releasing the flow again. There are several ways you can help keep your soul intact while working in any industry in which you practice your art, or direct a crew to produce it. I hope to give you a few tips that have helped me in the past.

One lead foot on the hose of the artistic self is *ego*. In television animation, the creator of a show can be hailed as "the god." He or she can be put on a pedestal,

interviewed, photographed, quoted, and even write a bible (okay, the show bible . . . but it is ironic that it goes by this name). The creator is often in charge of a crew and makes more money than everyone else. You can see how easy it might be to start getting so full of yourself that the connection with your crew starts suffering, your work starts to decline, and your home life, friends, family—you get the picture. You may have noticed in my hose metaphor that the creator is merely directing the hose: He or she did not make the water! At the risk of sounding too metaphysical, the artist/creator is merely a channel. In my opinion, the creator is no more responsible for the ideas that come through him than a radio is for the songs that come through it. Once the creator starts taking credit for all of the gifts he or she has been given, that line often shuts down. I'm sure you have seen it many times in music, film, and television. A music star has some hit records and starts erecting statues of himself, dressing like a king, and getting cosmetic surgery. Then, suddenly, the hits dry up. As I said in chapter 2, I like to use "ego" as an acronym for Edges Genius Out. Genius, to me, is what comes through in an artist's work. Whereas excellence can be produced from skill, genius comes from inspiration and passion.

I have also seen extremely talented creators and producers who suddenly realized that their crew had learned their job so well that the collective output was ten times better than the creator could ever have done him or herself. If you have hired well, the craftspeople and specialists in their positions are supposed to produce better than you ever could. With this realization, you can either jump for joy (which is preferable) or sink into insecurity and begin treating your crew poorly to maintain some sort of superiority. Granted, there can be challenges involved when members of the crew think they know more about the overall direction the show should take than the creator, but that's another story.

So how does one stay in the artistic flow and avoid egomania? As I discussed in chapter 1, when in my twenties, I ran an illustration and design business that catered to mostly corporate and advertising clients. The reason I got into animation was to have an artistic outlet that was my own: I could do what I wanted and then share it. My artistic self opened up again and aided the corporate work while I had my outside film projects. What was ironic (although it makes total sense) is that the animation projects started becoming more successful than the other work. When I started working on *Rocko's Modern Life,* I let go of all my other projects to focus on my show. What became apparent, however, was that although *Rocko* was my creation, it was no longer my baby. I was caring for it, but it had new parents. At the end of the day, it would be living with those parents, not me. This was not one of my independent films; it was a commercial project, and I was working for "Conglomo." I became grouchy, irritable, and began to not look forward to going into work (a feeling I had not felt since working at the ad agency at age nineteen). I had to redirect my thinking, so I started new projects outside of *Rocko*—books and film—which helped me to pump up my artistic connection. I also began doing service work with schools and nonprofit organizations.

So what I am trying to suggest with this story is to ask yourself these questions whenever you get submerged in a commercial project and feel the hose drying up:

Do I have a life?

Although doing your own show can be completely exhilarating, it won't sustain you. Your artistic life still needs to be fed. This is but one project, and eventually it will be over. Don't give up your painting, your short-story writing, or your sculpting. These pursuits are invaluable! I started taking night classes at an art college to pave some new ground in painting and to try some new media I had not used before. I am an artist foremost, and I trust you are, too. Running a show can mean countless meetings involving budgets, schedules, and corporate conference calls. It can drive you mad, so keep grounded with your art. Keep it close to you.

When immersed in a project, exercise and a proper diet are very important. Watch the caffeine intake and avoid resorting to the late-night quickie meals because you never had time to catch a break to eat. These will eat away at your sanity.

Are my friends and family still talking to me?

Friends and family are extremely important. Keep them around at all times. Make time for them. Keep up with outside activities. Friends who were with you before your show took off are great because they keep you grounded and level-headed. Same goes for family—although when I would visit my sister, my niece would have a stack of *Rocko* drawings and autographs I was supposed to do for her classmates, for the most part, it was the old and familiar that kept me sane. Also, the show won't be around forever. Make sure your friends, family, and your art still are when you're done.

Am I keeping my life as simple and frugal as possible?

