STORYBOARDS
MOTION IN ART

Second Edition

Mark Simon

Focal Press

STORYBOARDS: MOTION IN ART

SECOND EDITION

MARK SIMON

∞ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Keith Sintay
Artist/Animator
818-834-7325

Jeanne Pappas Simon
Writer
407-370-2673

Jenni Gold
Gold Productions
Writer/Director
407-380-3456

Troy Schmidt
Writer
iamtodd@aol.com

Chris Allard
Storyboard Artist
617-964-9062

Wayne Carter
Writer
awc54@aol.com

Willie Castro
Laser Storyboard Artist/Animator
407-859-8166
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Steve Shortridge
Storyboard Artist
423-232-5191

EPL Productions, Inc.
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Kissimmee, FL 34747
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Dan Antkowiak
818-679-8236
storyboards@aol.com

Thomas Miller
Liquid Digital Illustrations
423-928-8090
digisaur@preferred.com

Jesus Trevino
Director
323-258-0802

Klasky Csupo
Animation Production
Storyboard Artists:
Steve Ressel
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Mark Simon
Animatics & Storyboards, Inc.
Storyboards, animatics, character design, After Effects, animation production
407-370-2673
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The storyboard is an illustrated view, like a comic book, of how the producer or director envisions the final edited version of a production to look. This view of the production is the most effective form of communication between the producer or director and the rest of the crew. Just as building plans direct construction crews to build a house the way an architect designed it, storyboards direct film and TV crews to produce a project the way the director designed it. Each drawing instantly relates all of the most important information of each shot and defines a singular look for the entire crew to achieve.

Storyboards actually started in the animation industry. In the early 1900s, the great animator Winsor McCay was creating comic strips for his amazing animations. These were certainly some of the earliest storyboards. Later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, scripts for the emerging animation field were typed out in the format of live-action scripts. This very quickly caused complications. A written description of an animated action does not necessarily get the right idea across. If the script said a character had a funny expression on its face, what does that mean? It's easy to write the words "funny expression" or "funny action," but animating a character to achieve it is much more difficult. The animators were finding out that a written gag was often not funny when translated into animation.

To remedy this, the "storymen" (there were no women in the story departments back then) began to draw sketches of the salient scenes and gags. Very quickly they started adding more and more drawings to their scripts until it became customary to sketch the entire story. In order for the entire story-writing team to see the sketches, they were tacked up on the wall. Someone had the bright idea of putting these sketches onto large pieces of beaverboard (thus the term "storyboard"). Beaverboard was used extensively for partitions and ceilings, and it is a lightweight, fibrous board that is easy to push tacks into. This was advantageous for the storymen, who were tacking up hundreds of drawings. With the drawings on such boards, the entire story could also be moved and viewed in another room.

Animations at the time started holding written descriptions down to a minimum. Writing was limited mostly to dialogue and simple camera instructions. If an idea did not hold up graphically, it was rejected.

Storyboards are now used to help develop a script, flesh out an idea, enhance a script, and/or visualize a finished script. Development of animations often use storyboards throughout the entire production process. The *Star Wars* epics used storyboards to work out ideas and scenes before the script was complete. They are a

great device to help develop a project in all phases of production.

Over the years, the practice of storyboarding has become more prevalent in live-action shooting. Although animations have every scene storyboarded without exception, live action storyboard use is mostly limited to commercials, as well as action, stunts, and special effects scenes in movies and TV shows.

A well-done set of boards is beautifully representative of any visual motion, like a comic book; the images flow together to tell a story. The line work may be somewhat rough, or it may be very tight and detailed, but what is important is properly visualizing the flow of the story.

You've heard that "A picture is worth a thousand words." In the entertainment industry, a picture is worth much more than a thousand dollars. When people read a script, everybody gets a different image of what it should look like. The producer and the director, however, are the ones who make the final decision. Without a set of boards to represent exactly how they want a scene to look, any number of things can go wrong. Statements might be heard on the set like, "Oh, that's what you meant," or "What are you doing?!!! That is NOT what I asked for!!" If everyone is working towards the same vision, miscommunications such as these will not happen.

In the golden years of animation, in the days of Chuck Jones, Tex Avery, Bob Clampett, Friz Freleng, and Walter Lantz, the directors drew most of their own storyboards. As animation studios grew, tasks were delegated to others. Only recently has the trend of directors doing their own storyboarding begun to grow again. Some of the newer animators, such as John Kricfalusi of *Ren and Stimpy* fame, feel that it's important for cartoon writer/directors to draw their own boards.

