

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH CHUCK JONES

Working at Warner Bros. from 1938 through 1962, legendary animator Chuck Jones perfected the wisecracking Bugs Bunny, the short-tempered Daffy Duck, and the amorous Pepé Le Pew. The purest expression of his artistry is his Road Runner series, in which Wile E. Coyote endlessly pursues the elusive Road Runner. With its streamlined visual style, brilliantly geometric gags, and constant comic invention, the series is a masterpiece of American screen comedy. During the retrospective *Chuck Amuck*, Jones spoke at length about his life and art. In the tradition of his hero, Mark Twain, Jones was a witty, wry, thoroughly engaging speaker.

A Pinewood Dialogue moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (December 18, 1994):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Chuck Jones.
(Applause)

JONES: Thank you. I am 82 years old, which could happen to anybody! (A lot of people are headed in that direction, at any rate.) But Oliver Wendell Holmes—you notice how I bring in all this culture—Oliver Wendell Holmes said that, when he was a little bit older than I am, he said somebody asked him how it felt to be an old man. He said, “I don’t feel like an old man. I feel like a young man that has something the matter with him.” (Laughs) And he says a beautiful little chick ran across the way, and he grabbed his friend by the arm: “Oh, to be seventy again!” So, you can see, there’s life in the ancient frame. The nice thing about being an animator is that you can create—or if you can’t do it yourself, you can animate somebody who can. Like Pepé Le Pew, for instance. It’s just as well that we cut off what Pepé is doing offstage, because it’s rather disheartening to see how much he makes a shambles out of the Hays office. A very sexy skunk.

SCHWARTZ: I noticed that today the name Maurice Noble got some applause from a knowledgeable audience, so I wanted to start by asking you about...

JONES: He’s still there, obviously, and he came out of retirement long enough to do this film. Maurice came out. He’s 87 or 83—anyway, he’s older than I am, by God. Not that it means much, you know—

you begin to add up after 82; it doesn’t really matter a hell of a lot, I guess. And I remembered when again, the subject that suddenly stuck in my mind was what John L. Lewis said about William Green. He was head of the mine workers and Green was head of the AFL, and he said, “Green doesn’t have a head. His neck just grew up and haired over.”

So, a frog doesn’t have any hair, but that’s what it looks like. You know? It looks like his body just grew up and sort of slimed over, I guess. But I felt, we got to get this frog to be very believable in a very short time. So, when he pulls himself up out of the can, he slips, like, a little bit, and when he blinks, he blinks upward. The blink goes upward. That may sound ridiculous, that—who knows that? I know it. So I put it in, by God, and you better be impressed.

Thing is, you have to do that kind of thing. You’ve got to believe it yourself. You have to believe the character. You’ve got to believe in Daffy Duck. You’ve got to believe in these characters. An animation director is very much like an actor. He moves from role to role; he does not work like a comic strip. The characters are not funny-looking. My frog looks exactly, I hope, like a frog. Bugs Bunny looks like Bugs Bunny. He may not look like a rabbit, but he sure as hell looks like Bugs Bunny. He has an anatomy. And he moves like Bugs Bunny, in the same sense that Daffy has an anatomy and he moves like Daffy. I have one; I can only move according to whatever dubious skeleton I have—that’s being replaced part by part.

I have a new hip. I have part of an ankle. I have a pacemaker. I have an insatiable appetite for martinis—in other words, I'm becoming more like the Tin Man. (Laughter) But again, I can only move according to the structure that I am in—sometime in my life—I am stuck with.

SCHWARTZ: Many of your greatest cartoons are, in effect, pantomimes. There's no dialogue. The Road Runner series is basically a pantomime series. *One Froggy Evening* has no dialogue. I had a few questions about that. One is whether there is an influence from silent comedy, the films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, in your development.

JONES: Well, I was a kid, about seven or eight years old, just after the First World War. My father had an orange grove on Sunset Boulevard opposite Hollywood High School, and he didn't see any future in films, but he saw a future in oranges, and so we had quite a large orange grove there. And as far as I was concerned, I didn't realize that I was different than other little boys. I didn't realize that every little boy in the world couldn't go out and sit on his front steps and see Mary Pickford ride by on a white horse at the head of the 160th Infantry of the Rainbow Division of the First World War. I figured anybody could do that. And so, it wasn't impressive to me. And it wasn't impressive, although it was extremely interesting, to go down and watch Chaplin work. It was two blocks from our house, and we could go down there and look through this fence and watch Chaplin shoot. But he was very disappointing to me, because I had seen his films, and to see him out there doing things over and over and over again... Which I thought was ridiculous, because in his films he didn't do things over and over again. I didn't quite understand the concept.

