

WALT DISNEY'S FANTASIA



WALT DISNEY'S FANTASIA



BY JOHN CULHANE

ABRADALE PRESS/HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC., PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

For
my mother and father, Isabel and Jack,
who took me to *Fantasia* with Fantasound;
and my wife, Hind, and our sons, Michael and T.H.,
whom I took to *Fantasia* with digital stereo;
and to my art teacher, Corinne Brown,
who gave me an original cel of the milkweed ballet
J.C.



Editor: Darlene Geis
Designer: Samuel N. Antupit

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Culhane, John.

Walt Disney's *Fantasia*.

Reprint. Originally published: New York : Abrams,
1983.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. *Fantasia* (Motion picture) I. Walt Disney

Productions. II. Title.

[PN1997.F3317C8 1987] 791.43'72 86-28740

ISBN 0-8109-8078-9

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Times Mirror Books

Printed and bound in Japan

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1940 The original release

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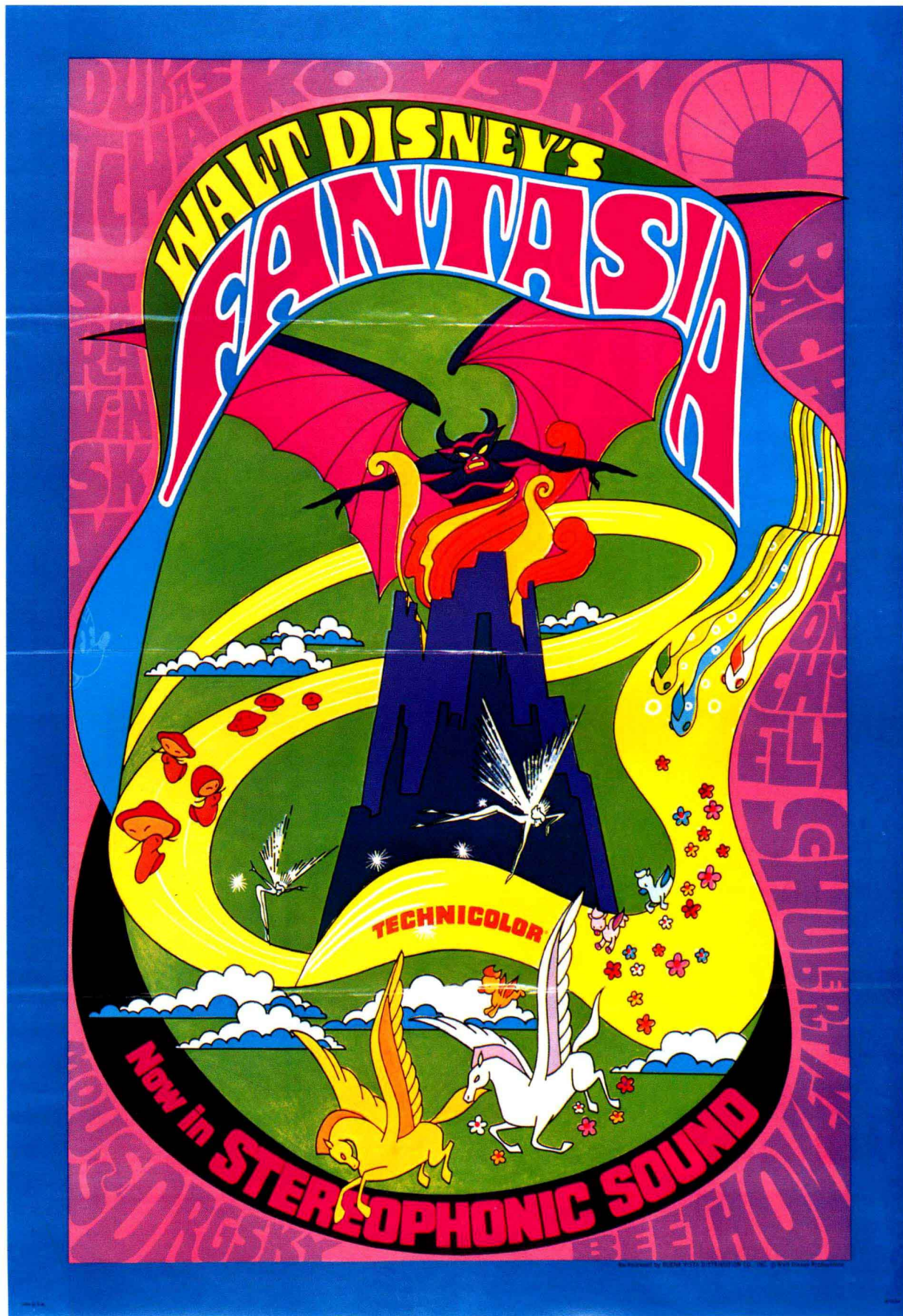
ISBN 0-8109-8078-9

