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Beiman's Progress

How hard work and The Fates helped Nancy Beiman to her rightful place in the Pantheon of Disney animators

by Janet Benn

She has animated Bugs and Donald, Snoopy and Goofy, friends of Fievel Mouse and Mickey Mouse, Don Martin's humans and Chuck Jones' Martians. Nancy Beiman has worked for Jack Zander, Rick Reinert, the Disney Channel, Disney television movies, Warner Bros., Bill Melendez, Gerhard Hahn and Steven Spielberg.



Nancy Beiman in her studio at Walt Disney Feature Animation. Photo by Gary Krueger. © Disney.

Now, as Supervising Animator for *The Fates* and *Theban* in Disney Feature Animation's current release, *Hercules*, she has reached a place she has been working toward for 20 years. It seems fitting that she should be acting in the Underworld: well suited to her talents as a caricaturist and her strong New Yorker's individualism and cynicism.

A CalArts First

Beiman was fated to be taught by the colleagues of the Nine Old Men at the California Institute of the Arts from 1975-1979. As Tom Sito has described in his remembrance of the 1976-77 production of *Raggedy Ann and Andy* (*Animation Magazine*, April/May, 1997) those years saw the last productions of the old generation, and the first efforts of the new.

Through a string of coincidences worthy of her weird sisters' invention, Beiman was chosen to receive a scholarship to the inaugural class of the Character Animation Program at CalArts. She had already been accepted at New York University, but instead she went to California.

"I went to the right school," Beiman told me recently. "That was an incredible course. You had Jack Hannah teaching Animation, Elmer Plummer with Life Drawing, T. Hee teaching Caricature, Ken O'Connor doing Layout. These are legendary people. One non-Disney person, Bill Moore, was a design instructor at Chouinard Art Institute for 40 years. This turned out to be the most important course of all, since everything else works out of good design. I was very lucky to be there when they were all there. There were two other girls in that first class but by

the end of `76 I was the only one left. I was the first to graduate in 1979. Since Jack Zander had already hired me, I graduated three months ahead of the guys."

Nancy explains how this happened, "I was heading back to New York [on a school break], and Jim Logan (who was at Dick Williams' studio in Hollywood) told me to look up his old friend Jack Zander when I was in New York." At Zander's Animation Parlour, the Art Director reluctantly agreed to take a look at Beiman's student film. "He's looking at the cat film and he goes, 'Who did this?' 'I did.' 'You did this?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Excuse me, I think Jack better have a look!'"

"Zander looked at it for a minute and said, 'I've seen enough! Get over here! Sit down, draw me something!' Jack said later, 'You were 21 years old, you looked 14, and no one had ever heard of Cal Arts!' She continues, "No one had ever seen a student film with Disney style animation in it. Jack wanted to be sure I wasn't faking it! I think I drew some little sheep for him. And he said, 'Get in my office, sit down! You wanna go back to school? To Hell with school! Sit down, we'll pay you! Start working!' But I said, 'Mr. Zander, my parents will scream at me if I don't have that diploma.' 'Allright. Why don't you work for me this one week, and then you come back in January, after you get it?' he suggested." There were some phone calls to California, and "that's how all this foofraw started. So I started working for Zander's in December of `78 and went full time in March of `79."

Beiman is a traditionalist who has nevertheless broken ground for women in unprecedented areas. As a result of her first job, she was the youngest person and one of the few women ever to be initiated into the New York Union (Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Local 841) as an animator. Later, she was to become a director in New York for Warner Bros. on their first attempt to revive six minute theatrical shorts production after the demise of Paramount's Famous Studios in the `60s. Even though this was 1991, there were still few female animation directors in New York.

Taking up residence among the cliff dwellers of Manhattan, her preferred habitat, she did well, becoming one of the principal animators for Zander's commercial spots and *The Gnomes* television special. In 1982, she left to pursue freelance opportunities which included her first Disney assignment.

Dogs And Ducks

"I've been working for Disney for a long time, but not necessarily in [the] Animation [Division]. I started in `82. I was freelancing for Rick Reinert Productions, which was subcontracting for Disney. I worked on *Winnie the Pooh and a Day for Eeyore*, the original Disney Channel station breaks, and a lot of educational stuff for Florida with Donald Duck. In 1986, work started getting rather thin on the ground, and Dean Yeagle and I formed Caged Beagle in an attempt to get commercial production going again. It was the wrong time to start a studio in New York City, though we did subcontract work from Warner Bros. on their *Quackbusters* feature.

"I then went out to California and picked up work from Bill Melendez, who was a wonderful, wonderful boss. I worked on a show called *It's the Girl in the Red Truck, Charlie Brown*. It was a really elaborate animation with live-action combination, with Snoopy's brother Spike. What I

loved about it was, Spike had never been animated before, and the directors said, 'Do what you like with him.' Spike doesn't talk, just like Snoopy. So this was the first fully pantomimed character I had done. Boy, was he fun! I mean, I had more fun on him than just about anything.

