

## Three Films by Chuck Jones: Duck Amuck, One Froggy Evening and What's Opera, Doc?

By Craig Kausen  
Grandson of animator Chuck Jones

When people ask what it was like growing up with Chuck Jones as my grandfather, I tell them that he was like many other grandfathers I knew growing up. He spent time on the weekends with us when he was home from the studio where he was making cartoons during the week. One of my earliest memories with him was when I was just learning to swim around the age of five (a bit late for most youngsters living near the ocean). I finally found the wherewithal to dog-paddle out into the middle of the pool by myself and at that moment Chuck walked onto the pool deck wearing his khakis, deck shoes, collared shirt, and even a hat. He saw what I had achieved and without hesitation ran to the end of the pool, dashed off the diving board, picked me up with water still cascading from atop his hat and down his face and threw me into the air with a loud "Woo-hoo!!" I can still see his water-soaked, smiling face staring up at me in joyous celebration. Perhaps he was just a little bit different than some other grandfathers I knew.

Another wonderful tradition that we were fortunate to enjoy was on frequent occasion, Chuck would bring down a handful of 16mm prints of his Warner Bros. cartoons to show at his house in Corona del Mar. We were often able to bring a friend to these ad hoc film festivals in his living room where my brother, sister, or I would be chosen to play projectionist on his old, blue Bell and Howell projector. He might casually refer to a memory about the cartoon or tell a story about how the ideas were conceived before we rotated the knob, heard the clackety-clack of the film as the numbers counted down until the Warner Bros. shield would jump onto the screen as the Merrie Melodies or the Looney Tunes theme songs began to play. It was in these "private" screenings that I first got my exposure to the three films referenced below.

In 1992, the National Film Preservation Board selected "What's Opera, Doc?" as the first animated short film to be inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. I clearly remember where I was when I heard the news from my mother that it was to be the first to be inducted.

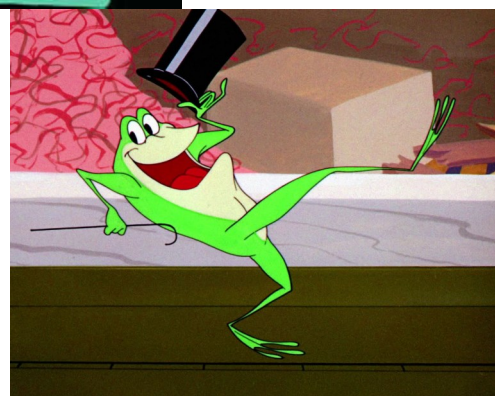


Above: Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in "What's Opera, Doc?" Center: Daffy Duck in "Duck Amuck." Bottom: Michigan J. Frog in "One Froggy Evening." Courtesy Warner Bros.

Arguably the most famous short animated film ever created, "What's Opera, Doc?" (1957) has been feted, lauded,

praised, and applauded. Considered the #1 animated cartoon as selected by 1,000 animation art professionals, critics, and collectors, "What's Opera, Doc?" is the boisterously rhapsodic retelling of Wagner's operatic "Der Ring des Nibelungen" cycle.

Chuck would talk about how much fun it was to team up with his writer, Mike Maltese, condensing the three-day opera into 7 minutes of animation while keeping all of the nuances and emotional moments of the original. Bugs Bunny in horned helmet and Brunhilde braids, Elmer Fudd with sword and magic helmet continue their epic struggle to the Wagnerian strains of the Valkyrie's melody. I remember Maurice Noble telling me that he was brought in after the production had begun because Chuck was not happy with the way the production was being staged. Maurice decided to take it out from under the proscenium arch and create the 'Wagnerian World' we all have come to know and love.



“What’s Opera, Doc?” was soon joined in the National Film Registry by his 1953 short animated film, “Duck Amuck.” To this day, as the opening titles and credits roll by for “Duck Amuck,” my expectations are enticed into the world of Musketeers and “sampling his blade” only to be surprised, as Daffy is, at the dissolving scenery on his “animation stage.” Chuck always said that Daffy was the victim, the one who always loses, yet always dreams of all of the attention and all of the riches. Chuck would say “I always dreamed of being Bugs Bunny, but then I would wake up, look in the mirror, and see Daffy Duck.” I always loved that; he also said that we are all just a little bit avaricious. Perhaps that’s why Daffy resonates so beautifully with each of us. No other cartoon breaks the fourth wall quite the way “Duck Amuck” does with Daffy’s attention being turned not only out of the film and directly to the audience, but, in fact, to the nefarious animator who can’t quite get his act together throughout the film. And then at the very end to have Bugs Bunny be the silent antagonist, it provides such an unexpected twist that the layers of “reality” are endless.

“Duck Amuck” was honored as the second greatest animated film of all time in the book “The 50 Greatest Cartoons, As Selected By 1000 Animation Professionals”. I always loved this quote by one of his brilliant animators: “It is one of a handful of American animation masterpieces, and likely the most cerebral of them. Daffy makes the most of his opportunity for a definitive solo tour de force. It is at once a laugh riot and an essay by demonstration on the nature and condition of the animated film and the mechanics of film in general.” --- Richard Thompson, “Film Comment,” 1975

Having films showcasing Bugs Bunny and/or Daffy Duck, who appeared in hundreds of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies films over 30 years, selected as the greatest of all time seems quite apropos. However, to have a Chuck Jones film, whose characters starred but one time, be selected for its greatness illustrates how beautifully and precisely the characters develop and communicate to the audience (without even a single spoken word).

“One Froggy Evening” is possibly the greatest directorial achievement of Chuck’s career. Steven Spielberg called it the “Citizen Kane” of animation. “Time” magazine has said it is “as close as any cartoon has ever come to perfection.” In 1993, I remember being

at the office with Chuck after he got off the phone with Jerry Levin, then CEO of Time Warner Inc. Mr. Levin had called Chuck personally to say that he felt there was more brilliance and more character in “One Froggy Evening” than possibly any other film in history. Later that year, Warner Bros. selected Michigan J. Frog as their official “spokes-phibian” for their new WB Network.

Through my many years of personal exposure to most of my grandfather’s films (who knows, perhaps I have actually seen them all by now), I recognize a common thread of intellect, unexpected twists and turns, and the ultimate in character development common to a Chuck Jones creation.

It’s difficult to tell what properties go into the making of a classic cartoon film. Is it as simple as a legendary director, dedicated and talented animators, layout and background artists of impeccable ability, a musical director with a depth of knowledge not likely to be seen again, a story-writer whose talents have yet to be equaled, all working in an environment producing some of the greatest cartoons ever made? If not those, what then? Is it the foresight of genius? Or is it all just happenstance, a matter of fate, a harmonic convergence of talent?

I would say it is a peppering of all of these coming together with the passion, curiosity, and joy of creating the very best that each individual could produce, at that time of their lives and their careers, and that the end result was simply targeted toward their own enjoyment of the final product.

I think Chuck truly encapsulated it when he said, “The rules are simple. Take your work, but never yourself, seriously. Pour in the love and whatever skill you have, and it will come out.”

I see both the love and the skill every time I watch one of these cartoons.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Craig Kausen is the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the non-profit Chuck Jones Center for Creativity based in Orange County, California.*