Let's face it. If you suddenly start making more money than you are used to, you are going to want to enjoy it. But keep this in mind: If you go out and buy the big new house and a new fancy car, you are going to have to sustain that lifestyle. Your show may be a big hit and go on to earn great revenues, or it may be a modest success. Either way, at the end of the day, you will be glad if you socked some of that money away for the future. Keeping a low overhead buys you freedom. It allows you the choice to do creative projects out of artistic impulse rather than financial need.

There is a great story about Ted Geisel (aka Dr. Seuss). He played around with writing movies and cartooning, but nothing gave him more satisfaction than writing books for children. When he was in his early fifties, he hadn't yet obtained much success from his children's books but felt he wanted to devote the rest of his life to this pursuit. He put himself on a strict budget so that he was not in dire straits if his books didn't sell well. So what happened next? He wrote *Horton Hears*

a Who, Cat in the Hat, Green Eggs and Ham, and the list goes on. He kept strictly to his budget and never had to take an advance. Without that outside pressure, his artistic flow was unhampered. When he did start making money, he actually started giving it away, preferring to live as simply as possible. He bought his artistic freedom by scaling back. He was not "owned" by anyone. Ultimately, going out on spending sprees may be an underlying symptom of a larger problem, such as the need for prestige or for diversion, both of which are common these days. Don't fall prey to it—keep things simple.

Are there ways I can be of service anonymously?

Soup kitchens always need help. Underprivileged kids need mentoring. The art departments of public schools are in dire need of assistance. Local communities need involvement. These are all ways to help you level out your ego and give you perspective on what is really important. I have had moments where what seemed to be a huge problem with the production of a television show felt so trivial when I saw someone just struggling to get a meal that day.

Are there ways I can make sure everyone on the production is treated fairly and with respect?

Quite often, the creator of the show has more leverage he can use to protect the crew. Sometimes certain aspects of the work environment could use a good kick in the pants. As the show creator, you've got a big boot: Use it if necessary, but sparingly.

Can I take the money and notoriety I receive and use it to give back?

I created a foundation with the money I earned from *Rocko's Modern Life* that funded art and media departments of several public schools (and continues to fund many projects to this day). My studio is also a member of One Percent for the Planet (a partnership of companies founded by Yvon Chouinard, founder of Patagonia), pledging to donate one percent of gross sales before taxes to organizations preserving the ecosystems of our planet (www.onepercentfortheplanet.org). Since its inception in 2002, more than thirty million dollars have found their way from businesses' bottom lines to help save the planet.

On another note, being the creator of a cartoon and walking into a children's hospital to draw and meet with the kids may be the best medicine they will get that day. When I started doing work with the LA Children's Hospital, one teenager, named Carlos Grande, made a particularly strong impression on me. He had been battling AIDS from a very young age, which he had contracted through a blood transfusion. He was a big animation fan, especially of *Rocko's Modern Life*. There was a woman working with the hospital to help make "dream" films with kids who had life-threatening diseases. Carlos was an artist and wanted to animate his film. With Carlos writing the story and designing the characters, we worked side by side for several months to produce a short animated film version of his dream,

which involved Carlos battling this horrible monster and winning. Carlos had so much wisdom and spiritual connection for someone that age. I'm guessing it came from his having come so close to death several times. It was hard for me to be with him at times, having also lost someone I loved. Nevertheless, I cherished that time with Carlos. We finished the film and screened it at the American Film Institute (AFI) theater. Carlos sadly lost his battle to AIDS about a year later. I will never forget him.

Can I work on story and character moments that pass along positive messages?

The question to ask yourself is, can you do it without being preachy or sacrificing the humor and premise of the show? Even putting a peace sign on Lazlo's flag was adding a subtle, positive symbol of something I believe in that was being viewed by millions of kids. (There are responses to this suggestion that I would not recommend, however: To me, kids' TV is no place for religion.) To give you a personal example, one of my most cherished honors is the Environmental Media Award, which I won in the '90s for the *Rocko* episode on recycling called "Zanzibar," which was directed by Jeff Marsh and Dan Povenmire (who went on to create *Phineas and Ferb* for Disney). "Zanzibar" was a musical about the importance of recycling, cleaning the air, and holding corporations accountable for the pollution. It was goofy and campy, but it got the message across while still being entertaining. You will even find versions of the songs from that episode on YouTube sung by garage bands. The last episode of *Camp Lazlo* was one I wrote called "Peace Frog," which discussed the "Hummer" culture and how the quest to be seen as a "big and all-powerful human" was running roughshod over the ecosystem. We were able to send a message and still be funny with it, and it was episodes like that one that helped my soul stay alive.

