

Nick Park on Directing THE WRONG TROUSERS

By Steve Blodrowski

Wallace and Gromit, the delightful characters whose *THE WRONG TROUSERS* just won an Academy Award in the animated short category, began their career modestly enough, in a sketchbook director Nick Park kept in art school. "At one point, I was thinking of a book that would be illustrated for kids, and I had these two characters, though originally Gromit was a cat," Park recalls. "Later on, at National Film School in London, I needed a couple of characters for my graduation film, so I went back to my old sketchbook, found these two, and changed Gromit to a dog. They were just fit into the story, basically."

The film was *A GRAND DAY OUT*, in which Wallace and Gromit run out of cheese and hit on the idea of going to the moon to replenish their supply. Park worked on the film for several years before hooking up with Aardman Animations, who offered to help him finish it while he worked on other projects for them. "I was working on it single-handedly, because it was quite low-budget, so I couldn't really pay people properly to help. Then Aardman gave me part time employment and helped



The animated comedy team of Wallace and Gromit poses on the set of their latest winner, *THE WRONG TROUSERS*.

me finish it."

The film justified the six years of effort by earning an Academy Award nomination. It also established the trademark Nick Park style of wide-mouthed, toothy characters speaking in amusingly exaggerated lip-sync. "Partly, I wanted to make my mark," Park admits. "But the biggest catalyst was Wallace's accent after I recorded the voice with Peter Sallis. He puts on this Northern accent, which really stretches the vowels. I let that dictate to me. I animated a little dialogue in *GRAND DAY OUT*, and it was a bit subtle. So on the next take, I thought, 'Just go for it.' I thought [the approach] was just for Wallace.

When it came to *CREATURE COMFORTS*, I thought it would be a more natural style, but as soon as we came to designing and animating the animals, I just found I liked that approach too much to get away from it."

CREATURE COMFORTS, which employed Aardman's innovative technique of creating "documentary" animation by lip-syncing puppets to taped interviews, won Park his first Oscar. After this success, he and Aardman returned to Wallace and Gromit with a bigger budget and greater ambition. Whereas *A GRAND DAY OUT* suggested the simple structure of Melies' *A TRIP TO THE MOON*, the new effort is a plot-driven thriller. "A *GRAND DAY OUT* was very much a linear story, which works well with very young kids—they can grasp it easily," he explains. "With the next film, I felt like more of a filmmaker than an animator, and I was more ambitious to do something with more plot. With a bigger financial commitment, we all wanted to see something stronger come out of this, something pushed forward in terms of storytelling. We put more effort up front into that, about six months of writing. We went to a writer named Bob Baker, who's done ten years of *DR. WHO*.

Despite the overt Hitchcockian influence, the title is not an intentional play on *THE WRONG MAN*. "I didn't know there was a film called that," says Park. "It's funny, because I'm into Hitchcock films very much. I was aiming to get something of a B-movie thriller feel to it, like *THE THIRD MAN*. That's not exactly a B-movie, but I love

that sort of title."

Feathers McGraw, the felonious villain of the piece, also goes back to Park's art school sketchbook. "I had this idea of a bunch of penguins coming to stay with Wallace and Gromit; then I wanted to strip that idea down to one penguin and use it as the basis for this new story. At first, he was going to get up a lot of mischief and get on Gromit's nerves, basically. Then somebody said, 'Why not make him a kind of hardened criminal living undercover?' That fit in with the Hitchcock idea—the kind of strange lodger who comes and goes without saying anything, and you wonder what he's up to. That element started to come out and form the story.

"I just wanted a villain that was the most unlikely," Park continues. "There's something about Wallace and Gromit that goes back to the English tradition like the Ealing comedies. That's a feeling I tried to capture—that there's something just quirky about the story. I tried to inject unlikely things into the story, like the *Techno Trousers* and the penguin, always having a twist so that nothing's predictable. Whenever the story is doing what you think it should, then don't do it; take it somewhere else. Don't let anyone have quite what they're expecting."

In keeping with the Hitchcock tradition, Park presents two marvelous, visual set pieces, so brilliant in their execution that they almost justify themselves quite apart from how they fit into the story. The first is the sequence wherein the penguin uses Wallace, in the *TECHNO TROUSERS* steal

Nick Park animates a scene of Wallace, trapped in the *Techno-Trousers* which run out of control, taking him on a madcap race along the street.



an uproarious chase atop a model train. "I tend to be more visually led, and I just loved the way the penguin fit onto the train. In fact that whole sequence was a kind of set piece we had on the shelf which might have been used in the plot and might not, because I had many different ideas."

