

By Jake Friedman at AnimatorsUnite.com



Keeping Fresh the Old Spirit: An interview with JJ Sedelmaier

Witty animation with mature themes have inspired most of us [watch "Stoned Wheat" on Youtube.com] but much credit should probably be given to JJ Sedelmaier. Very few studios have a track record like JJ Sedelmaier Productions; upon entry of the studio, which currently houses six hired full-time staff, nearly a hundred awards grace the shelves. This is the studio that introduced us to SNL's "TV Funhouse" the first season of "Beavis and Butthead," the intro to "Strangers with Candy," countless memorable animated commercials, and most recently the Tek Jansen sequences on "The Colbert Report."

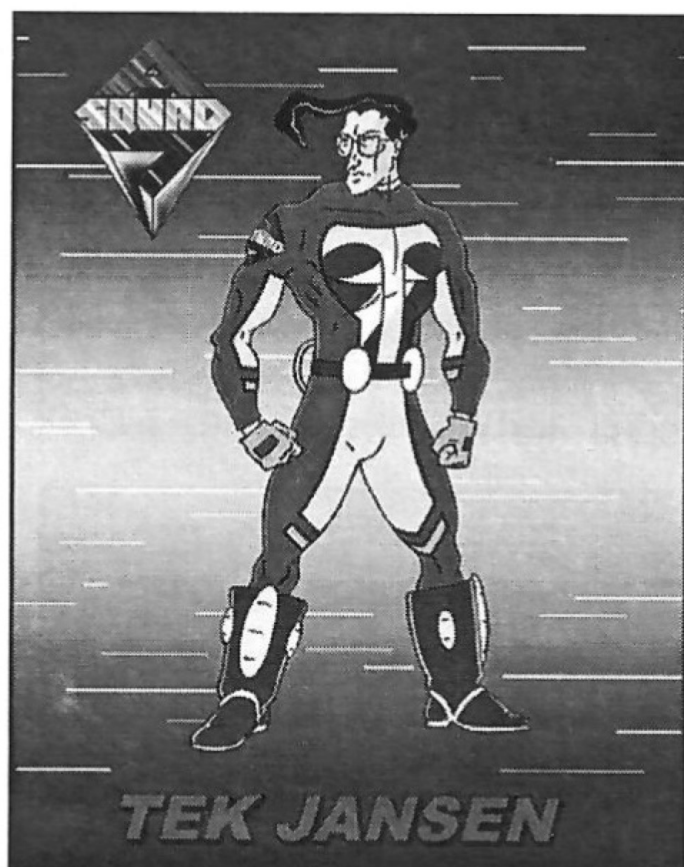
In an age of CG departments in 2D studios, or in which all the drawing done is on digital Wacom tablets and Syntique screens, Sedelmaier's studio, co-run by JJ and wife Patrice, stands out in the sea of time. It's a studio that encourages a creative vibe with hands-on art, using [ooh!] light discs and [ah!] pencils. I was recently graced with freelance animation work at the White Plains studio, where one of my first tasks there was cleanup and inking with pens on paper!

There's no question of Sedelmaier's strength in the New York animation community, but I wanted to uncover the secrets of the masked man, Sedelmaier himself.

JF: What's your sense of quality work that you strive for?

JJS: It's based on really thinking about why something is designed the way it is and trying to keep it as valid as I can. You can have something that feels conventional, but there should be something about it that sparkles. Sometimes it's a glorious, luscious style. Other times the style is very rudimentary, even crude, but there's still something charming or smart about it.

JF: Some studios develop a style as their calling card. Did you ever try that?



JJS: That's the last thing I would ever do. There's so much to animation. The craft is constantly wide open, and the more work that's done in different styles, the more that is evidence of how versatile the craft is. One of the reasons we're not doing Saturday Night Live anymore is because I got absolutely terrified of being type-cast. I don't want to be thought of as the place that just does the SNL stuff. We had a body of work before we did the SNL stuff, and founded the studio on working with artists and illustrators who sometimes have never been animated. This translation of different graphic designs into film is very exciting.

Around the studio the shelves are filled with hundreds of books on various artists. One day JJ will be talking to artist, director, production manager Dan Madia about artist Alex Toth, another day he'll be talking to artist, director, production manager Dave Lovelace about Looney Tunes timing. There is no shortage of influence at the studio, and every book and magazine seems to have its purpose.

JF: You've noted your dad as an influence as a TV commercial director. What did he do?