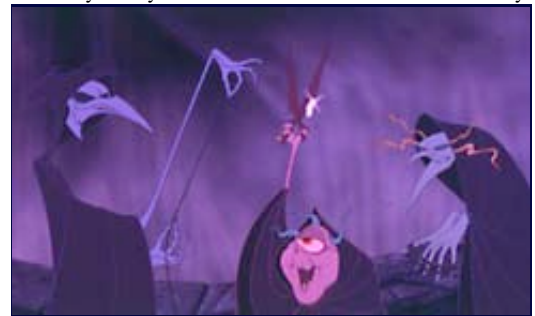
"In '88 everything died. So I saw a magazine article that said, 'Don Martin cartoons to be done in Germany.'" Nancy sent her reel, not really expecting much, if any, response. "Then I get a long-distance call, [a voice] with a heavy accent, that goes, 'This is Gerhard Hahn, from HahnFilm. Can you get on ze next plane? How many years can you stay?' And I said, 'Whoa, whoa, there. Here's what we'll do: why don't I come over for thirty days to Berlin, and I'll work on your Don Martin commercial, and we'll see if we like each other?'"

"I made some very dear friends over there. The Don Martin job was a really wild commercial for the Swedish election of 1988, where I worked with some Danish animators and met Borge Ring. I found HahnFilm to be a pleasant place in which to work. The *Werner* project we did was a lot of fun. It was a feature, the most successful German film since 1945, and the sequel [*Werner, Eat My Dust*] has broken that record. I mainly did storyboard on *Werner* and also some animation. I went to Annecy [Animation Festival] in '89, and was approached by the Spielberg people [to work on *An American Tail: Fievel Goes West*]. I said to Gerhard [Hahn] as he was just about to start full production, that I always wanted to work in England, and this was about my only chance. So we parted on very amicable terms.

The Fates, characters of destiny, animated by Nancy Beiman for the film *Hercules*. © Disney.

Cats And Mice

"[At Amblin in London] I was originally hired as an animator, but I was a supervisor within six months. I was doing a great deal of footage, and I'd asked for Miss Kitty, who was unassigned. I got the promotion. Kitty, I thought, is one of my best assignments: she was a great voice. Amy Irving did a sort of Mae West accent. Her dialogue was a little crazy, so I suggested to Simon Wells, one of the directors, that since she had scatterbrained dialogue maybe she should be scatterbrained in her actions. This was enthusiastically accepted. So I had a lot of freedom in her choreography.



"Then, instead of going onto the next feature, I went back to New York to work for Greg Ford on a Bugs Bunny show that I would direct. So, I tell people I change countries the way some people change socks! I've always been a person who prefers to live where I want to live. You know, I could have made more money going out to L.A., let's face it, in 1982, when Rick Reinert offered to bring me out there. I hung on as long as I could in New York, and then went to Europe, because I like to live in a cosmopolitan city."

Beiman was piling up credits like trophy heads from jobs which were coming, Hydra-like, from all directions. Nancy started her move West, like Fievel, with her next job for Warner Bros.

Bugs in New York City

Warner Bros. opened a production studio in New York in 1989 in the historic Film Center Building on Eighth Avenue in the Hell's Kitchen district. Nancy's first directing assignment was

to be a compilation program of 30 minutes' length titled *Lunar Tunes*.

About it, she says, "I tell people, saying you've done a compilation picture is like saying you've had an illegitimate child! We had to take the Martian cartoons of Chuck Jones and incorporate them into this new stuff." Chuck Jones has always been one of Nancy's heroes. "I do feel like I'm doing him a terrible disservice, so we did not have direct hookups from old animation to the new. They are kept strictly separate. The old footage is presented as evidence in a trial. And I've literally put it on a motion picture screen, which is modeled on the old Art Deco fixings that were in our studio. Plus, no one said the 'old footage' had to be animation! There's a montage sequence of which I'm still rather proud, called 'Know Your Neighbor,' where you have Marvin say, 'Here's how Earth creatures portray us!' And it's all these clips from Grade Z live-action horror movies."

A feature of the recent (June 1997) Cartoon Network weekend of Bugs Bunny cartoons was one which had never been seen before, called *Blooper Bunny*. This was the second film made at the New York studio. Nancy recalls, "*Blooper Bunny* was directed by Greg [Ford] and Terry [Lennon]. It had a very elaborate computer animated background at the beginning of the film that was done by the Kroyers [Bill and Sue]. [In New York] I animated Bugs and Daffy matching to these computer backgrounds. Elmer [Fudd] was done by Dean Yeagle; Yosemite Sam was done by Nelson Rhodes in New Mexico. So, we actually had the scene worked on in three different cities. The film was extremely amusing, it just aired this week. I would love to hear what people thought of it. I would love to hear the reviews, because, of course, we were very proud of it, and we were very happy that it aired."