But my father told me, one time he came home from over there—he did get into films in one way or the other, but mostly in the other. He said he saw Chaplin do one scene 132 times. And the thing is that what he did was, he... It was a little thing where, you know that little choppy run that all the comedians use when they hop on one leg, when they run around the corner being chased by cops? This one called for him to do it on the ice, which he couldn't do in Southern California, because there wasn't any ice.

So, what he did was put down an oilcloth and then oil it. So then, he tried to do this thing, and of course his feet would slip out from under him. And around, maybe—my father said [the scene took] around about 15 seconds, and he shot it 132 times before he had it right. And that stuck with me—that idea of 132. I thought he was lying. But my father didn't lie. I mean, after all, he promised my mother a genius, and he did deliver. (Whispers) Meaning me!

Let me give you a very quick run-through in the way I work in Warner Bros., because it was different than it was at Disney. There were three units there, in the very early days—there were Tex Avery and Bob Clampett and me, and later Friz Freleng came over from MGM. And so from 1946 on, when Clampett had long gone, and Tex had gone to MGM, Bob [Robert] McKimson and Friz Freleng and I directed all the films from 1946 until they closed the studio in '63.

I don't know where they are, but I know when Tex was dying, and he knew he was, he was in a hospital with a friend, and he said, "I don't know where animators go when they die, and they probably don't need another animator." But then he thought a minute and he said, "But I bet they can use a good director."

And he was a very gallant man, and a very funny man—a very shy man, oddly enough. Because when you consider how raucous his stuff was, you wouldn't think of him as being shy. What I find—at least my experience has been—that all great men are shy. That all great women are shy, too. And all of us are uncertain. I have that at least in common with greatness, and that is that I can't ever look at a finished anything I do with any confidence. I always see the mistakes. So whatever else that I may have, I don't know. That's for you to decide. And your laughter decides it.

So you do these layouts and so on, but—you first of all, you have to design the character. Well, in live action, when the script is complete and the director says, "Fine, I want to make this film," then you have what they call a casting session, when they send in actors of all various kinds. And the director or his, whoever works with him, will select the actor to play that part. Our equivalent of that was in—like with Pepé Le Pew, I knew that I wanted a sexy skunk.

But I had never seen him. I knew what he would do, but I had to figure out—so my casting session then was to sit down and start drawing skunks. And they were terrible. As you saw here on the Coyote, the Coyote's a lot different today than he was then—he had a big, kind of long, scrawny nose. So, I had that session, and I don't know that I improved him, but I certainly changed him over a period of time. Pepé changed a bit, too. But you have to use him immediately, so your first casting session: So, getting back—this doesn't usually work out, but getting back to that 132 times Chaplin shot, we didn't do that; we could not shoot a scene over and over again. But I have, in an effort to find a single drawing—I must have made five hundred drawings of Pepé before I got the character the way I wanted him. But I have very often in the picture drawn fifty drawings of a character in a particular situation. You may remember... Did you run *Feed the Kitty*?

SCHWARTZ: Yes, we did today.

JONES: Well, you know that scene where he went, "Me!" You know? (Laughter) And she came and says, "What are you up to now?" And he said, "Me!"—and he didn't say it, but, God, it was hard to get that drawing right. And I worked on it, worked on it, worked on it, but it didn't work, you know? I'd never drawn a bulldog saying "me" without saying it. Looking with that wonderful feeling of incredulity. I really liked that picture. I really fell in love with that damn dog. And he was so touching. And when the lady said, "I know what's bothering you." She said, "Here." She gives the dog that damn cookie, and I... (Laughter) And the dog takes it and puts it in his... (Overlap/Inaudible) And I cry, I do! I really do. (Laughter) And I didn't intend it that way. By God, I was being funny. And I found out I was being... I felt a true sense of sorrow about this little guy.

And so... Having done those layouts, having timed every scene in the picture, including how long the scenes were, [how] physically long the guy's running, so on—and then you call the animators in and go over the entire story with them, and then you hand out sections to each of the animators... They weren't specialists. I like animators to be able to do lots of things, to try and—you know, and I think that's where the fun is: the variety of it. And so, then the animator takes it away, and animates on it, and he has an assistant animator that follows him up, the guys that want to become animators.

