



*An interview by Jake Friedman*

## Profile: Michael Sporn

You might recognize his signature style in his numerous "Sesame Street" segments or his dozens of 30-minute films for cable. It's tactile in its paints and pencils, subtle in its animation and very deep in its storytelling. Currently, Sporn heads up the oldest standing studio in New York City, and he still has his own share of feasts and famines. He also has four films coming to DVD this April, and four more next autumn, all of which will no doubt be announced on [www.michaelspornanimation.com](http://www.michaelspornanimation.com) and his popular blog (or "splog"). Here, Sporn discusses his theory on television cartoons, on animator types, and how technology plays its role in the business.

### **What was your particular career path?**

I've been working at animation all my life. When I was 12 I saved up enough money to buy a movie camera. I needed a projector to see the film, so I had to save up to get that, too. I did about two and a half hours on 8-milimeter by the time I went into college at the age of 17. My brother-in-law was a carpenter, so he built me a multi-plane camera. When I went into college, the New York Institute of Technology, I just studied art, even though the college was supposed to teach animation.

I joined the Navy after college – bet-

ter that than Vietnam – and I was a Russian interpreter there. I was based in Maryland, and I never left the United States. When I was down there I started contacting the Hubley studio. John Hubley was sort of a hero of mine. I saw *Of Stars and Men* (1964) when I was in college, and when I was in the military I started contacting the studio, and I got a response saying anytime I was up in New York, come in, we'll be glad to see you. Innocent as I was, I believed it. It turned out that the secretary who was being fired had a nice joke at my expense by signing John Hubley's name to this letter that she sent me. So when I started contacting them, they didn't know who I was.

So after the Navy, what I did do was get a job as a messenger at the studio of Hal Seegar. Hal Seegar worked for Fleisher and was a production manager on *Gulliver's Travels*. In his own studio he revived *Koko the Clown* and *Batfink*. When I got the job, they had all the animation equipment, they just didn't do any animation – the studio was editing things for ABC. I got the job for \$60 a week. At the time I was getting unemployment for \$70 a week, so I took a cut in pay. But what that did was teach me about film editing, and I ended up being an assistant editor there doing commercials for ABC and segments for "Wide World of Sports."

That same year I was calling the Hubley studio almost every week, at the suggestion of the personal assistant there. And I had conversations with her for about a year, and then one day I got a call from her to come in. So I was hired for 2 days, which turned into 5 years.

The first day I was there I had done some in-betweens and Tissa David came in and was flipping through the scene and said, "Who drew these horrible drawings?" She knew I was the only other person in the room. But what she did was offer to help me in her own time, giving me assignments.

So After the Hubleys, I worked for several different studios, like Phil Kimmelman's studio PK&A. Then I found out that Dick Williams was doing *Raggedy Ann* and Andy in the city, and Tissa got me a job there, when I was about 30. I was able to spend a lot of time there with Tissa and Corny Cole. I was the head of assistants, and I managed about 150 people. It was a fun job for about the first 9 months, and then when they fired Dick, I left too, because my allegiance was to him.

After *Raggedy Ann*, I ended up working for R. O. Blechman for about five years. Most of what I was doing was commercials, and I hated it. I was sort of running the studio; there weren't many people there at the time, and I realized that I could do this for myself. So I left Blechman in 1980 to form my own company. I haven't looked back, though I enjoyed working with all the great animators over the years.

I always felt like there are two types of animators. There are those who know every rule, and control it in enormous ways, like Art Babbitt and Dick Williams. And there are those who

also know the rules of animation but draw from the hip and let the animation go emotional, like Grim Natwick and Tissa David.

**Are there any animation techniques you've learned that a person can't research in book?**

Learning anything in a real studio, books aren't going to be as helpful as you thought they were. Even punching holes in a piece of paper.

**What kind of character traits does it take to create and run your own studio?**

Stubbornness. That's the only character trait, because unless you're clever and agile, money will be a major problem all the time. I would say 60 per cent of my job is worrying about finances. You also have to be able to get your work seen and shown off, and there are some people, like Pat Smith, who are good at doing commercials and at the same time doing their own films.

**What do you look towards for inspiration?**

Lately it hasn't been animation. Very, very few animated films do I find inspirational in any way whatsoever. I loved *Toy Story*, but at the same time Disney was doing *Hercules* and *Tarzan*, and whipping up the audience's speed level. I felt that that was the death of 2D animation. Good 2D animation is pretty quiet. And Flash animation seems to be the equivalent of doing animation in the 1910's. "Aesop's Fables" stuff. With that, I feel like you're spending more time with the tool than with the drawings. You're not thinking about the characters' thought processes more than you are about getting from here to there. I haven't seen any Flash animation yet where there's character development.

I like artists Paul Klee and Egon Schiele. And different comic strips like "Krazy Kat," "Polly & Her Pals," and "The Gumps," which was a serial that read like a novel.

**What exactly is your theory on quiet animation?**

I always felt that TV animation screams at you. At recording sessions, the actors walk away with sore throats. And it's not just sound, things are quicker-cut and come flying out; colors are bright. And I just want to see a little depth. "Samarai Jack" was pretty nice. Often they had episodes without speech at all, and when they did have it they had control over it. I just saw an episode of "Camp Lazlo," and they didn't have one moment of silence. There's no character, no anything when you do that. But the same guy, Joe Murray did "Rocko's Modern Life," and that had moments of cleverness and humanity.

**So what makes a good cartoon?**

Story. But I don't make typical cartoons. My films are based more on human traits than they are on cartoon traits.

**What have been your favorite projects?**

Two: The Hunting of the Snark. It was a 35 millimeter film of the same film I made in 8 millimeter. That was a 10 minute film of all the skills I taught myself in animation when I was in college. The other film is The Marzipan Pig, a half-hour film for HBO. It's based on a Russell Hoban book and tells the story of various forms of love using different objects and animals. It's a very complex film and complex story. Tissa David boarded and animated it all.

**What would you like the future to hold for your studio?**

I'm interested in features now, so I'm trying to develop different features and try to get them going. If you have a feature, then you don't have to divide your mind between a bunch of different little projects, all of which are going on at the same time, so you can't give the proper attention to any one project.

**What's the hardest thing about your job?**

Dealing with it on a down time, when there isn't a lot of work. At the same time that happens, I'm trying to work on my own films. You just find a way to do it. It's all juggling.

**What's the biggest perk about your job?**

The attention. The miniscule bits of glory you get at a screening or a festival. The true moments are when you finish a film like The Man Who Walked Between the Towers.

**Why did you choose to do what you're doing?**

To control my own life and work and what I do.

**How do I get to be where you are now?**

Stubbornness, and you need to back it up. You need to be knowledgeable and crafty to be able to juggle all the odds and ends. The talent keeps it going.