Nancy knew that her time at Warners was limited. "Warner Bros. closed the New York Studio in 1992. I was supposed to go back to Germany, but Gerhard [Hahn] did not get financing for another feature. I wound up working for the Phillips Sidewalk Company in L.A. with Gary Drucker and Rebecca Newman on a now-dead system called CDI. CDI went at 10 frames per second, but looked like full animation."



Nancy animated on Disney's *A Goofy Movie* while working at their studio in Paris. © Disney.

The Mouse in Burbank

However, the CD-ROM system was to win out in the marketplace and the divine hand of Disney plucked her from the shady Underworld of soon-to-be-obsolete CDI technology, to act Goofy and eventually shoulder the labors of *Hercules*. *The Goofy Movie* was produced by

Disney Television, and was first released theatrically to critical acclaim. "In 1993 I got a phone call from Disney Television [in Burbank]. They said, 'Would you like to work for us on *The Goofy Movie* in France?' I said, 'When do I leave?' They needed a Supervisor [Supervising Animator] with experience who was very mobile and could live in Paris for a year.

"I was Supervisor on Roxanne, the girl, and also did a lot of work on Goofy and Pete. They gave me the opening scenes in Goofy's house, since they wanted a 'Jack Kinney-style' Goofy. They said, 'He's a very sensitive character later in the film, so we want to lead in with something where the character's behaving like the Goofy the audience always knew.' So they

wanted me to do something goofy with Goofy. I remember director Kevin Lima wanted him to dance the Mambo." When Nancy finished the animation, she showed it to him. "I wanted this to be the stupidest Mambo ever filmed! He said, 'You won! That's right!'" Nancy continues, "The choreography was like John Waters did it."

In 1994, Beiman continued working for Disney Television, this time in Burbank. She was getting closer to features, and at last the word came down. "In the beginning of '95, I was informed that John Musker and Ron Clements had asked that I contact them at [Disney] Features. They said, 'We would like to know if you'd do The Fates for us (on *Hercules*).' They showed me the Gerald Scarfe drawings, and some of designer Sue Nichols' work, and I thought, 'This is really exciting, very different.'

"They were completely surreal characters, more 'graphic' than 'character' animation," notes Beiman on animating The Fates for *Hercules*. © Disney.

"You've got to realize, when you're brought up doing what you call the traditional Disney style, Scarfe's designs can look a little intimidating at first, but Gerald had worked in animation before, so he would meet us halfway. If I said, 'Gerald, she won't turn. I need a back view,' he did it for me. And, I would combine the two designs, I would interpolate the two, making a happy medium. I did every scene on The Fates. They were completely surreal characters, more 'graphic' than 'character' animation. I figured that they were spirits, so they didn't need bodies. They were just heads and hands (and one portable eyeball) and the drapery suggested 'bodies' underneath. I designed The Fates, and The Old Theban, the Fat and Thin Women, and many other characters based on drawings by Gerald Scarfe.



"[Scarfe] is a gentleman and a professional. For example, as he was going to go back to England, [at the last minute] I said, 'Hey, Gerald, I forgot something! I need a bug!' I was doing this scene with these Thebans standing around the well, and a cricket has to hop in, and I didn't have a model for the cricket. He said, 'Big eyes or small eyes?' I said, 'I think big eyes.' He did this funny little jelly bean of a cricket, with giant eyes, that goes, 'Cheep!' and frightens all the Thebans. I also did the Painter in Herc's villa, who is, by the way, a caricature of Gerald Scarfe! Gerald had sent his drawing for the character and [Ron and John] said, 'You know, this looks a lot like him.' I said, 'Do you think he'll get mad at me?' And, I don't know if he knows it now, that he's in there."

Nancy Beiman continues today at Walt Disney Feature Animation in Burbank, but she wanted you all to know she's not the only girl anymore. "There were many women animating on *Hercules*. Ellen Woodbury was the other Lead Animator. She did Pegasus. Caroline Cruikshank, Teresa Wiseman, and Terri Martin were all in the Phil[octetes] Unit. Catherine 'Catpou' Poulain worked on Meg[ara] in Paris. Gilda Kouros in the *Hercules* unit was our only Greek animator [as well]. [There were three] female animators in the Effects Department, and a number of Department Heads and Key assistants were also women."

So different from the time nearly twenty years ago when Beiman stood alone as the first woman to graduate from the CalArts Character Animation Program. Luck (or The Fates) had an

influence, but raw talent and hard work, combined with a deep appreciation of a great tradition, tenacity and courage in the face of adversity were there and needed as well.

Janet Benn was Scene Planner, Layout Checker and Retake Supervisor on MTV Animation's Beavis and Butt-head Do America at MTV Animation in New York. She has worked in animation production for 20 years, and was an inker and final checker at Zander's Animation Parlour when Nancy Beiman was animating there. She was also the first vice-president of Women in Animation/New York, and has also officiated at ASIFA-East and Women Make Movies, Inc.

[Table of Contents](#)

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