And in the meantime, Maurice Noble—I just get him the storyboard—which is very rough; the storyboard is not what's going to appear on the screen, because most writers are not very good artists. So, I just hand the idea to Maurice, and say, "While I'm doing the character drawings, I want you to plan the scenics"—the backgrounds—and act as the art director. And that's what they would do. So he would be designing the film in terms of the backgrounds, layouts, and so on. And while I was doing the other thing. And then that pretty much takes care of the creativity. And from that point on, it's ink and paint—donkey work, really.

And camera. But a cameraman has no volition. All he can do is what he's told to do. So when you give a cameraman an animation, or an editor credits, you're not really being fair to anybody else, because it's all been done for him. All he does it put the background down and put the cel over, pull the thing down, push a button, and do it again. He's not artistic. But there are certain people who seem to like to do it, and it has kind of a wonderful routine to it. But you have to think about how slowly he's moving: it takes him probably two hours to get three seconds done. So, it isn't very moving, you know, even the Road Runner. So, that's really the way we worked at Warner Bros. They didn't work that way at any other studio that I know of.

SCHWARTZ: When is the soundtrack completed? What is the relationship of the soundtrack to doing the animation? You have a brilliant composer, Carl Stalling, and great sound-effects people. So, do they actually create the soundtrack and record it before the drawings are made?

JONES: Yeah. It varied. If you're doing *What's Opera, Doc?*, we would work with the music, and we took the storyboard, and then I'd make a bunch of layout drawings, and Maurice would do some—what we call—inspirational sketches. And then we'd pull the musician in, and we'd go over the story. And, like, on *What's Opera, Doc?*, we took the entire *Ring of the Nibelungen*—which runs fourteen hours—and squashed it down to six minutes. (Laughter)

But the music that was played was honest. I mean, that was really a section—was not squashed. It was just that we took out sections that we particularly liked.

Because it's limiting—just to take that great music and do anything with it—that is unfair. I mean, the fact that when I went to Germany and visited his grave, in fact, that I could hear a whirring sound... I don't think...

Wagner, that is. Mark Twain said that Wagner's music is better than it sounds. I think if you listen to the whole fourteen hours, you'd think so, too. You know, he had fun with the German language, you know. He said that the German language is the only language in the world that has perspective. The words have perspective: they were so long, they would go into the distance.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You worked with characters that had personalities and you had to work with the personalities. And you also created cartoons where—for example, *The Dot and the Line* or *High Note*—where they had no set personality, where you wouldn't think the line moves or the note walks. What was the difference, and which would you prefer?

JONES: As far as I'm concerned, the characters did have personality, but I didn't do it the same way. We were determined on *The Dot and the Line* that we would keep—like Cézanne or Matisse—that we would keep everything on the surface. We were trying to avoid any depth or roundness. But in that case, what I was looking for—and to a certain extent in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, the personality of the narrator was so vital. And Robert Morley imbued into *The Dot and the Line*—he was able to shift over from character to character.

But I was determined on that one, because it was a little book, you see, and I didn't want to change the book by putting faces on it or anything like that. Yeah. It was different. There's no question about it; a different way of approaching it.

The question has to do with favorites, like with Norton Juster, who wrote *The Dot and the Line*, and Dr. Seuss, of course. I don't have favorites of anything.

You know, it's like, if you have four or five children, you're going to have a favorite, but you better keep it to yourself. (Laughter) Because it really has been a problem.

You owe every character that you work with the very best that you have. I haven't always [been] able to do so, but my intent always is that Daffy Duck deserves as much of my attention as does Bugs Bunny, or Dr. Seuss, or anybody else. And you owe any audience the best that you can do. That may sound rather noble, but it's also practical. And so, you don't ever have to worry about it and say, "I can kiss this one off." You can't. If you ever think you can approach any subject by saying, "I can do it; it's a snap," that hurts everything—it hurts the audience, it hurts you worse than anything. So you have to approach every one with great intensity.

And that's why when we do *What's Opera, Doc?*, for instance, the music is played by an eighty-piece orchestra, and it's played correctly. It's played the way it should be played. But the fact that Bugs Bunny and Elmer are in front of it—I always felt that they are trying to do it right. (Laughter)

And Maurice talked to me and he said, "You know, we have a real problem on this picture. We want this to feel like the classic ballet, and yet," he said, "we don't have any flesh tones, and we don't have the tutus." And so I said, "Well, think about it, see if you can come up with an idea. I'll do anything, you know." And he came back later and he said, "Why don't I paint the background in flesh tones and the trees like tutus?" which he did. And if you look at it, you'll see that during that whole sequence, it's all flesh-tone backgrounds. And so you're left [with that impression], subliminally. I talked it over with Sigmund Freud—he agreed, you know? (Laughter)

So, you do look for things like that. In that opening, which was a very sweet tribute to *A Night on Bald Mountain*... Because Bill Tytla, who animated that, and also animated [the character] Stromboli, was our Michelangelo—powerful, beautiful strong stuff. So Abe Levitow animated that. He also had this remarkable, powerful way of drawing, and I loved laying that out, those shadows and so on. Yeah, I don't probably realize how cultural we were. I know you don't! (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Whose idea was it to use Boris Karloff in *The Grinch*?

