

# That Old Bluth magic

A Disney Defector Makes Good

"Animation is a key to the inner workings of the mind. It goes where the live action camera cannot enter, to unlock an entire imaginary kingdom which is otherwise quite inaccessible."

The words, and the philosophy behind them, belong to animation director Don Bluth, the man responsible for spearheading the return to classical animation techniques which put a failing industry back on its feet.

Bluth's journey toward industry self-realization began in 1955 when, fresh out of high school, he joined Walt Disney Productions as an assistant animator. He found himself working under, and learning from, veteran animator John Lounsbery. One of the pioneers in the field, Lounsbery taught him the value of meticulous attention to detail while the two were working together on the full-length feature *Sleeping Beauty*.

Eighteen months later Bluth left Disney to pursue different career interests. Earning a degree in English Literature at Brigham Young University and managing a theatre with his brother in Culver City, California helped give him the diversity he felt he needed before returning to the animation field.

In 1968, he joined Filmation Studios for a short stint working

on Saturday morning cartoons, but soon realized that when it came to quality, Disney still set the standards. So, in 1971 Bluth returned to the Disney fold, where he worked on such animated features as *Robin Hood* (1973), *Winnie The Pooh and Tigger Too* (1974), *The Rescuers* (1976), *Pete's Dragon* (1977), *The Small One* (as producer/director in 1978) and *The Fox And The Hound* (1979).

But even there, within the hallowed halls of the industry giant, Bluth noticed a difference. Fewer frames were being used per second, which meant fewer in-between drawings were being created. The result was a flatter look and less fluid movements for the characters. The detail and precision he had come to regard as a Disney hallmark

were slowly being abandoned, while shortcuts and cheaper alternatives crept into the work.

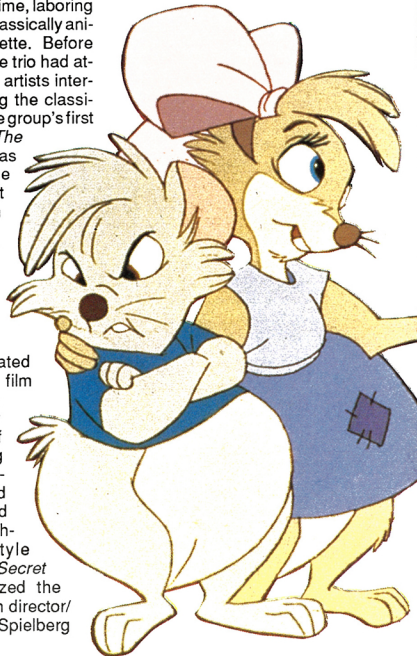
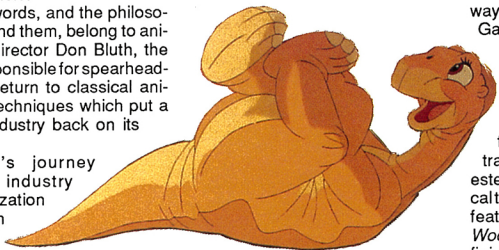
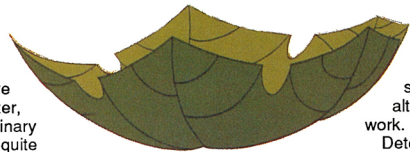
Determined to show that the old way was still the best way, Bluth and fellow animators Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy began working in

Bluth's garage during their spare time, laboring to create a classically animated featurette. Before they knew it, the trio had attracted a team of artists interested in re-learning the classical techniques. The group's first feature, *Banjo The Woodpile Cat*, was finished in 1979, the same year that Bluth, Goldman and Pomeroy, along with 11 other animators, left Disney to start their own studio.

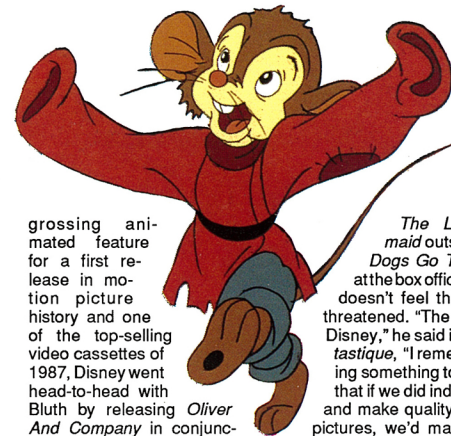
The group's first project was a two-minute animated sequence for the film *Xanadu*, which paved the way for the fulfillment of Bluth's lifelong dream: his first full-length animated feature produced with all of the richness of old-style animation. *The Secret Of NIMH* galvanized the industry, and when director/producer Steven Spielberg

contacted him to discuss working together on *An American Tail*, Bluth knew he had made the right choice.

Suddenly the *grande dame* of animation had real competition. Walt Disney Productions began working in earnest to keep up. In 1988, after *An American Tail* had become the highest



Bluth shares an animated moment with the cast of *All Dogs Go To Heaven*



LEFT: Fievel from *An American Tail*

OPPOSITE PAGE: Littlefoot from *The Land Before Time*

grossing animated feature for a first release in motion picture history and one of the top-selling video cassettes of 1987, Disney went head-to-head with Bluth by releasing *Oliver And Company* in conjunction with *The Land Before Time*, another Spielberg backed venture. The two features were so close in box office grosses that 1989 saw the same strategy repeated. *All Dogs Go To Heaven* prompted the simultaneous release of Disney's

*The Little Mermaid*, a picture some say is the best thing done by the studio since Walt's death.

The battle isn't over yet. Scheduled for a November release, Bluth's *Rock-A-Doodle*, a musical comedy about a rock 'n' roll rooster, will lock horns with Disney's *The Rescuers Down Under*, a sequel to the 1977 hit which, ironically, Bluth helped create. In production for November 1991 is *Song Of The Ice Whale*, which will be up against Disney's retelling of the classic fairy tale *Beauty And The Beast*.

Another feature soon to go into production, *A Troll In Central Park*, has yet to prompt an announced Disney project, though Bluth is characteristically confident there will be one. "I think we'll always go head-to-head from now on," he said in *Cinefantastique*. "But would I do it any differently? The answer is no. And I would leave again if I had to. It was the correct move for us all, and it's been a benefit to everyone, including Disney."

For those of us who celebrate the return of the magic which made animation special, the benefit is clear. We can thank Don Bluth for making that magic possible, again. ▼

Story By David Salcido

The Country Mouse Family from *The Secret Of NIMH*