

Tulips Shall Grow

By Mark Mayerson

“Tulips Shall Grow,” released January 26, 1942, is an animated short, part of the Madcap Models series produced by George Pal and distributed by Paramount. Pal’s animation work for Paramount is generally referred to under the Puppetoon label and the films were created using a stop motion technique called replacement animation. In other forms of stop motion, such as the titular character in “King Kong” (1933), a material, usually latex, is placed over a jointed metal armature that can be repositioned frame by frame. In Pal’s films, a series of separate body parts in successive positions were carved out of wood and replaced for each exposure of film. A walk, for example, might require a dozen pairs of carved legs to complete two steps. This gives the animation the unique appearance of solids that can stretch and squash like drawn animation. Pal’s films stood out in American theatres as the only regularly released stop motion shorts during the 1940s.

The history of “Tulips Shall Grow” is linked to the experiences of Pal and Paramount as they dealt with world events in the 1930s. Pal was born in 1908 in Cegléd, part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. He graduated from the Budapest Academy of Fine Arts with a degree in architecture. When he was unable to find work in his field, he got a job with Hunnia Films in Budapest where he gained his first animation experience. In 1931, he was working in Berlin and was promoted to head of the animation department at UFA. At the urging of his wife, Zsoka, he left Germany to avoid the Nazis on January 30, 1933, the same day that Hitler became chancellor. He spent time working in Prague and Paris before he moved to Eindhoven in the Netherlands to work on cinema commercials for Philips products such as radios and light bulbs. In addition, he made commercials for Horelick’s Malted Milk, a British product. In 1939, the Pals’ visa application to the United States was granted and they moved to Hollywood where he created his animated theatrical shorts for Paramount release.

The Great Depression affected all the Hollywood film studios. Paramount went into receivership in 1933 and its theatre chain went bankrupt in 1935. While it was founded by Adolf Zukor and backed during its reorganization by financier Otto Khan, both of whom were Jewish, the company could not afford to forego any revenue and continued to do business with the Nazis throughout the 1930s. Germany was the third



Frame enlargement shows Jan playing his accordion for Janette. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

largest foreign market for American films, so in order to keep the Nazis happy, Paramount dismissed their Jewish employees in Germany in 1933 and in 1937 hired a Nazi party member as head of their German operations. On September 2, 1940, Paramount was the last American film studio evicted from Germany.

The Nazis invaded the Netherlands on May 10, 1940. As Pal had worked there for several years, he had a personal connection to the situation. Sometime after the Nazi occupation of Holland, he put “Tulips Shall Grow” into production, an inspirational message to his former country.

The film starts off innocuously. In Holland, signified by windmills and tulips, Jan visits his girlfriend Janette. As they dance together, the screwball army appears from over the horizon. The leader goose steps and has a belt made of military medals. Screwball aircraft drop bombs on the windmills, perhaps a reference to the Nazi bombing of Rotterdam. Jan and Janette are afraid and flee, dodging machine gun fire from the aircraft. The aircraft drop tanks that pursue the couple across a devastated landscape. The two are separated in the chaos and Jan goes to a bombed out church to pray. Heaven hears his prayers and it starts to rain, rusting the metallic screwball army and rendering it inoperative. Lightning strikes the airplanes, causing them to crash. One of the soldiers gives a Nazi salute before collapsing. Jan returns to Janette’s windmill and finds her there. Reunited, they dance and tulips spring up in their wake. The windmills rejuvenate and the opening four notes of “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony” (Morse code for the letter ‘V’) sound as clouds take the form of a V for victory. A title flashes on screen reading “tulips shall always grow.”

The ending of the film served as an inspiration for Pal's later live action feature "The War of the Worlds" (1953), also distributed by Paramount. While "Tulips Shall Grow," Wells' novel and Pal's feature all have the enemy defeated by natural means after people prove ineffective, Pal's two films both have the main characters in church before the enemy succumbs, something not in the novel.

Germany declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941. At that point, Paramount no longer had anything to lose as their German offices were closed. Based on production numbers and copyright dates, "Tulips Shall Grow" was rushed into distribution. Originally scheduled for release in June 1942, it was moved ahead of three other Puppertoons to be released in January.

Prior to the United States entry into World War II, American animation had avoided mention of the Nazis. Adolph Hitler makes a brief cameo appearance in the Warner Bros. cartoon "Bosko's Picture Show" (1932) as part of a spoof of newsreels, but the appearance is devoid of any political content. When the U.S. revived the draft in 1940, both features and shorts used that as subject matter, promoting patriotism without focusing on an enemy. The Popeye cartoon, "The Mighty Navy" (released Nov. 14, 1941) featured an attack by an anonymous enemy and a

flag instructed the audience to name their own. Pal himself made an earlier Puppatoon with the screwball army, "Rhythm in the Ranks" (1941), which had no reference to Nazis and had the screwballs fighting toy soldiers, something that undercut any real drama. "Tulips Shall Grow" was unique for its time in identifying the Nazis and treating bombs and bullets realistically, not for comedy.

The film was nominated for the Academy Award for best animated short subject, one of four animated nominees that year that focused on the war, but lost to Disney's "Der Fuehrer's Face." However, "Tulips Shall Grow" was the first of those films produced and released, no doubt due to Pal's sympathy for the Dutch victims of Nazi aggression.

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

Mark Mayerson worked in animation for almost thirty years, and created the TV series Monster By Mistake. He is currently teaching animation at Sheridan College in Canada. His blog is <http://mayersononanimation.blogspot.com>.