Is there a way I can help be a catalyst for change while I'm producing this show?

As the creator of this cartoon, you have the ear of a lot of fans and, if the show is successful, of the money people. Think about ways you can use that influence as a tool for positive change. Entertainment is a huge business. Animation generates massive amounts of toys, books, games, and stacks and stacks of plastic DVD packaging. Can you maybe help push for alternative, more sustainable ways of creating the toys from your show? I was able to get Cartoon Network to look at switching over to using 100% recycled paper products in the whole studio. Think about the changes you can make. We live in a time where our buying habits are making an impact on the future of our children, and of our planet.

At the risk of sounding too hippy-dippy, I would like to challenge you: Whether you are producing a character-driven project on your own or with a network, or are working within the mainstream entertainment business, I want to urge you to produce your products and entertainment with the least impact to the Earth as

possible, as well as attempt to sway those who make those decisions. It's becoming good business to hop on that bandwagon.

Am I being as honest as I can? Am I keeping my ego out of the way?
Honesty and humility will keep you thriving. Practice them.

These are all ways you can keep your soul intact. Having your own show is extremely rewarding. Working in television has its own challenges, but it's not designed to make you miserable; there are simply more hurdles thrown in front of you as you move toward the finish line. You are so much more than your cartoon. Creating one is an amazing experience, but it's not the total story of who you are. Stay vibrant. Stay relevant. And keep contributing, both artistically and to the planet.

Conclusion

I hope this book has fired you up to tackle this process and not overwhelmed you. I always find that the best way to start anything is to break it down to the smallest steps. Remember: Small achievements start with small steps, but huge achievements start with small steps too. Either way, start off modestly and keep building.

Let's recap some of the main ideas:

- Get inspired by your reasons to do a show.
- Character is King (or Queen).
- Find characters all around you that have traits and imperfections an audience can relate to.
- Don't sacrifice the consistency of the character or the rules of your cartoon world for a joke.
- Be prepared (yes, the Boy Scouts had it right).
- Knock their socks off with all your pitch materials. Go the extra mile.
- Just because you can't get a development person to like your idea doesn't mean it's not a worthy one!
- Hire a good entertainment lawyer.
- A network or studio is not the enemy! If you perceive them to be an evil empire, then they will be.
- Have a strong backbone, but choose your battles: Focus on the important ones.
- Keep things as simple and clear as possible.
- The creator of the show can't do it all, so hire great people. In fact, hire people you know are better than you in their areas of expertise.
- Producing the actual series involves creating a turnkey operation. Teach everyone how to fly in the same direction.
- Hire team players; avoid "favor hiring."
- Good characters and strong stories will sustain you in a series environment.

- Make sure your gags and stories are funny to others beside yourself.
- Bridge the gap between your need for artistic expression and the requirements of making a commercial cartoon.
- Television is a rough canvas, so use its imperfections as part of your artwork.
- Don't be guided by your ego or your sense of importance.
- Make a difference with the influence and notoriety you earn. Stake out a brave course.

And don't lose sight of the most important point:

- Have fun. This is, after all, about making cartoons!

I've tried my best to empty the contents of my brain onto these pages with any information that may be of help to you. But don't use my book as your only source of information. There are several guides out there on animation, the animation business, writing, etc., that can also help, and I've included a few on page 229. We are also blessed these days with the wonders of Internet blogs and other online reservoirs of support. Mine is one of them: www.joemurraystudio.com. Please feel free to drop me a line and to check out the latest information I have on the world of the animated series.

I didn't predict that the animated series would be my storytelling device, but an artist's tools come in many shapes and encompass a variety of media. Yours may turn out to be animation, or you may come away using the tools in this book to create a whole new way of letting others live in and explore the world of your characters. Storytelling has been around since the first drawings on cave walls. We are only scratching the surface of where our need to tell stories will take us. Whatever you do with the help of this book, whether you make your own film, Web series, children's book, or network cartoon series, or something you haven't even conceived of yet, if you maintain your vision and your integrity, I guarantee it will be a gift to us all. If anything, I hope this book has inspired you to pursue your dream, whatever it is. As Joseph Campbell used to say, "Don't die with your song still in you."