He feels that it's important for stories to be written by cartoonists who not only can write; they can draw. Cartoons are not just funny writing, they are funny images and sight gags. Cartoonists know the capabilities and limitations of the medium and can best take advantage of it. Writing alone can't do this. Cartoons are best when they do the physically impossible and deal with exaggeration.

Live-action storyboards are generally done in pre-production, as soon as a script is in its final stages. Storyboard artists will work mostly with a director to illustrate the images in his or her mind for the entire crew to see. At times they may work with a producer, if the producer's vision is the guiding force in a project, or prior to a director signing onto a project.

The other person a storyboard artist is likely to work with is the production designer. The production designer holds the creative vision of a project regarding everything behind the actors, including not only sets and locations, but also props and, at times, costuming. The look of the sets and locations will be extremely important to the character's action. A storyboard artist may help out with the look of a project in a number of different ways. The production designer will supply the artist with all the visual information needed. Storyboard artists may also be asked to draw conceptual illustrations of what the sets or locations should look like before detailed designs and construction starts.

The people running a low-budget production may think they are saving money by not using boards, but quite the opposite is true. The lower the budget, the more organized the production has to be in order to accomplish the difficult task at hand. Any misunderstandings or bad communications can throw the already too-tight schedule out the window. The more a project is boarded, the better the preproduction will
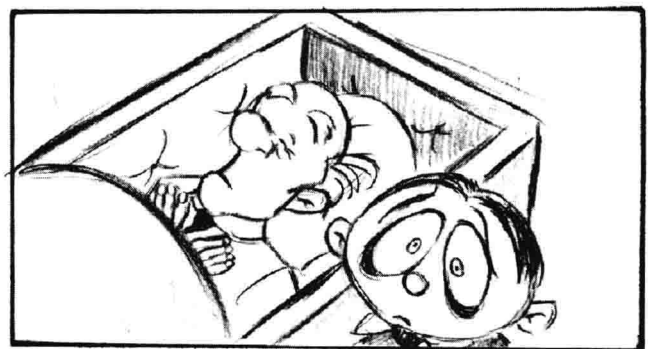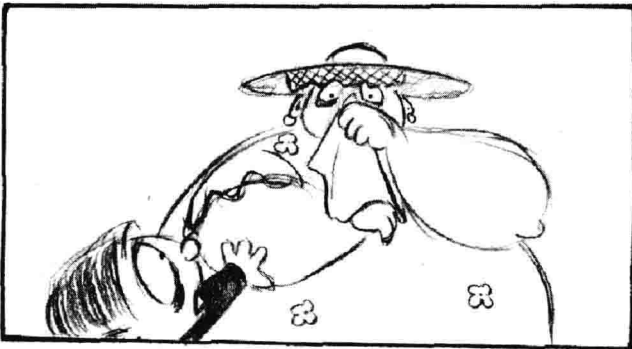

