

June 2010

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Recommended Citation

Bowlin, Barrett (2010) "What You Should Be Feeling: An Interview with Bill Plympton," *Harpur Palate: a Literary Journal*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/harpurpalate/vol10/iss1/8>

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Bowlin: What You Should Be Feeling: An Interview with Bill Plympton

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE FEELING: AN INTERVIEW WITH BILL PLYMPTON Barrett Bowlin

Bill Plympton's career in animation has spanned decades, and his work has remained wildly and internationally popular despite changing trends and troubled economies. His distinct style and subject matter have pushed cartoons into unfamiliar but welcome territories, and his short and feature films have earned him acclaim from hundreds of film festivals, critics, and prize committees. His first feature to be nominated for an Academy Award, for example, was 1987's "Your Face," an outlandish and brilliant short film that featured voice work from Maureen McElheron. As one of the hardest working artists in the business, he knows what it's like to single-handedly draw and color an animated full-length feature, the first of which was 1992's The Tune. In order to finance his films, Plympton has worked in the commercial industry, as well, producing spots for companies like Geico, United Airlines, AT&T, and Nike. As independent an artist as they come, however, he has worked tirelessly to promote his creations, the latest of which is the full-length feature, Idiots and Angels, which will be released in New York on October 6th, at the IFC Film Center. We recently had the opportunity to speak with Bill Plympton and discuss the film, the changing face of media, and why thought balloons are awkward, little bastards.

With Idiots and Angels, how have you noticed that your personal style and artistry has changed? Why do you think it has changed?

That's a function of the technology. The feature film I did before *Idiots and Angels* was called *Hair High*, and, at that time, the cost to transfer digital to film was really expensive—like \$100,000 to 200,000—and that was way beyond my budget. In the last three or four years, the transfer cost has come down, and now it's about \$25,000, and that I can pay for. Before that, I had to take my

drawings, make a Xerox copy of my drawings, and then paint on the Xerox cels from the drawings. And the Xerox process didn't have very good resolution. But now, when I scan it on the computer, the resolution is so precise and so sharp that I can do it all the shading with pencil and do all the texture and all the detail, and the resolution is perfect. So that's why it's a totally different style. And, quite frankly, when I was starting out, doing illustrations as a kid, the pencil was my preferred form of making art, so it makes sense now that I'm making a feature film now of pencil on paper; it feels like I'm home, like I'm back to my roots.

Does working with a pencil and paper go a lot faster for you in the process?

It goes a lot faster; I don't have to hire so many people to paint the cells and clean the cells. That was a very backbreaking and time-consuming process. But now they can clean the cels digitally. It goes twice as fast, and it's much cheaper in the process.

In contrast with some of your previous feature-length films, why did you opt to have Idiots and Angels run without dialogue? What constraints did this pose for you during the film's creation and process?

The idea of doing it without dialogue is not new, as you know; Sylvain Chomet did *The Triplets of Belleville* without dialogue. But it just felt to me that the film was more about emotions and about visuals, and not so much about talking. So I wanted to try and experiment and see if I could make the film without dialogue. A number of my shorts have been made without dialogue, so I knew I could do it in a short film, and I wanted to see if I could do it in a feature. And, quite frankly, it was a big success. A lot of people come out of the film not really realizing there's no dialogue. The story just feels very clear without words. Another reason it's been successful overseas is because there's no

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dialogue. There's no cost in doing subtitles; there's no cost in dubbing. It just makes the process a lot easier to sell overseas.

What constraints do you find are there when you work without dialogue?

A lot of the interior dialogue is difficult—you know, when someone is thinking of something they did in the past—so then I have to go to thought balloons, which are a little awkward. Wording would be a little bit clearer there, and, normally, when someone's angry, they'll yell epithets. But the storytelling is quite easy without words. To bring up another issue, the music really becomes the dialogue. It becomes the explainer of what's going on and what you should be feeling.

In terms of innovation, where do you see animation and cartooning heading?

I think it's diversifying. I know there's a big push on computer animation, and a lot of money is being made by computer animation, but I think there are other styles of animation that are equally powerful and popular. For example, stop motion (the Henry Selick and Wes Anderson films), claymation (which is Nick Park), traditional cel animation (which is Japanese manga), and then mine, which is pencil animation, and also a lot of flash. There are a lot of great flash-animated feature films that are coming out. So I think the audience is open to any technique so long as there are interesting characters and the story is told well. I don't think there's any real limit on animation; the future's very bright for cartoons.

What obstacles have you seen or do you anticipate for cartoons in the near future?

Personally, my obstacles include trying to get distributors to handle my films and to believe in them, which is a mystery to me because I know that my films are popular all over the world and that I have a big

audience. But a lot of the distributors are afraid of my films because they're not family entertainment. So I'm always butting my head against the stereotype that animation has to be for kids. And they can't get behind the idea that mature ideas are the perfect subject matter for animation. Whenever I try to sell my films to distributors, they say it's a little racy for animation. "Sorry, kid, we just can't handle it." So that's why I have to self-distribute the films. It's very discouraging. It's a tough, uphill battle fighting against Dreamworks, Pixar, and Disney, but I'm having fun and I'm enjoying making my films.

Looking back at your syndicated newspaper strip, Plympton, when did you stop working on newspaper cartoons?

I started in 1975 and ended in 1985.

What was behind the decision to move away from that medium?

As a kid, I always wanted to be an animator. I always loved Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse and Goofy, and that was really my lifetime goal. When I moved to New York in 1970, animation was a dying art form, and it was very tragic. So the only option for me was to work in print—illustrations, gag cartoons, political cartoons. That was the way to make money and still do cartoons. But once animation started coming back in the mid-1980s, with MTV and Japanese anime and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* and *The Simpsons* and the whole Disney resurgence, then I felt the time was right to get back into animation, and there was a market again for cartoons.

*Like you've done with several of your other full-lengths, do you plan on releasing the storyboards of *Idiots and Angels* as a graphic novel?*

No, we should, though. I tried that with *Hair High*, but it didn't work out very well simply because it didn't get a major release. Very few

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publishers will release [an animated film's storyboards] as a graphic novel unless it gets a major release, like *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*. I just don't have that kind of muscle power.

[Plympton does have a big art book coming out in the spring called Independently Animated: Bill Plympton. It will contain art and anecdotes and reproductions of his work that no one has seen before.]

What do you find are the challenges of working within the print medium?

The problem with print is that it's static. There's no movement; there's very little storytelling. It's very local and doesn't get all over the world. My films are shown all over the planet and on television, and they move and they're funny, and they've got color, and sometimes they're twenty feet high. In print, you just don't have those kinds of specifications. You don't have that kind of impact, that power. So I was sort of happy to leave print. It was pleasant but it didn't fulfill me as an artist, which is something animation does.

Bill Plympton's latest film, Idiots and Angels, will be released in New York, on October 6, at the IFC Film Center. For more information on Plympton and the film, visit idiotsandangels.com.