I look forward to seeing what you produce!

Acknowledgments

"If I have seen farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants."

—Sir Isaac Newton

As with any book about a medium that was born long before I was and will continue long after I'm gone, I am not only humbled by those I have learned from but deeply indebted to them. That is also the case with those who have helped me bring this book to fruition and have added to my store of knowledge: Steve Hillenburg, Everett Peck, Craig McCracken, Tom Warburton, Sue Mondt, Jeff Hutchins, Tom Kenny, Daniel Hawes, and Linda Simensky, who contributed a wonderful foreword. Many thanks are also due to those helping hands without whom this book would not have been possible: Adam Chromy, Chuck Hurewitz, Amy Vinchesi, Autumn Kindelspire, Janet Dimon, Laura Allen, and Jerry Beck for his fact-checking help.

Let me use this opportunity to say thank you to everyone who has helped me along the way, tolerated my crazy artist's antics, and whom I hold out as inspirations. I've been very fortunate to be surrounded by great teachers, colleagues, and peers in both my independent-film and television careers: most notably Mark Briggs, Mark O'Hare, and Nick Jennings.

A big thank you goes to Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, which picked up and funded my two shows—I am forever grateful for that opportunity. Notably, they are Vanessa Coffey, Linda Simensky, Gerry Laybourne, and Herb Scannell at Nickelodeon, and Bob Higgins, Jay Bastian, Khaki Jones, and Andrea Lopez at Cartoon Network. Thank you to the television networks around the world who

have aired (and continue to air) *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo*. Thank you to my dream crews from both of my series. I pushed them hard, and they delivered. But all in all, I believe that we shared the same goal: to put an animated series of value on the air, and one that we could be proud of. And, of course, to the fans that have watched, and keep watching, the shows and films I've produced. The audience participates in the journey of an artist: Thank you for participating in mine.

Recommended Reading

THE BUSINESS SIDE OF ANIMATION

These books helped tremendously in inspiring my business side, not only for animation, but for art and illustration as well.

Lager, Fred, *Ben & Jerry's: The Inside Scoop: How Two Real Guys Built a Business with a Social Conscience and a Sense of Humor* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1994)

Levy, David, *Your Career in Animation: How to Thrive and Survive* (New York, NY: Allworth Press, 2006)

Raugust, Karen, *The Animation Business Handbook* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press, 2004)

Roddick, Anita, *Body & Soul: Profits with Principles: The Amazing Success Story of Anita Roddick & The Body Shop* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1991)

Rydall, Derek, T*here's No Business Like Soul Business* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007)

Schwartz, David, *The Magic of Thinking Big* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1965)

THE ART OF ANIMATION AND STORY

There are many great books that have aided my animation and story-writing development, but I found these to be particularly helpful.

Bonnet, James, *Stealing Fire from the Gods: The Complete Guide to Story for Writers and Filmmakers* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006)

Georgenes, Chris, *How to Cheat in Adobe Flash CS4: The Art of Design and*

Animation (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2009)

Furniss, Maureen, *The Animation Bible: A Practical Guide to the Art of Animating from Flipbooks to Flash* (New York, NY: Abrams, 2008)

Johnston, Ollie, and Thomas, Frank, *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 1981)

Jones, Tim; Kelly, Barry; Rosson, Allan; and Wolfe, David, *Foundation Flash Cartoon Animation* (Berkeley, CA: Friendsofed Press, 2007)

Seger, Linda, *Creating Unforgettable Characters* (New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company, 1990)

Simon, Mark, *Producing Independent 2D Character Animation: Making & Selling A Short Film* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2003)

Williams, Richard, *The Animator's Survival Kit: A Manual of Methods, Principles and Formulas for Classical, Computer, Games, Stop Motion and Internet Animators* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 2001)

Creating Animated Cartoons with Character

Glossary

ANCILLARY MARKET The market for animated properties outside that of the main business of airing a series on a network, such as toys, books, T-shirts, etc.

ANIMATIC A series of storyboard panels filmed or scanned in sequence, then played back with dialogue as a sort of "slide show" to test the timing of dialogue and images, story flow, gags, and character poses before finished animation begins.

ANIMATED SERIES A collection of animated television episodes that share a common title and involve the same characters. A typical season of an animated series runs anywhere from 13 to 26 episodes, with 52 half-hours the norm for syndication.

