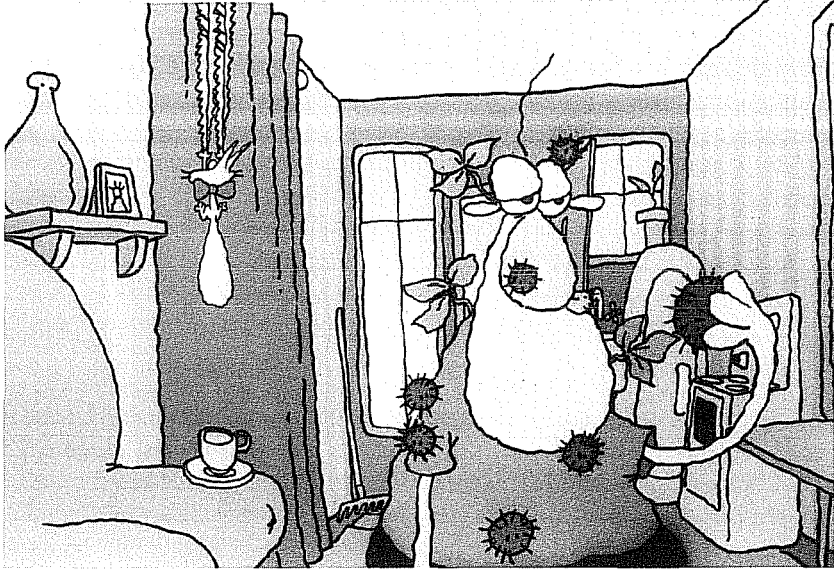


FILM REVIEWS / CRITIQUES DE FILMS

WACKY MUSICAL STORIES: NOT WITH A SNEEZE BUT A SNIFFLE?

Wacky Musical Stories. National Film Board of Canada, 1995. Four selections. Running time: 37.01 min. \$14.95. ISBN 0-7722-0544-2. (This video is sold in bookstores through McClelland & Stewart and is for home use only. Information about videos packaged for school and commercial use is available from the NFB.)



Illus. from "The Cat Came Back," director Cordell Barker

These four cartoons were viewed both as mime without sound and as song-stories with the music turned on. Comparison of the four will include reactions of two other adults and questions regarding their suitability as children's entertainment.

"The Cat Came Back" is a 7:37 minute cartoon about a man and a cat. An innocent tuba-player, introduced in a short teacup-rattling scenario, discovers a tiny yellow cat on his doorstep. His frantic and noisy attempts to rid himself of the feisty wee feline by land, sea or air are outmatched every time by the cat's calm and quiet return. As in the Saturday cartoons, our hero/villain's methods backfire.

"The Cat Came Back," unlike the Saturday cartoons, has a flat line. Its overall feeling is manic rather than antic. "Getting Started," the last of the four cartoons on this video, also lacks impact because there is no buildup of suspense. In "The Cat Came Back" the action is fast and furious but flat. In "Getting Started" the action is slowmoving and flat. Each is humorous in many details but neither has

trough or crest to carry the viewer on waves of laughter.

The enjoyment in "The Cat Came Back" is mainly its well-performed music which has a kind of "Gilligan's Island" tone. It's Canadian, though, with a nice blend of country and maritime sound. The movement and gestures in the animation do add interest. The buntzy little car traversing rolling hills, the teensy cat and the mix of glee and gloom that makes up Mr. Johnson's mania all contribute to a great storyline laid down by the music. The joke inherent in the nine lives of the spirited cat ends the production with a good unexpected punchline.

"The Cat Came Back" is easy to follow and not very long so it may capture the interest of a group of schoolage youngsters. "Juke Bar," on the other hand, required three viewings before I and my companion viewers caught on to the story. We eventually got that the jukebox is an insect exterminator's device using swing music as lure.