JONES: Je. Moi. (Applause) Boris Karloff for the Grinch. Dr. Seuss, Ted Geisel, did not know anything about Karloff. He knew that he played all

those parts, as everybody did, and that he played the monsters and so on. But many people had never known that he—and you probably can still get the records or discs today of him telling the *Just So Stories*, the Kipling book, and all that stuff. And I'd heard it and I'd read it.

And what I was curious [about], of course, was that when we did *The Jungle Book* (I haven't seen the new one, but I mean when we did *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* and *The White Seal*—*The White Seal* was for *The Jungle Book*, curiously enough), I don't think Disney took the trouble to find out how to pronounce the boy's name: M-O-W-G-L-I. In recordings made in the 1930s and '40s, Karloff called it "Mawgli." And my father, when I was six years old, called it "Mowgli." Well, Kipling's daughter was still alive (he was not). So, I called her up on the telephone, and I said, "We're going to do *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* on the screen for television," and I said, "There's one thing that puzzles me." I said, "How do you pronounce M-O-W-G-L-I?" And this wonderful old voice came out of there like Edna May Oliver and she said, "You pronounce it Mowgli." She said, "I hate Walter Disney." (Laughter) And that was the first time I ever heard him called Walter!

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) You said that you did a lot of the characters just for fun, but how did you decide what characters you wanted to go on and keep doing?

JONES: There's not a day in my life that I don't make twenty drawings. From the first time I started drawing till today. I can't get through a day... Some people call them doodles, but they're not. They're just drawings. I don't know how you do anything! I don't know how you decide to do anything! You go into a restaurant, and you open the menu, and say the lamb chops look good. How the hell do you know? They here? They're in the kitchen! They look good, you know? They look good! Carrots look good. Ridiculous.

I don't know how I pick out a character! But it's a good question. I just I wish I had a rational answer. But I don't know. It just comes to a point where something seems to work. So you say, "That looks like it's going to work," and you try it. But in animation, you also have to try it out to see whether it will move right or not.

I don't pay attention to the audience. I don't see how you can. I used to watch the guys that made features, you know? I don't know of any director who doesn't do this, and that is, if he takes the picture out to preview, and he doesn't get what response he wants, he'll go to another theater. Till he finds somebody that does like it.

Which leads us again to the whole idea: what is the difference between tragedy [and comedy]? Comedy is always concerned with simple matters. Coyote wants to catch a road runner. That's a simple matter. Or something to eat. Charlie Chaplin's looking for someplace to sit, get something to eat, to act well as a waiter, to hand a girl a rose. All these things are very simple. Comedy is built on that. And I think, obviously, that is why we are so much more devoted to comedy than we ever can be to grand tragedy. It's just too big. And giant tragedies don't happen to us all the time, and very seldom do the gods come roaring down out of the heavens, you know.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Was Dr. Seuss involved in the Private Snafu cartoons? A lot of the cartoons are now coming back, being re-released. What's your feeling about that?

JONES: Yes, of course. Dr. Seuss did work at what they call "Fort Western," which is Western Avenue and Sunset Boulevard. Frank Capra was the Colonel in charge there. Ted Geisel—that's Dr. Seuss—was the Captain. And that was during the war. A number of other people that we worked with, and Dr. Seuss... And several people—Otto England there, a Disney writer on *Dumbo* and other things, and a number of people that worked at Disney's—worked with him. They wrote the stories, and I directed about half of them. Friz did a few, and some of the other guys directed a few of those.

