

AVERY, FREDERICK BEAN (“TEX”) (1908-1980)

Landmark animation Director whose unique style, perfected at MGM, was to become one of the most recognisable of the 1940s. Among others, McKimson, Jones, and the Hanna-Barbera team were all strongly influenced by Avery's style of precision-timed, high-speed animation.

Avery started out drawing cartoons for North Dallas High School's annual, *The Viking*. Upon his graduation from that school in 1927, he attended a summer course at the Art Institute of Chicago, hoping to improve his skill to the point where he could sell a cartoon strip to a local newspaper. While he reportedly enjoyed the studies; he dropped out after about a month, seeing little relevance to the kind of cartooning he wanted to do in the institute's traditional life-drawing based curriculum. Not long afterward, Avery moved to Los Angeles, where he worked loading fruits and vegetables onto trucks.

Avery entered the field of animation in 1930 as an inker at Walter Lantz's studio. After a while, he was in-betweening. Toward the end of his tenure at Lantz's studio, Bill Nolan would reportedly hand over enough of his work to Avery that he was directing cartoons in all but name. Adamson credits him with timing animation on *Towne Hall Follies* (Nolan, 1935) and *The Quail Hunt* (Nolan, 1935). (Incidentally, Avery had been blinded in his left eye during some horseplay at the Lantz studio.)

In search of more money, and probably screen credit, Avery moved to Schlesinger's studio in late 1935 where he replaced director Tom Palmer, with whom Schlesinger was generally dissatisfied. Avery was given a unit consisting of Robert "Bobe" Cannon, Bob Clampett, and Charles M. Jones, in addition to Virgil Ross and Sid Sutherland, both of whom Avery had brought from Lantz's outfit. This unit was put in the original "Termite Terrace" Building on the Warner Brothers' Sunset lot. As was standard for Schlesinger-produced cartoons, Avery was credited with "Supervision" rather than "Direction", his name listed as "Fred" rather than "Tex". (By all accounts, producer Leon Schlesinger considered nicknames undignified and his workers undeserving of the title "Director".) This billing would not change for Avery until his move to MGM.

Avery and his unit can largely be credited with bringing the studio to life after several years of relatively bland and highly repetitive cartoons featuring such utterly forgettable characters as Buddy. To start, Avery and his unit succeeded in making Porky Pig, who had first appeared in *I Haven't Got a Hat* (Freleng, 1935), a genuinely likeable character. In an environment of relative energy and enthusiasm, Avery and his unit tried to come up with newer and better characters, going on to create Daffy Duck as a foil for Porky in *Porky's Duck Hunt* (1937).

Despite the fact that Avery and his unit had created the studio's first truly appealing characters, Avery directed very few Looney Tunes: the black and white series which showcased the studio's recurring characters. For the most part, Avery directed Merrie Melodies, which were produced in color, but which featured "one shot" characters exclusively. Consequently, Avery's most widely recognised work from this time is a series of "spot-gag" cartoons spoofing the live-action *Fitzpatrick Travelogue* short subjects.

Tex Avery's single greatest cartoon creation from his time at the Schlesinger Studio is undoubtedly Bugs Bunny. Bugs had not truly developed so much as appeared in various guises before Avery utilised the existing framework -- rabbit, rabbit being hunted, rabbit foiling hunter -- to create Bugs. Earlier cartoons had featured rabbits, who, for the most part, did little more than resemble Daffy Duck in voice and manner. The rabbit known as Bugs -- named after Director J. B. "Bugs" Hardaway -- changed appearance and character repeatedly from one short to the next, from one Director to the next. It is not until Avery's *A Wild Hare* (1940) that Bugs