Needless to say, after their current success, Wallace and Gromit will continue their adventures. "We are talking about some of the ways it might go. We have a lot of interest in doing more films; I feel the iron's hot and ready to strike. We're talking about a longer film at the moment, though what the actual length would be we don't quite know. It could be a 50-minute TV movie or even something longer. We're working on a script with Bob Baker again, a 75-minute story that we may very well condense down. We think we probably could get the feature film money for it, but it's a matter of: the more money there is, the more commercial pressure there is, and with these two characters I think they've got to be handled sensitively, not driven by people in suits saying what they should be doing and what kind of market they've got to appeal to, because I think it would destroy them." □



Wallace and Gromit began their adventures with a trip to the moon, in **A GRAND DAY OUT**.



Oscar-winning Claymation Masterpiece

WRONG TROUSERS

An Aardman Animations Production in association with Wallace & Gromit Ltd. and BBC Enterprises. Directed by Nick Park. Produced by Christopher Moll. Executive producers Peter Lord & David Sproston. Executive producers for the BBC, Colin Rose & Peter Salmon. Animation by Nick Park & Steve Box. Art director, Yvonne Fox. Optical effects supervisor, Peter Wignall. Production manager, Pete Thornton. Music by Julian Nott. Editor, Helen Garrard. Photography, Tristan Oliver & Dave Alex Riddett. Written by Nick Park & Bob Baker with additional contributions by Brian Sibley, based upon characters created by Nick Park.

Voice of Wallace.....Peter Sallis

By Steve Biodrowski

In recent years, there have been so many failed attempts at creating Hitchcockian suspense, that the task has begun to seem almost impossible. For example, when Kenneth Branagh made *DEAD AGAIN*, all his Shakespearean skills could not hide the fact that he did not possess the essential cinematic craft necessary to pull off that kind of thriller. But now, out of the most unexpected of places, comes proof that the elusive grail is within our grasp.

The animated short *THE WRONG TROUSERS* takes Wallace and Gromit, the delightfully daffy duo from *GRAND DAY OUT*, and places them within a mystery-thriller scenario. The effect, of course, is parody, but like the best parody, this humor derives from the fact that what we are watching is in many way indistinguishable from the real thing. Ignore for a moment that what we are watching are lumps of clay. The techniques—camera placement and movement, editing, and lighting—are as carefully employed as in any live-action film.

The film begins with a disarmingly amusing episode regarding Gromit's birthday, which he thinks Wallace has forgotten. The tone shifts in a subtle way, however, when they take in a border: an obsequious penguin, who soon seems to be taking Gromit's place. The situation is ripe for comedy, which director-animator Nick Park exploits fully, but along the way we gradually find that the mysterious penguin has a hidden agenda: to wit, heisting a diamond with the aid of Gromit's birthday present ("Techno Trousers...ex-NASA...great for walkies.")

Everything about this film is perfect, from the broad comic strokes to the subtle nuances of the characters' expressions. Even



The felonious penguin, Feathers McGraw, gets the drop on our heroes; where he could have been packing a magnum is anyone's guess.

elements which could have been weaknesses are turned around into strengths. For instance, the silent penguin (only Wallace speaks) has virtually no expressive capabilities except for his blinking eyes, but this only adds to his enigmatic nature, as the Bernard Hermandesque score underlines every gesture with menace.

The film is filled with so much detail and cleverness that multiple viewings are almost essential. Park pulls some effective cinematic "cheats," such as having Wallace back into an empty doorway, then stepping aside to reveal the penguin, who has suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The effectiveness of the character's surprise appearance is only augmented by seeing how Park pulled a fast one on us.

Make no mistake: this film is a humorous takeoff on the theme, but Park is confident enough in his abilities to go for extended visual sequences of the jewel heist, with only minor comic touches. This is so well done that, on first viewing, one would assume it to be the highlight of the film. Then Park audaciously tops it with the climactic model train chase—quite an impressive coup. Like many great set pieces (the train chase in Hitchcock's *NUMBER 17* comes to mind), this later scene is barely justified by the story. (Gromit could have simply conked the villain on the head with his rolling pin, but in a deliciously absurd sight gag the penguin pulls out a gun. Where the hell was this suit-

less penguin packing a rod?) But the visual impact of the scene is so great that it truly justifies its own existence.

If all this sounds a tad heavy-handed for a review of an animated film, let me acknowledge that *THE WRONG TROUSERS* is good exuberant fun. The storytelling is brisk enough to hold the attention of youngsters, but most of the references and inside jokes are clearly intended for an older audience. In its own way, despite the claymation which would seem to indicate a kiddie format, this is an ambitious undertaking which uses the cinematic form to its fullest extent. Shot for shot there is more style here than in a dozen live-action features—style that is enjoyable both for its own sake and for effectively enhancing the storytelling. □

Disguised as a chicken (note the rubber glove), McGraw carries out his diamond theft.

