

THE SECRET OF NIMH

What looks like Disney, sounds like Disney, but isn't Disney? A film by ex-Disney artists.

By Kyle Counts

Classical animation has been gone for a long time. Elements like lush backgrounds, special effects and character contact shadows are not seen even in the best of the animated features. But Don Bluth, president of Don Bluth Productions and director of the forthcoming animated feature, *THE SECRET OF NIMH* (rhymes with time), wants to resurrect them in his \$6.1 million production set for a June 1982 release. The film features the voices of Elizabeth Hartman (*A PATCH OF BLUE*), Derek Jacobi (*I, CLAUDIUS*), John Carradine and Dom Deluise.

THE SECRET OF NIMH is a first feature effort by a group of 14 animators—led by Bluth—who walked out in mid-production on Disney Studio's *FOX AND THE HOUND* due to lack of creative control, a day Bluth refers to as "D-(for Disney) Day. It got to be that we couldn't be creative in the true sense of the word. The red tape, the bureaucracy, the chain of authority—everywhere you turned, someone was saying, 'we don't do that at Disney,' or 'that isn't what Walt would have wanted.' When we realized how difficult it was to grow in those confines, we decided to leave the organization."

"We" included Gary Goldman and John Pomeroy, partner's in Bluth's company and directing animators of *NIMH*. During *THE RESCUERS*, several artists began to feel the decay of the Disney system. "We were being trained to animate, but not to direct or do layouts or cutting," recounts Bluth. The group bought their own animation equipment and started experimenting. After five years they made *BANJO, THE WOODPILE CAT*, which they sold to ABC. The featurette showed to themselves and to potential investors that they were quite serious and capa-

ble of doing a full-length animated feature.

THE SECRET OF NIMH was, in fact, first considered at Disney when a copy of Robert C. O'Brien's Newberry Award-winning novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nimh*, was circulated among the powers-that-be as a potential studio vehicle. It was greeted with an overwhelmingly negative reaction by just about everyone but Bluth.

The film will differ vastly from the



Above: Mrs. Brisby tries to untangle Jeremy, the crow, from a string he's collected for his nest. Inset: Don Bluth (left) Gary Goldman (middle) and John Pomeroy, maverick animators who left Disney to form their own company.

novel, according to Bluth. O'Brien's book is really two stories in one: the first about a widowed field mouse named Mrs. Frisby, who must move her children out of their cinderblock home before it is destroyed by a farmer's tractor. The second story concerns a supra-intelligent strain of rats which escape from their lab cages at N.I.M.H., which stands for National Institute for Mental Health, and seek their own self-sufficient Utopia before the farmer, whose land they

occupy, discovers they are stealing both his grain and electrical supply. Bluth's version combines the stories, the main thrust centered around the field mouse's plight.

Bluth, however, felt any title with the name "Mrs. Brisby" (Whammo had the copyright to Frisby) would sound too "cutesy-pie," thus turning off potential adult patrons. "We don't want people to think we're making a children's picture," he said. "We're not. We are attempting to stimulate, on all levels, for all ages."

Certainly there will be moments of "cutesy-pie" in *THE SECRET OF NIMH*, but such sentimentality should be effectively counterbalanced by the film's darker tones. The audience will witness, for instance, the captured street rats' metamorphosis, through drugs, into an advanced breed of super-rodents. The camera will truck into the molecular structure of the rat's DNA, and show the DNA begin to change, culminating in a psychedelic light show.

The style of *THE SECRET OF NIMH* will no doubt reflect a strong Disney influence, but Bluth isn't bothered by the comparison. "Style was something that was set by Walt, and everyone will always give that to him," said Bluth. "He used a semi-realistic form, which allowed audiences to strongly identify with the characters. This is our form in *NIMH*. You create a form all its own

by burlesquing a human or animal."

The feature film is not the only project on the company's docket. 11 weeks were allotted to the creation of a two-minute animated sequence for *XANADU*. This decision increased the pressure of a late June release date for *THE SECRET OF NIMH* making long hours the norm. Now, it is not uncommon to find an exhausted artist catnapping under his or her desk. Such ten-minute refreshers are encouraged by Bluth, who, as an artist, knows how tiring it can be to sit at a drawing table anywhere from eight to 12 hours a day.

"That's why you'll find Don and John and myself the first ones here in the morning and the last ones to leave at night," said Gary Goldman. "We're running hard, and we want everyone else to run hard." Goldman feels that creating a tight-knit creative team at the directorial level is the key to a quality project. "At Disney, the storyman was responsible only for the story, and when it was done the director would determine if it worked for him. Here, the drawings come out of the director himself."

Bluth estimates that production is slightly behind the midway point, with another seven months of additional work to be done. The completed film will make use of some 6,500 feet of film, with over 1,000 background paintings and between 120,000 and 160,000 drawings for the film's 75 to 78 minute running time. Jerry Goldsmith, composer of the Oscar-winning score for *THE OMEN*, will write the music score, his first for an animated feature.

Bluth isn't all that certain he feels comfortable tagging *THE SECRET OF NIMH* as a return to the classic style of animation, saying, "I'd prefer to simply say that we're going to do our darnedest to keep what I think is a dying art form from dying." □

Mad professor Mr. Ages pulls a string to start the gears in his underground lab.

