

Magical Maestro

By Thad Komorowski

It may be impossible to pick a single animated cartoon that best represents the name Tex Avery. The first nine years of his legacy at the MGM cartoon studio (1941-1950) produced one of the most impressive oeuvres in all Hollywood cinema. Despite being part of what amounted to an artistic vacuum, Avery's best films always try to out-do each other in their rowdy, delicate search for animated perfection.

If one cartoon *did* have to represent Avery at his finest, "Magical Maestro" would be a fine choice and likely get no sane arguments to the contrary. One hears infectious laughter during any Avery cartoon with a live audience, but never more than when the great singer Poochini (Avery's reoccurring character Spike the bulldog under a cornball alias) stops during his solo to pull a hair out of the film's projection gate. So convincing that a note, re-printed in "Daily Variety," had to be sent out to theaters:

"Notice to projectionists: Approximately 850 feet from the start of the film a hair appears at the bottom of the screen. Later, the singer reaches for the hair and removes it. This is a gag in the picture, not something in the aperture of your projector!"

Avery had used a heavy-handed variation of the hair-in-the-projector gag a decade earlier in "Aviation Vacation," one of his last cartoons for Leon Schlesinger. But those ten years had made all the difference in the timing and filmmaking Avery was constantly refining.

The cartoon is literally a culmination of Avery's greatest period, as it was one of the last cartoons Avery finished in mid-1950 before he left the studio for a 17-month sabbatical. That break, initiated by something of a nervous breakdown, had been a long time coming.

Avery was regularly at odds with Fred Quimby, the MGM cartoon studio's producer, and Scott Bradley, the cartoons' musical composer. Quimby didn't find Avery's humor tasteful, accused him of overspending, and lamented the lack of more continuing character series from his unit. Bradley hated Avery's musical preferences; he preferred working with Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera, who made MGM's Tom and Jerry cartoons and more or less gave Bradley carte blanche as a musician.

Personal confrontation with colleagues mattered little, however, in comparison with the internal confrontation



Poochini and the infamous "hair in the projector" gag.

between Avery and his own perfectionism. Most of Avery's collaborators at MGM commented that he was the textbook definition of "worrywart;" that he was never confident with his own drawing skill and would always have his roughs diluted by a layout artist educated in the Disney fashion; that he would come in on nights and weekends to do revisions because he didn't think the cartoon was funny enough.

Said Avery in a 1977 interview with historian Milton Gray: "That's why I took a year off, because I attempted to do everything. I would come in on Saturday and flip drawings and change timings that I'd perhaps seen in pencil test the week before. Rather than involve the guys, I would pull out drawings, perhaps, and change a little timing."

By the time Avery had written, recorded voices, and planned the soundtrack for "Magical Maestro" at the end of September 1949, he was deep into that frenetic stage of his life. It probably galled Bradley no end that Avery was eviscerating Rossini—mixing his work with the likes of "Mama Yo Quiero" and "Everything I Have is Yours"—but that was the point of Avery's comedy: everything was up for grabs, often at the expense of stuffed shirts.

Indeed, taking down pompous, self-proclaimed "high culture" is precisely the point of the film. Mysto the Magician (voiced by Daws Butler) is booted out of Poochini's dressing room after an unsuccessful, buoyant sales pitch to add his magic act to the show (animated by Mike Lah). Mysto vows revenge on the snob by sabotaging the concert with his magic wand. After capturing and impersonating Poochini's conductor (a caricature of Bradley), Mysto throws everything he can at the singer. Starting with rabbits, flowers and other magic props as mere irritants, it soon becomes a transformational free-for-all. The singer's rendition of "The Barber of Se-

ville” (recorded by MGM contract player Carlos Ramírez) repeatedly interrupted as he takes on various singing personas, via magic, at any moment the audience is least expecting it. One wave of Mysto’s wand changes Poochini into a square dance caller and back again. Another wave and he’s decked out as a sissy schoolboy singing “A-Tisket, A-Tasket.” The more preposterous and humiliating, the better.

Nothing builds, at least in the sense of story structure, in “Magical Maestro.” Avery is clearly throwing everything and anything he can into it to get a laugh. At one point, a heckler socks Poochini with fruit; it becomes a headdress and Poochini transforms into a grotesque Carmen Miranda, complete with rabbit accompaniments. It isn’t enough that ink sprayed from a pen turns Poochini into a black-faced Ink Spot (voiced by actor Paul Frees, as identified by historian Keith Scott), but Avery has to top even that by having the heckler drop an anvil on Poochini—so now, squashed, he sings with a deep, gravelly “black” voice. When the gag’s worn out its welcome, a firefighter rabbit sprays the ink off with a hose, and another rabbit enters to jack Poochini up to normal height.

There is little influence of other drawing hands in the cartoon, despite the capable, individualistic styles of animators Mike Lah, Grant Simmons, and Walt Clinton. For approximately the last two years before his sabbatical, Avery’s personal drawing style was closer to the surface than ever before, to great effect. Spike the bulldog had also become a kind of muse for Avery, having starred in eleven near consecutive cartoons. Avery’s whims to have his characters do anything—and do anything to them—were only truly fulfilled if it was Avery’s drawings doing it.

Cartoonist Gene Hazelton may or may not have done the character layouts for “Magical Maestro,” but he was working for Avery at the time, and what he told historian Michael Barrier in 1979 held true for all of those Spike cartoons regardless: “I finally got smart, and whenever Tex gave me a layout, no matter how crude it was, I traced it and just rendered it up a bit. It *had* to be that way, to be a personal statement by Tex Avery.”

In “Magical Maestro”’s concluding moments—for no apparent reason—Mysto’s disguise finally falls apart. Poochini, now wise, turns the tables by grabbing the wand and forcing his tormenter through all the same ridiculous routines in a matter of seconds, finally bringing

the curtain down (literally) on Mysto and the rabbits. Avery was a true crowd pleaser: he wanted the audience to laugh, but he still wanted them to feel satisfied with the outcome for the characters, thus the instigator’s swift comeuppance. What more could you ask of a comedy director?

By the time “Magical Maestro” was released in February 1952, Avery was back working at MGM, but the cartoon was the last of its kind. Avery’s post-sabbatical films—made before he was finally laid off for good in June 1953—didn’t boast the freewheeling nature or bold movement of “Magical Maestro” and the like, but rather the softer gag style and graphic influence of UPA, the hip new studio in town.

Nor did the making of later Avery cartoons boast the extravagance “Magical Maestro” did. Keith Scott’s research of animation voice recordings shows that Avery brought in the Mary Kay Trio, a Las Vegas lounge act, to record seven different numbers for the cartoon in August 1949. When viewing the film, pull yourself out of the fun for a second and realize there isn’t anything more than scattered remnants of those professional, well-paid sessions in the final picture.

It’s easy to see why Fred Quimby got miffed with Tex Avery’s methods. But then, it’s obvious that Tex Avery was always right—it’s the laughs that count above all else.

For more info on Tex Avery as an artist, filmmaker, and person, read Joe Adamson’s “Tex Avery: King of Cartoons,” Michael Barrier’s “Hollywood Cartoons,” and John Canemaker’s “Tex Avery: The MGM Years, 1942-1955.”

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Thad Komorowski is a lifelong animation historian and archivist, currently pursuing his Master’s at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. He is the author of the acclaimed Sick Little Monkeys: The Unauthorized Ren & Stimpy Story and an upcoming book on the history of animation in New York City. He is also a radio journalist, whose work has appeared on WBGO News in Newark, New Jersey.