

## Program note for **Chuck Amuck: The Cartoons of Chuck Jones**

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Chuck Jones was born in Spokane, Washington in 1912. Before he was six months old, his family moved to Southern California, and Jones has lived there since. Spending his childhood near Hollywood during the silent film era, Jones grew up in the vicinity of such great comedians as Mack Sennett, Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin. While this proximity may not be the source of Jones's particular comic genius, the comparison between his cartoons and the films of these pioneers is apt. Like the best of these screen artists, Jones has created a distinct comic universe with sympathetic characters who are in constant struggle against the rest of the world. And like Chaplin and Keaton, Jones is able to not only portray the characters and their struggles, but to step back and precisely define the conditions that they are struggling against. In simplest terms, his cartoons set their comedy in the context of a world view.

The closest comparison with Jones's world view is to the films of Buster Keaton, with whom Jones shares a sense of minimalism, a love of mechanics, and an ability to portray the absurdity of characters who strive to succeed in a coolly indifferent world. Rather than despair, Jones' characters constantly try to be inventive and adapt to the situation, no matter how hopeless. A perfect expression of the Jones world view is the set of rules he obeyed in the creation of the Coyote-Road Runner series:

RULE 1. The Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by going "Bee-Beep."

RULE 2. No outside force can harm the Coyote—only his own ineptitude or the failure of the Acme products.

RULE 3. The Coyote could stop anytime—if he were not a fanatic. (Repeat: "A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim"  
George Santayana.)

RULE 4. No dialogue ever, except "Beep-Beep."

RULE 5. The Road Runner must stay on the road—otherwise, logically, he would not be called Road Runner.

RULE 6. All action must be confined to the natural environment of the two characters—the Southwest American desert.

RULE 7. All materials, tools, weapons, or mechanical conveniences must be obtained from the Acme Corporation.

RULE 8. Whenever possible, make gravity the Coyote's greatest enemy.

RULE 9. The Coyote is always more humiliated than harmed by his failures.

These rules do more than define the physical restrictions and laws that serve as the underpinning for all of the gags. They also define the Coyote's personality in simple, cinematic terms. And this is the essence of what makes Chuck Jones one of the greatest American animators. (Perhaps the greatest: in the new book *The Fifty Greatest Cartoons As Selected by 1000 Animation Professionals*, ten of the top fifty cartoons were directed by Jones, including four of the top five: *What's Opera, Doc?*, *Duck Amuck*, *Duck Dodgers in the 24 1/2 Century*, and *One Froggy Evening*).

In his engagingly unconventional memoir *Chuck Amuck*, Jones described the epiphany he has as a child watching his quirky house cat Johnson, who spent countless hours devouring grapefruits:

"Johnson demonstrated with such vivid certainty the whole truth of the matter: it is the individual, the oddity, the peculiarity that counts. Character always comes first, before the physical representation.... We are not what we look like. We are not even what we sound like. We are how we move; in other words, our personalities."

More than his brilliant timing, and his boldly expressive drawing style, it is Jones's emphasis on personality—

the charisma and nuance that he brought to his characters—that defines his genius. Each of Jones’s characters, whether the resourceful Bugs Bunny, the ever-eager Daffy Duck, the amorous Pepe Le Pew, express different aspects of the artist’s personality. While Daffy and the Coyote may be Jones’s sympathetic losers, his most popular character, Bugs Bunny, is the one who uses his wits to survive. As Jones describes the basic formula of the Bugs Bunny cartoon:

“In all Bugs Bunny films we opened on Bugs in a simple, understandable, and rational place for a rabbit to be: in the forest, in the meadow, down a hole, in a carrot patch, or in a pet store... but above all else living peaceably, contemplating an obscure Wang Dynasty dissertation on carrots—a sort of Professor Higgins in sweet solitude.

“Then along comes someone with designs on his hide, his foot, his use as a meal or as an outer-space rocket passenger. It is a very simple formula. Bugs resist in every way he can imagine, and he is a very imaginative rabbit. He is also that unusual comedian: a comic hero, and they are very few. Bugs is what I would like to be: debonair, quick-witted, very fast on the comeback, a sort of male Dorothy Parkerish D’Artagnan.”

Jones did not create Bugs Bunny, but he did perfect him. Of course, Jones did not work single-handedly. Instead, he was a key player in one of the most fortuitous collaborative situations ever to exist in Hollywood, the legendary Termite Terrace. This was the nickname of the cartoon studio on the Warner Bros. lot, where Jones worked from 1938 through 1962. The relationship between Termite Terrace and the content of the cartoons created there is clear: here was a world with limited resources, a clear set of rules, and tight limitations, in which genius could thrive. Working under limited budgets and impossible deadlines, the animators in Termite Terrace worked as anarchically as they could in factory conditions. The laborers were divided into units, each under the control of a director. (The finest of these practitioners included Jones, Bob Clampett, Tex Avery, Friz Freleng, and Frank Tashlin). With the tasks rigidly divided among the writers, layout artists, musicians, and other artisans, each cartoon was overseen by the director, who created the storyboard, the key drawings, and the model sheets that defined the movement of each of the characters. Exemplifying the auteur theory, the cartoons created in Termite Terrace were clear reflections of both an overall studio formula and the director’s personality. Each cartoon was made at a budget of approximately \$30,000, and was a little more than six minute long, consisting of about 5,040 individual drawings. Like Bugs and Daffy, the animators at Termite Terrace worked in direct opposition to the conditions that surrounded them. In response to an edict from the studio boss Eddie Selzer that “bullfights aren’t funny,” Chuck Jones created the quintessential Bully For Bugs. Responding with inspiration to the limited conditions of their environment, Jones and his colleagues created comic masterpieces that endure today.

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