

# At these prices, don't call them 'cartoons'

AP — The best news for fans of animated movies came with last week's box-office report that showed big grosses for "The Land Before Time" and "Oliver and Company."

Revival of animation, the most tedious and expensive kind of filmmaking, has been predicted every few years. Until recently, though, economies made animation features risky. But in their first weekend "The Land Before Time" topped all releases with \$7.5 million in 1,395 theaters (\$5,395 average), and "Oliver and Company" in a smaller release of 552 theaters scored no. 4 with \$4 million (\$4,226 average).

Those are big numbers, and they're likely to grow through the holiday season. That's encouraging for the animation trade, which has been hampered not only by the heavy expense of production but the nature of the audience.

"A large number of tickets we sell go for a lower admission price," said Don Bluth, who produced "The Land Before Time."

"If we make a botch with a pic-

ture, it's because we sold more tickets," Bluth, who formerly worked for the Disney Co., cautiously predicts a renaissance of animation.

Walt Disney Pictures, which produced "Oliver and Company," has pumped up its animation department and is starting up an additional facility at the Disney-MGM studio lot in Florida. Roy E. Disney, nephew of Walt, is largely responsible for the revival. Four years ago when Roy helped create a new management at Disney, the outlook was dismal.

"Animation was dying around here," he said in an interview at his studio office. "There had been 10 years of a kind of lack of faith in it, and a lack of direction to it. There were an awful lot of discouraged artists working here."

"We were finishing up 'The Black Cauldron,' which had been an enormous seven-year effort, with the kind of strange idea of doing an epic or making a masterpiece and not having any strong sense of what the

story was. There were a lot of people who thought we just weren't going forward with the animation department. There was even talk of getting out of the movie business entirely."

Disney was faced with the task of educating new company heads, who were trained in live-action films, to the uniqueness of the animation process.

"First of all, it's a matter of time; 'Oliver,' for example, took four years to complete," he said. His campaign was aided by having "The Great Mouse Detective" in good story form. When the movie proved a hit, all doubts were erased.

"Oliver and Company" resulted from a "Gong Show" session in which 20 film executives appeared with at least three story ideas. Most were shot down, but an updated "Oliver Twist" survived. Members of Fagin's gang became dogs, as was the newcomer, Oliver. But during story development Oliver became a kitten.

The young animators worked at a fast clip, inspired by the casting of

the voices, including Bette Midler, Billy Joel, Dom DeLuise and Robert Loggia. Many of the new artists have come from the Disney-endowed California Institute of the Arts, but Disney observed that more schools are teaching animation as an art.

The studio won't reveal the cost of "Oliver and Company," but Disney said it was in the middle range for an animated feature (estimated: \$18 million). Computers will increasingly relieve some of the tedium of inking and painting, he said, helping to bring down expenses.

"But the animation of a character, hand-drawn in pencil, I think will never change," he said.

Bluth, who produced "The Land Before Time" for \$12 million, found a way to reduce animation expense: He moved his entire studio to Ireland because of the labor cost of animation. The Irish government offered a 10-year commitment for tax breaks, grants for Irish artists who would be trained and access to bank loans, he said.

"It was like Moses leading the

children of Israel out of Egypt," said Bluth. "The artists had to pull up all their staves; many of them sold their homes."

"Many of them have bought homes there, they all have Irish accents, some have joined the Catholic church. It's a conversion to another way of life. I don't think many plan to stay there forever. But they have embraced the Irish society."

Bluth led an earlier exodus of Disney animators during the studio's low period and produced "The Secret of NIMH," a failure. Then he combined with Steven Spielberg on "An American Tail," a rousing success. "The Land Before Time" also resulted from a Spielberg idea.

"I can't understand why no one has made a film about dinosaurs," Bluth recalled Spielberg telling him. "It's a natural. There is a great interest in dinosaurs. George Lucas and myself have wanted to do such a movie for some time, but we didn't want to do it with puppets; we tried that and it didn't work."

With Spielberg and Lucas as executive producers, Bluth could hardly miss. He admitted his ignorance of

dinosaurs, but he said Spielberg told him: "You can learn."

Bluth and his artists soon recognized the difficulty of animating dinosaurs. "For instance, the brontosaurus with the long neck. It has a little head, like a ball on a stick. It doesn't have the shoulders and the hands to give you gestures. It all has to be done with facial expressions."

But how to make the beasts move? Bluth and company reasoned that the prehistoric creatures were reptiles, and birds evolved from reptiles in forms. So the artists copied moves from films of chickens and turkeys.

After the opening of "The Land Before Time," Bluth returned to the Dublin studio where production is under way on the next feature, "All Dogs Go to Heaven," which takes place in the hereafter.



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## Parodies poke fun at holiday humbug

AP — These are not your typical Christmas songs: Santa gets stuck in the chimney. The patient pooch Rover eagerly awaits the used Christmas tree.

Even the vocal group is unorthodox: the Bah Humbug Singers.

The songs and the singers are all elements of a cassette tape recording being distributed nationwide, "Bah Humbug," a parody of four famous Christmas songs.

The songs, on Playback Records based in Miami, are also being played on many radio stations and several radio networks.

The tune to "Jingle Bells" is sung to new lyrics of a song titled "Discount Sales."

For example:

"Discount sales. Discount sales.

Discount all the way.

This is how we can afford

Christmas gifts today."

The parody of "O Christmas Tree" goes:

"O Christmas tree. O Christmas tree.

The season is now over.

Christmas tree. O Christmas tree.

You mean a lot to Rover."

The parodies are the work of Dick and Lee Ann Loftin of Tulsa, Okla.

Daughter April, 15, when the recording was done, joins them as the Bah Humbug Singers.

"This is the human experience of what happens at Christmas," Loftin said in a telephone interview from Tulsa, where he is a disc jockey for radio station KVOO.

"It's humor that everyone can enjoy and at no one's expense," he said.

Another song on the cassette is "Up on the Roof," a parody of "Up

on the Housetop."

Poor Santa:

"Up on the roof there was a thump.

I was awakened with a jump.

It came from outside the chimney trunk.

It seems that Santa Claus was stuck."

This is the third Christmas since Loftin wrote the parodies and made them available to the public. He says the songs are getting more popular each year.

"People everywhere identify with it," he said. "It's about the holiday

frenzies. We just captured that by setting it to words and music."

"We are making fun of everything everyone has gone through: the un-Christmas merriment."

The fourth song is "We Wish You a Debt-Free Christmas," a parody of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas."

The final line of the first verse is: "And no interest charge!"

Somewhat "Frosty the Snowman" escaped the treatment.

"We didn't get into this to become famous or stars," Lee Ann Loftin said. "We just wanted to have fun."

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