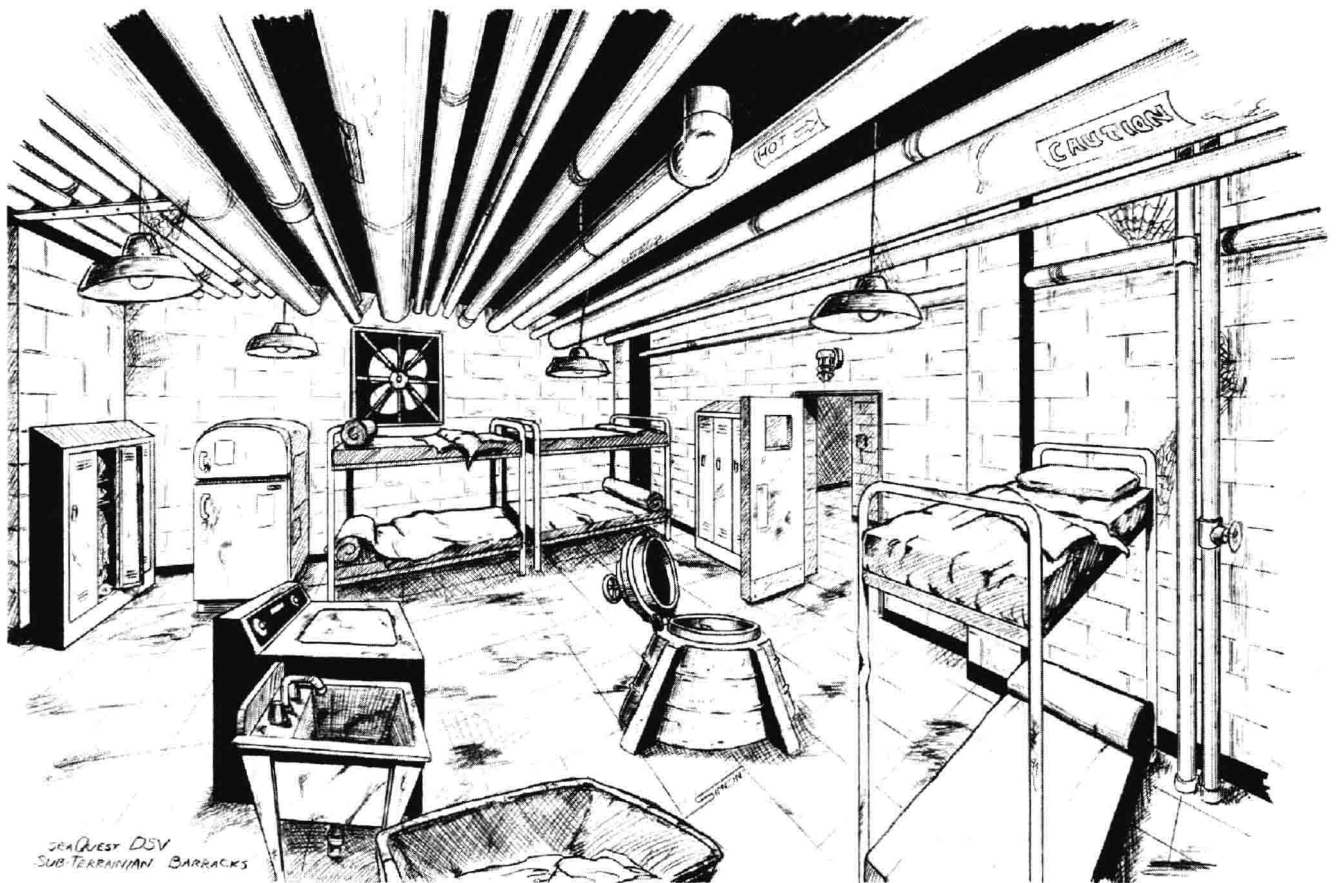**FIGURE 1.1** *Winslow* boards by Keith Sintay.

FIGURE 1.2 *seaQuest DSV*. RENDERING OF SUBTERRANEAN BARRACKS. PRODUCTION DESIGNER: VAUGHAN EDWARDS. ARTIST: MARK SIMON. (© by UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS, INC. COURTESY OF MCA PUBLISHING RIGHTS, A DIVISION OF MCA, INC.)

be, the less overbuilding of sets and props will happen, and the faster the crew will move in unison to get all the coverage in shots. Instead of shooting every angle for possible edits, every edit is shown on the boards, cutting the extra cost of film and processing, as well as the labor expense of shooting excess footage and wading through miles of useless film in the editing suite.

For example, I storyboarded a number of scenes on a shoot for Chuck E. Cheese pizzerias. This shoot used a walk-about, a character suit of Chuck E. that someone walks around in, instead of animation. After looking at the boards, production decided that they wanted the walk-about to have a different hairstyle for one segment. Deciding this with the storyboards was much

cheaper than having realized it while an entire crew stood around waiting for a puppet's hair to be changed.

Drawing storyboards is a wonderfully exciting and creative outlet. A storyboard artist is crucial in both the flow of a story and in the organization of a shoot. Good storyboarding requires knowledge of directing, editing, storytelling, and camera techniques. Add artistic talent and the ability to work with others to tell a visual story, and you too may enjoy illustrating in the exciting world of entertainment.

For producers, directors, and other crew people who don't draw, knowledge of storyboarding is just as important, for it will enhance your ability to communicate with your crew and in the end help you tell a better story and run a better production.

FIGURE 1.3 *Jonathan's Town* boards by Mark Simon. (© 4friends Prod., Inc.)

PART ONE

THE BUSINESS OF STORYBOARDING

CHAPTER 2

GETTING STARTED

FIGURE 2.1 *seaQuest DSV* boards by Mark Simon. (© by Universal City Studios, Inc. Courtesy of MCA Publishing Rights, a Division of MCA, Inc.)