ANTAGONIST A character that contends with or opposes the popular direction of the story or the main character. The antagonist represents the obstacle to what the protagonist wants. Contrary to popular belief, the antagonist is not always a villain.

ANTHROPOMORPHIC Human characteristics ascribed to nonhuman things (both *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Camp Lazlo* featured anthropomorphic characters).

AVID A digital, offline picture-editing system used by many live-action and animation editors. Avid is a company that makes lots of software applications.

BACKGROUNDS Painted or digitally produced artwork that serves as a backdrop to the animation action. Background artwork generally does not move beyond minor camera movement.

BACKGROUND LAYOUTS Drawings that design the background and background

elements to complement the central action. These are designed from storyboard information.

BUDGET The estimated finances necessary to complete a task, such as animation production. Budgets are usually broken down into smaller "line item" categories to monitor and coordinate each department's expenditures.

CABLE NETWORK Cable networks are subscription television channels (as opposed to the major public broadcast networks NBC, CBS, ABC, FOX, and PBS) that target niche markets and generally are not governed by the negotiation and union rules involved in public network programming. (See *Network*.)

CASTING SHEET A list of characters that have speaking roles used to cast the voice talent that will record those voices.

CASTING DIRECTOR The person responsible for hiring voice actors for an animated production. This person will often also be the voice director during recording.

CATALYST An element that directly affects and changes other elements within a story. In animation, a catalyst is a character or conflict that, when inserted into a normal situation, creates sudden change.

CGI Computer Generated Imagery. More commonly referred to as "computer animation," CGI is usually devoid of line drawing and utilizes heavy light-source shadowing instead, creating more realistic-looking animated characters.

CHARACTER In animation, a vessel that encompasses a created personality, look, and voice unique unto itself. Any animated actor placed in a scene becomes a character, from main characters to background characters.

COLOR KEY A master color design that shows the overseas studio artists how each character and prop should be colored. There are also "background keys" that perform the same function.

COLOR PALETTE The selection of colors an animator uses when creating the look of his or her animated production. The palette will be used as a guide in the show's development. *Rocko's Modern Life*, for example, had a "fruity" color palette, whereas *Camp Lazlo* had a more summer cabin/earth tones feel.

COMMERCIAL SPOT A slot reserved for a commercial, or the commercial itself, within the running time of a television show. An average 30-minute animated show will have eight minutes reserved for commercials. Most animated episodes will run commercials before, halfway through, and directly following the episode.

CONTRACT A legally binding written agreement between two or more parties (in this case, the artist and the financier, network, or studio) detailing the exchange of properties, compensation, representation, and more. Often full of legal jargon that should be deciphered by a qualified entertainment lawyer.

CO-PRODUCER A person who shares the duties of the producer or executive producer. A co-producer will often have the right of approval over most production issues, but only under the parameters set up by the main producer.

CUE In the case of animation, a musical selection designed to be a part of a whole. An action, mood or story point will usually dictate the appropriate "cue" and where it will go in the film or episode.

DEMOGRAPHIC A statistic characterizing a group of people, usually used by networks to target a particular viewer market. (For example, *Camp Lazlo's* main demographic was 6- to 11-year-old boys.)

DEVELOPMENT In animation, the stage during which a series or short concept is re-worked or fine-tuned until all parties involved are satisfied with the project's direction. The length of the development process can vary greatly.

DEVELOPMENT BIBLE A reference guide or "blueprint" of the proposed animated series that maps out in detail the preliminary information on such elements as characters, backgrounds and settings, story, and more.

DIALOGUE RECORD The process of voice actors recording an animated feature's dialogue track in a recording studio, under the direction of a voice director. The actors usually work from a script, unless they are instructed by the director to improvise.

DIRECTOR The principal artistic force over a film or series; or, the person ultimately responsible for a specific department's contribution to the project. There are several types of directors in animation and film: for example, for *Camp Lazlo* and *Rocko's Modern Life*, a storyboard director was in charge of telling the story and mapping out gags through the use of storyboard drawings. An animation or timing director took the completed storyboard, created an animatic, and edited, mapped, and timed the action by writing out timing sheets.

EDITING The process of revising elements of a project for purposes of storytelling, polishing, or timing issues. This is true for an animation picture editor, sound editor, dialogue editor, or music editor.