Bunny's distinct character, voice, appearance, and overall manner come sharply into focus. Avery cites the Disney short *The Tortoise and the Hare* (Wilfred Jackson, 1935) as an influence. Ironically enough, it was a Bugs Bunny cartoon -- *The Heckling Hare* (Avery, 1941) -- which ended Avery's career at the studio. The cartoon was supposed to end as follows. Bugs and Willoughby (the hunting dog who has been chasing him throughout the cartoon) fall through a hole overhanging a cliff, plummet through space screaming in terror for several seconds, brake to a sudden stop and land gently, then razz the audience by saying "Fooled ya, didn't we?". (This is the point where the cartoon now irises out, ending abruptly.) As planned and originally animated, the cartoon had Bugs and Willoughby fall through yet another hole, with Bugs crying out "Hold on to your hats, folks, here we go again!": reportedly the punch line to a then-current joke of an off-colour nature. It is unclear whether Schlesinger was pressured by Jack Warner to cut the last line. At any rate, Leon and Tex apparently got into an argument over the cut and Avery was suspended, only to be fired (or forced to resign) soon afterward.

Avery was, at this time, also developing the first of the *Speaking of Animals* short subjects which used animated mouths superimposed on live-action animals. (The series was sold to Paramount in 1941.) Evidently, this only served to exacerbate Schlesinger's already-tenuous working relationship with Avery. While the exact date of his departure varies from source to source, it most likely occurred late in the summer of 1941.

Tex went on to blossom creatively at MGM through the 1940s and 1950s, with a long string of truly great cartoons to his credit. The work of these productive years includes *The Blitz Wolf* (1942), *Bad Luck Blackie* (1949), *Magical Maestro* (1952), and many others. There is a long series of cartoons starring Droopy, his most enduring character from the MGM years, several cartoons starring Red Hot Riding Hood, a sexy bombshell of a nightclub singer, created and artfully animated by Preston Blair, and a series of documentary-type cartoons with titles such as *House of Tomorrow* (1949), *Car of Tomorrow* (1951), and *TV of Tomorrow* (1953).

Avery returned to the Lantz studio in the 1950s where he worked on a few of the early Chilly Willy cartoons. Eventually he wound up directing television advertisements -- the last time he directed Bugs Bunny was for a Kool-Aid commercial. He is also credited with creating the roaches used in the commercials for Raid Insecticides.

Tex Avery died on August 26th, 1980, while working at the studio of his previous colleagues and rivals at MGM, William Hanna and Joe Barbera.

The author recommends the Joe Adamson book *Tex Avery: King of Cartoons*. The book is devoted solely to Avery and contains a substantial number of informative interviews with him, which include anecdotes about his days at the Lantz, Warner Brothers, and MGM Studios. Reference should also be made to John Canemaker's recent *Tex Avery* which contains a wealth of drawings and model sheets from Avery's MGM years.

Some reference footage of Avery survives from the 1930s and 1940s. Originally shot to provide animators with models of action, it shows Tex acting out scenes from *Cross-Country Detours* (1940) and playing the part of the little scarecrow in *I'd Love to Take Orders From You* (1936). Reference footage also survives of the stripper used by Avery as a model for the lizard shedding its skin in *Cross Country Detours*. A studio secretary named Trixie, who worked for Tex, posed as the Mae-West like deer in the same cartoon.

Tex provided a number of vocal characterizations during his career as a Director, most notably as the laughing hippo in *Hamateur Night* (Avery, 1938), the jolly walrus in *The Penguin Parade* (Avery, 1938), the laughing referee in *Count Me Out* (Hardaway/Dalton, 1938), and the rascally ghost in *Ghost Wanted* (Jones, 1940). In interviews conducted by Adamson, Avery states that he also provided the voice of Willoughby the hunting dog in the cartoons *Of Fox & Hounds* (Avery, 1940), *The Heckling Hare* (Avery, 1941), and *The Crackpot Quail* (Avery, 1941). *Funnyworld* #17 credits him as the spider in *Meatless Flyday* (Freleng, 1943); but this attribution seems rather unlikely for obvious reasons. The author believes that Avery may have provided the voice for the hippo who mocks the lion at the beginning of *Hold the Lion Please* (Jones, 1942).