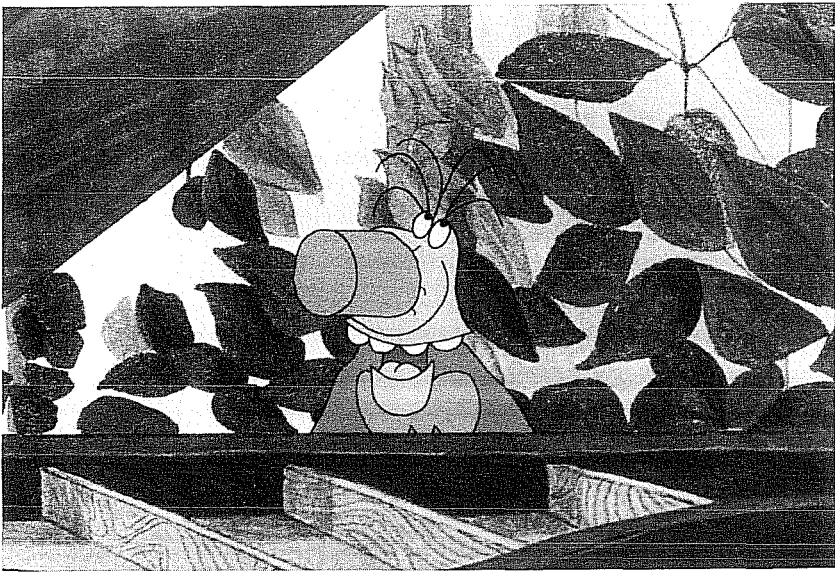
The bugs are hideous but wonderfully made. There is a Prohibition, speak-easy, gangster ambience with touches of Broadway and Hollywood musicals and dance patterns from the 1930-40s era, including hints of the fox-trot, in the nightclub scene. These visual and musical references are clever and challenging but how would young children relate to them? A subplot love story of two "innocents" who escape the awful fate of the other bugs provides interest as well as a happy ending.

The combination of realism and animation, colours, patterns, costuming and music are all affecting. Is it possible, however, that this little production number entertained its makers far more than it will its targeted viewers? What child would understand this work or find it funny? It might provide fun for young people, perhaps in their "sophisticated" twenties, who may be acquainted with lore from the 1930-40s. For a younger audience the buildup might be more towards perplexity than laughter.

Of the four selections, "Black Fly" rates highest for its authentic Canadian experience and its possible appeal for youngsters as well as adults. It has a sense of fun from the start. Its depiction of those pesky little flies taking over the roles of people and the words and folksound of surveyor and lyricist Wade Hemsworth arranged by Kate and Anna McGarrigle are key. All involved in this production have done fine work. A classroom music teacher might use this 5:06 minute video as part of a program at the elementary level in grades four to six. It has the same degree of musical fun as another NFB production "The Log Driver's Waltz." These are both attractive ways to introduce the young to Canadian history.

Though "The Cat Came Back" won Festival Awards in Yugoslavia in 1988 and is based on a classic folksong with 100 years to its credit, "Black Fly" contains more genial humour in its animation and reflects a genuine northern context. The sober little white-on-black jig at the end is a clever touch.

Finally, "Getting Started" simply doesn't get a move on. For all its various attempts to play off the character's inert posture towards piano practice, this offering manages only to irritate the watcher. It is 12:22 minutes of clever sound



Illus. from "Getting Started"

effects and sight gags signifying nothing. These ploys don't collect in the viewer as a buildup to mirth.

The simple airy elegance of its uncluttered setting is really attractive but the storyline, based on a weak premise, is not nearly as exciting as waiting for a sneeze. In fact, it's more like a continuous snuffle.

Yet I can't fault any one of the participants in this endeavour. It's a quality production in many small ways. I, for one, feel relief and gratitude when Patrick Godfrey plays Debussy's *Children's Corner* to finish up the piece. Also, I feel that the lovely little piano doesn't deserve the pounding it gets when the frustrated little fellow loses his cool.

"Getting Started" might appeal to children who dislike piano practice but I doubt that it would do much to make them laugh at and deal with their own ennui. Rather, it might persuade them that their case against applying themselves to this sometimes tedious discipline is valid.

Questions: Is *Wacky Musical Stories* targeted for a particular age or group of children or were a number of very talented people making these videos for their own enjoyment? Does violent mania have to be the humour of choice to get children's attention as ever seems to be the case in adult entertainment?

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