FINAL CUT PRO A popular Mac-based digital editing software.

FLASH ANIMATION A program developed by Macromedia originally designed for Web-based animation but which is also used by animation houses and independents for animation production. Television shows such as *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends,* on Cartoon Network, are animated in Flash.

FOCUS GROUP A group of viewers, made up of one or more key demographics, used to test the appeal and validity of a particular series or film. The testing results are used for general market research and can influence a network's decision to move forward with a project.

GAG A term used in animation for a written joke or prank that sets up either a funny dialogue exchange or a build-up followed by payoff action.

HOOK The unusual quirk, concept, or visual in a character or story that captures a viewer's interest and leaves him or her wanting more.

INCIDENTAL CHARACTER A very minor character whose main purpose is to provide backup for a gag or to fill a crowd scene.

INDEPENDENT A filmmaker or creator who produces a film or television show independent of the direct involvement or ownership of an outside source, such as a network or studio. You can still be considered independent if you acquire outside financing yet maintain creative freedom.

LEAD SHEET A tracking sheet created by the art director to instruct the overseas studio which prop, character, or background goes with each scene. The lead sheet is usually cross-referenced with the storyboard to provide clear directions.

LINE PRODUCER The producer in charge of keeping all separate departments for a series or film on track, on time, and within the operating budget. This is an extremely important task and typically includes hiring and firing staff, as well as other human resource issues.

LOCKED PICTURE The footage of a film or animated episode edited to the length it will remain for the duration of the post-production process. The sound effects and music editors use this and the corresponding time code to make their final sound edits.

MAIN CHARACTER The central character that the series or film is built around. In a series, the main character typically appears in every episode and is the focal point of the story.

MIX The process in which the final locked picture, dialogue, sound effects, and music are combined and brought collectively to the final audio level and quality that will appear on the screen.

MIX STAGE A dark, soundproof room that usually includes a large mixing console and a viewing screen meant for previewing the mix.

MODEL PACKS Packets used as reference for the overseas studio animators containing full turn-around, color key, and mouth chart for each character appearing in a particular episode.

MODEL SHEET A detailed description of how to draw a particular character, including construction guidelines, expressions, and a full turn-around of the character. This is used by both the in-house artists and the overseas studio to ensure all animators draw a character the same way, and that the character stays "on model."

MOUTH CHART A chart of a particular character's mouth shapes, used to animate dialogue sounds. Each mouth pose is labeled with the letter A, B, C, etc., that is indicated on the timing sheets. The character can then be animated to speak the pre-recorded dialogue.

NETWORK A corporation that owns and operates one or more television channels. Content is often owned by the corporation and distributed to network affiliates. (See also *Cable Network*.)

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OPTION A contractual agreement between the creator and the network or producer in which the rights to purchase the creator's next project are held by the network or producer for a certain period of time. In the television and film industry, an option is placed on a property for an agreed upon fee. Before the option agreement expires, the "optioner" must decide to purchase or pass on the creative property, usually surrendering the option fee in the event of a pass.

OUTLINE The series of story beats, or the story structure, laid out without great detail but highlighting the main plot points. A script or storyboard can be written using the outline as a guide.

PILOT EPISODE An introductory episode of a television program produced to best represent and sell the series. The pilot episode is usually tested with focus groups, advertisers, and network executives before a final decision is made to go into production on the series.

PITCH The presentation of an idea to potential buyers or investors with the intent of convincing them to buy or support the project. A project might be pitched with a simple presentation or with a complete set of storyboards.

PLOT The sequence of events that drive a story.

PREMIERE The first time an episode or a series appears on the air. A movie premiere is the first time it is officially screened by an audience (not including test or press audiences).

PREMISE The basis for a story idea or outline. A premise precedes the outline or plot summary.

PRE-PRODUCTION All work that is performed before production officially begins on a project. Pre-production work is designed to prepare the staff to jump into production with all of the necessary materials in place, such as model sheets, background styles, floor plans, etc.

PRODUCER In animation productions, "producer" can carry several definitions: the person who deals strictly with financial, personnel, and scheduling matters (see *Line Producer*); the person who is more hands-on concerning matters of creative decision-making (sometimes also called the "executive producer"); and, on an animated series such as *The Simpsons*, this can also include an established writer, for whom it is customary to give a "producer" title.

