

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

By J.B. Kaufman

Some films achieve greatness because of their historical significance, others because of their artistry. A relative few can claim both. Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is one of the films in this charmed inner circle, a motion picture whose historical importance is inextricably linked with the magnitude of its artistic accomplishment.

"Snow White"'s historical credentials are well known: as the Disney studio's first feature-length film, it marked a significant turning point for Walt Disney himself, for the Disney studio, for the art of animation, and to some extent for American films in general. Like most celebrated "firsts," it wasn't really the first animated feature. But it's fair to say that no earlier feature had showcased the full range of animation technique in the way that "Snow White" did, nor so combined it with rich color, an infectious musical score, and an absorbing, carefully developed story. Instead of creating an art-house curio, bidding for attention on its novelty value alone, Walt boldly jumped into the center of the arena, crafting an *animated* feature that could compete with the major studios' live-action features on their own terms. The sheer audacity of this concept in 1937 is impressive enough, but Walt didn't stop with the concept. So fully did "Snow White" realize its goals that it scored a spectacular worldwide success at the box office, forcing the rest of the film industry to pay attention, and forever changing the course of the Disney studio.

"Snow White" capped what had been a decade of remarkable expansion and development for Walt and his artists. In their short cartoons of the 1930s, they had captured the attention of audiences and critics as no other cartoon producer had ever done before. Some of their success had stemmed from technical innovations: synchronization of music and sound effects with animation, the use of full Technicolor, advanced camera techniques. But this technological evolution would have been meaningless, and perhaps impossible, if the films had not also captured the hearts and imaginations of viewers. With their inventive stories, clever gags, and engaging characters, Disney cartoons of the 1930s exercised an irresistible appeal.

At the heart of that appeal was yet another development, one that was not widely recognized in the



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1930s and is still little understood today: *personality animation*. Almost from the beginning of his career, Walt had urged his artists to go beyond the simple mechanics of animation and create characters who moved, gestured and walked in ways that expressed their personalities. This was an extraordinarily difficult art, and the Disney artists strove to master it. Their efforts culminated in "Snow White", which built on the foundation of their earlier work and became the new milestone in this demanding craft.

This is the other half of "Snow White"'s greatness: the triumph of its artistic vision. The idea of giving each of the Seven Dwarfs a distinct personality, and a name that expressed his traits, has sometimes been decried by fairy-tale purists as if it were a flaw in the film. In fact it's a master stroke, a device that seamlessly welds the medium of the Brothers Grimm to the medium of Walt Disney. In the artists' hands, the dwarfs became a textbook exercise in personality animation: seven characters, all of similar height and appearance, who must be instantly distin-

guished from each other whenever any of them appeared on the screen. Fred Moore and Vladimir “Bill” Tytla, two of the legendary Disney animators, led a special group of fellow artists who realized that goal, etching memorable portraits of each of the dwarfs. Grumpy’s apoplectic rages, Dopey’s innocent silliness, Doc’s befuddlement, Bashful’s dreamy-eyed sentimentality, and the quirks of the other dwarfs endeared them to audiences as vividly drawn individuals. The art of character animation reaches its gold standard in “Snow White”, establishing a benchmark that has remained unchallenged since 1937—seldom equaled, never surpassed.

The heroine of the story, Snow White herself—along with the other “realistic” characters, the Prince and the wicked Queen—represented another kind of difficulty. Strictly speaking, of course, these characters are not “realistic,” but their fantasy is grounded in recognizable reality, and their movement is one of the most technically challenging tasks in animation. Here again, two specialists, Ham Luske and Grim Natwick, took charge of animating Snow White. And, in fact, each of them brought subtly different approaches to the princess’s personality, resulting in an understated tension that makes her a more interesting character throughout the film.

In other ways, too, “Snow White” established a precedent. One underappreciated aspect of the film is its story development. The story, based on the traditional folk tale, seems to unfold on the screen with deceptive simplicity, but in fact it was painstakingly analyzed, debated, and polished over months of story conferences. The result is a film continuity that largely remains faithful to the tale’s origins, but at the same time renders them fully cinematic. Like much of the best in film craft, this process remains “invisible” in “Snow White”, a sophistication of technique masked by a charming storybook style.

No small part of “Snow White”’s lasting appeal is due to its musical score. Several staff composers worked on the film, but the most prominent musical presence is that of composer Frank Churchill, who had joined the Disney staff in 1930. Much of “Snow White”’s sparkling incidental score is Churchill’s work, and he composed all the film’s songs—not only novelty numbers like “Whistle While You Work,” but several out-and-out romantic ballads. This is significant in itself. In particular, “Some Day My Prince Will Come” transcended what was seen as the traditional domain of “cartoon” music and became an enduring standard of the classic American songbook.

If no one had ever attempted a film like “Snow White” before 1937, it was partly because of the *logistical* challenge: the daunting task of producing the hundreds of drawings needed for *one* reel of animated cartoons, multiplied to feature-length proportions. The Disney artists did face a back-breaking workload in producing “Snow White”, but that was only half the story. Their labors produced a film that resonated throughout the world in the late 1930s, and remains undiminished today. To propose an impossibly ambitious new artistic goal is one thing; to realize that goal—with a level of craftsmanship that afterward remains the all-time standard—is a claim few motion pictures can make.

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

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