JJS: He did the "Where's the Beef"



spot; he did the federal express stuff, he literally changed the face of television advertising through his casting and his special humor sensibility which was rooted in the idea that entertainment sells. He was told that it couldn't. The impression some people had who had seen his work was that his commercials were very unusual looking, but they were only unusual in the sense that they were every-day looking. They appeared normal as opposed to plastic and polished. His stuff really isn't broad, it's understated. You can almost see influences of his work on films like "Raising Arizona" -- the camera angles, and the timing and so forth. In some respects my dad's stuff is almost like live-action cartoons. It's a great heritage.

JF: How did you wind up here?

JJS: I grew up reading comic books, watching cartoons, always drawing. In my family, it was pounded into me that I should do what I enjoy doing for a living as opposed to being in a situation where I would have to find time during the weekends. My mother's an artist and graphic designer, so there were always materials around the house. It was a great, inspiring way to grow up.

After I graduated from University of Wisconsin in 1979 I wanted to do comic books, and that brought me to New York. I worked in an antique shop for a while just to pay

the rent. I was just showing my book to anyone who would look at it, and then meeting people like Tony Eastman who really helped me get started. Then I started working, meeting people like Jan Svochak, a brilliant animator.

I'm not good at doing stuff just out of my head. I can work off of something somebody said or wants, or something that somebody is having trouble solidifying and making into something. And that's why finding those people that you have a rapport with is very important.

Working with JJ, I see that strive for perfection daily. His notes on layouts and designs are very pointed and clear. He will give you complete freedom to design a figure, but his notes might be to slim down the waist, or to bend a grotesque smile inwards instead of outwards. It begins very laissez-faire, and ends with him knowing exactly how to turn your raw drawing into something special.

JF: So what job prepared you most for what you're doing now?

JJS: I worked at the Ink Tank from 1984 until 1990. Had I not worked there, I don't know that things would have gelled like they wonderfully did. When I got there, they wanted to hire me as an in-between, and I told Bob [Blechman] no, I want to be an assistant. An assistant does much more input. So I assisted for a couple weeks, and then they had some Children's Television Workshop stuff that I was able to animate. And then there were some revisions on a commercial that Tissa

David had done that I made to modify when she wasn't available.

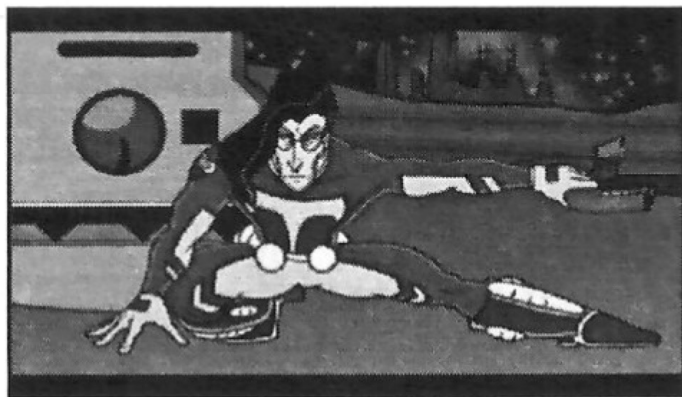
After a while I found myself doing most of the talking to the clients, and the studio decided I was going to be the producer, since I was talking about the work, and I was making people feel comfortable.

JF: How does one make clients feel comfortable?

JJS: By understanding what it is they're saying, what it is they want to hear, what it is you want to do, and then lifting the level of user-friendliness of the whole situation. I like letting them know that they're going to get not just what they need out of that situation, but also a little bit more. That little bit more is important, because that gives you the freedom to make it your own thing, within in their parameters.

It was JJ's wife Patrice that encouraged JJ to take the producing job, from which he was promoted to associate producer and then associate director. By the late 80's they knew they could open their own studio.

By the end I was producing and doing creative as well, and not everyone works as comfortably in one realm as the other. But it seems silly to me to not produce your own stuff. If you know what's involved in doing the job, it streamlines the process for everyone. What that does mean is that you can't take on a whole lot of work, but Patrice and I never wanted to take on a whole lot of work.



JF: What's it like to work with your wife?

JJS: It's terrific because it works. In some respects, what we do here is the same thing we do at home. We have different roles, she's always organized the household, and handled the money for the house, I've always handled the hands-on stuff in the house, and we wanted to be parents and have some control over our lives. If we were going to do that, we wanted to do it ourselves.

I guess we're both control freaks, but I don't think unreasonably.

There are a lot of professional couples and families that make lots of money but have separate lives, and when they come home, I think the last thing either of them wants to do is bring their partner up to speed so they could engage in a complaining process. And then they shut down, and in the process you get further and further apart. But this, at various times, feels like an extension of our home life. But we set it up that way. We did this so we could do this together and be parents at the same time.

Read the rest of the interview, including JJ's stance on small studios and his biggest challenge, on AnimatorsUnite.com. Enjoy "Stoned Wheat" on Youtube.com.