PRODUCTION The active assembly and creation of an animated series. In animation, a project may be referred to as "the Production." Also the name of a department (Production Department), which organizes and manages the output of the artists and writers.

PROPOSAL A presentation of materials describing in detail a series or film idea in order to gain approval from either the network or financial backers so the project can move forward.

PROTAGONIST The lead character in a story around whom the plot revolves. The protagonist usually possesses a "want" for which the antagonist creates an obstacle.

SCRIPT A written work that serves as the primary instructions for a film, radio or theatrical play, cartoon, or television production. Actors follow the action, stage direction, and dialogue in a script in order to play their parts.

SCRIPT-DRIVEN An entertainment vehicle that is propelled solely by the written word. In a script-driven animated series, the script is written first, and then the storyboard is produced verbatim from its direction and dialogue.

SERIES BIBLE A technical, instructive manual that maps out every detail of an animated series, no matter how small, from the background design elements to the amount of hair on a character's head. A proper series bible should guide and instruct a new crewmember or overseas studio in every detail of the animated world and the characters who live in it.

SETTING The location, or series of locations, including homes or other buildings, where the events of a story takes place.

SIZE COMP Short for Size Comparison, a side-by-side comparison of each character in a production that resembles a police lineup. It is helpful for those not familiar with a series when gauging how tall one character is in relation to others.

SHOW CREATOR The person who created the characters and premise of a show. Quite often, a show creator will be the executive producer of his or her series and will have responsibility for all major creative decisions.

SHOW RUNNER A person who runs and produces a show idea created by someone else. A show runner usually works on behalf of the show creator to realize the vision if the show creator lacks the necessary experience him- or herself.

SOUND EFFECTS The attachment of outsourced sound to a film, TV show, or live production. A good sound effect can widen the stage, so to speak, with the addition of off-screen sounds, which can enhance a gag or emphasize the mood (danger, fear, excitement, etc.). Animation relies heavily on sound effects and dialogue to help sell the visual.

SPOTTING The process during which the creator, director, or show runner takes the locked picture and communicates direction to the sound or music editor, usually scene by scene, providing creative input for each sound or music cue.

SPOTTING NOTES The notes produced for the sound or music editor after a spotting session.

STANDARDS AND PRACTICES The television network department that regulates the legal, moral, and ethical boundaries of the content of the shows it airs. Many people commonly refer to these regulators as censors.

STORY BEAT An important point or moment in the plotline of a story. A story outline can be broken down into "beats" to track the progression in a simple

manner.

STORYBOARD A panel or series of panels illustrating the progression of an episode or scene used in animation or live action. Storyboards are an inexpensive tool for mapping out and working on a story before the costly animating stage begins.

STORYBOARD-DRIVEN A production method in which the story is written via storyboard rather than scripted. A storyboard-driven story begins with a loose outline, and artists then tell the story visually, writing in dialogue that will be transferred to a script later.

SYNDICATION The process of providing a series of episodes (the standard minimum is 52 hours worth of content) for sale to outside markets, allowing for a non-exclusive, simultaneous airing, often in wide international markets.

SYNOPSIS A condensed or abbreviated version of a story or idea, featuring only the primary characters and key plot points.

TIMING SHEETS Used by animators to communicate proper filming instructions to a camera operator. In television production, they are produced by a timing director or sheet timer as a blueprint for an overseas animator in regard how to animate a scene, where to put dialogue, etc.

THUMBNAIL DRAWINGS Small sketches designed for rapid mapping of a story, scene, or gag.

TRADITIONAL ANIMATION A term developed with the onset of computer animation to describe the older method of drawing animation by hand. Computers are often used to color hand-drawn animation, but the animation remains "traditional."

TRACKING SHEETS Used by a line producer to keep the crew informed about a particular episode's point in its production schedule, as well as informing a department about the length of time they are allotted to work on a particular episode.

TURN-AROUNDS Drawings that show a character from four angles: front, three-quarter, side, and back views. This gives every animator an almost three-dimensional view of the character. Turn-arounds are needed for each character on a production.

VOLUME ENVIRONMENT Any production that is on schedule to produce multiple, overlapping episodes of a show or film. Different methods must be taken into consideration, with an assembly-line approach of producing multiple episodes simultaneously.

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