That's the only time I really knew what the audience was like. Most training films, as anybody's ever been in the army knows—how bad most training films are. They're bad, and at that time they were terribly bad, because they were made by army people, or... Put it this way: animation was a very good way to do a training film, because if you used live-action, if you used soldiers trying to act, they couldn't act. And if you used actors pretending like they were soldiers—only in Orange County, where we live, do people not know the difference between

a hero and some people who act as a hero. Ronald Reagan and John Wayne are considered heroes. And I think as actors—John Wayne was a marvelous guy, but he certainly was not a hero (except, like others, he was brave when he got cancer). But everybody in Orange County thinks that he won the war. It's a funny place to live. And actually, it's particularly funny now. I can tell you because we don't think the way they do. I really wouldn't vote for Genghis Khan if he came back to life. But they all would, you see? (Laughter) And we have to separate that. So when this thing, this scandal hit [sex abuse by Catholic bishops in the early 1990s], Marian and I just went crazy with it. Wonderful! About time! By God. That's so pious—Pope Pius.

Anyway, contrary to common belief, Mel Blanc never brought us a voice. He was one of the most brilliant actors I've ever known, extraordinarily quick. He was able to transfer his personality when we told him. But every line was carefully crafted by the writer and by the director. I worked hard on the dialogue because I didn't want any fat in there. A line written for Daffy could never have been delivered by Bugs. And a line for Pepé Le Pew was a special line written expressly for him. When the actor came in, he had never seen the storyboard. And Mel would come in about an hour before we would record the film, and I'd go over the storyboard with him, and then, carefully—and then, if it was Bugs and Daffy, for instance, I would read Bugs's lines, and he would read Daffy. And then we'd reverse the situation. And I'd be Daffy and he'd be Bugs. So that if Daffy was saying, "Let's run through that again," I'd say it to him, then he'd play it back: "Let's run through that again." And then he'd say—oh, I would say, "Okay." He'd say, "Shoot 'em now! Shoot 'em now!" Because of the time, now you have to see that it took us five weeks to do a six-minute cartoon, so a lot of time is taken up in writing the dialogue and delivering it, yes.

When Warner Bros. decided that they, in their foolish way—that they wanted to hire a man of my age to make some more cartoons, my condition was this: that I would not go in and make cartoons unless I could do it with young people. And that I felt it vital, necessary, for Warner Bros. to reconvene the idea of Termite Terrace—young people doing cartoons. The end purpose of my going to work for Warner Bros. was to do away with me. I mean, in

three years, I don't want to be there. I want the young people to learn what is necessary to make cartoons, to make new adventures of old characters, and to come up with fresh characters and new adventures. And that's what they are.

The people that animated this for all of them—I think the oldest one was maybe 32. And the youngest one was nineteen. Which is pretty much the way it ran in our studio. As I said, when I went in the business, I was not quite 18, and the old man was Disney, and he was 29. It's hard to believe that Walt Disney was under forty by the time he had finished *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Fantasia*. It was a young man's—today it's a young person's—game.

So, we have women and men. The musician we have is George Daugherty. He's 35. But he's a great student of Milt Franklin and Carl Stalling. Maurice [Noble] came in long enough to help—the backgrounds were all painted and designed by young people, with Maurice hovering over them to help them. And then he went back into—not into retirement, because he went back to doing watercolors and stuff like that. So, that was the whole point.

It's really a kind of curious thing when you look at it objectively. When I came into the business, there were a bunch of old men—and I use the term "old men"—running our business. And Leon Schlesinger and those guys were between [their] forties and early fifties. A bunch of old men running our business. Well, today, at 82, I look back, and I'd like to say there's a bunch of young men, 45 or 50, running the business. But the artists have to be—I don't want to hire, I don't want to hire people that are... And so, they're trying to set up a feature unit over there, too. And hiring people like that for that purpose. But that's not our business. My business is short subjects. And I love it. And I enjoy it. I have a new book coming out. And, of course, this is the *Peter and the Wolf* book that's advertised in *The New York Times* this week.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: *Chuck Amuck 2*, or something like that?

JONES: Well, no, it's *Chuck Amuck Reducks* [*Redux*], spelled D-U-C-K. (Laughter) That's what we're doing.

So, to come here and hear you guys seeming to enjoy the things that we did, and hopefully enjoying the things of the future—I'm certainly grateful to you, because all the years we were making cartoons, we never ever had any direct contact with an audience. And nobody ever wrote about us during those years. And the sad thing is that people like Tex Avery, and, you know, and Bob Clampett, and those guys never lived long enough to get the recognition. It really started in France, the same

way that American jazz really got its first recognition in France, too. You know, a wonderful book called *Le Jazz Hot*—which I thought was a wonderful name. So these guys started writing about American animation long ago, I mean, and they started in the 1960s, even.

But it's a rebirth, I think. And I'm doing my best to see to it that it happens. I don't know but that I will serve as a midwife! Anyway, thank you so much for coming. (Applause)

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