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1969 The psychedelic sixties release

The ultimate in sight and sound.
Now, re-recorded in new digital stereo.

WALT DISNEY'S FANTASIA



WALT DISNEY'S • FANTASIA

BASED ON THE ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK BY LEOPOLD STOKOWSKI. FEATURING A NEW STEREO SOUNDTRACK CONDUCTED BY IRVIN KOSTAL.
RE-RELEASED BY BUENAVISTA DISTRIBUTION CO., INC. TECHNICOLOR® ©MCMXLI WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS
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IN SELECTED THEATRES

1982 The digital release

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THE MAKING OF



Fantasia comes on the screen with an Art Deco title flash that reflects the period in which it was made.

FANTASIA

In a profession that has been an unending voyage of discovery in the realms of color, sound, and motion," wrote Walt Disney, "*Fantasia* represents our most exciting adventure. At last, we have found a way to use in our medium the great music of all times and the flood of new ideas which it inspires."

This Walt's-eye view of *Fantasia* appeared in the program for the film's world premiere, on November 13, 1940, at the Broadway Theater in New York—the theater that was called the Colony when Mickey Mouse made his debut there in *Steamboat Willie*, the first sound-on-film cartoon short, only a dozen years before. The statement was characteristic of the way Walt Disney's mind worked. The Tom Sawyer in Walt, hungry for respectability, insisted with his third word that the making of animated cartoons was a profession. He had vowed, when he was snubbed as a mere "cartoon-maker" seventeen years before, that his animated productions would someday be treated to the same kind of gala premieres accorded live-action films. But the Huck Finn in his personality chafed at wearing a tuxedo, and tended to see his "professional" life as an "exciting adventure," an "unending voyage of discovery" down some mythic Mississippi of the imagination.

This book on the making of *Fantasia* accompanies Walt Disney on that voyage of discovery, permitting us to watch his creative processes at work. Its principal source material has been the hundreds of pages of stenographic notes from *Fantasia* story meetings, where Disney himself took the lead.

From the beginning, Disney films were made by the story conference method. Walt—he insisted on being called by his first name—would bring together about a dozen artists and musicians in one room to play with ideas until they suggested other ideas, hopefully better, simpler, clearer, more entertaining ideas.

Everybody in the room could keep track of this play of ideas in sequence, because the ideas weren't just talked about, they were drawn as story sketches and pinned to storyboards. Storyboards were fiber boards, four feet by eight, on which the story sketches were fastened with pushpins, in rows that could be read from left to right. The sketches were made large enough so that each participant in the story meeting could see them clearly from his chair. Disney himself hadn't made a drawing since the twenties, but, in the words of Great Britain's political cartoonist and caricaturist, Sir David Low, his "was the direction, the constant aiming after improvement in the new expression, the tackling of its problems in an ascending scale and seemingly with aspirations over and above mere commercial success."

And the way Walt directed, at his best, was simply to stand up in front of a storyboard and act out the way he thought the action and dialogue should go.

For his early features, such as *Fantasia*, Disney had a stenographer present at each story meeting to record in shorthand what each participant said; these minutes—with any profanity removed—were typed, mimeographed, and circulated to those involved before the next meeting. That way each person could remember what Walt wanted, and could start figuring out ways to give it to him.

On December 8, 1938, for example, while discussing *Fantasia*'s visual complement to Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Walt suddenly exclaimed: "It'll be—boy! You'll really go through space!" He was talking about starting the segment with the camera in outer space, and then showing the audience what it would look like to travel from outer space to earth. And this was a quarter of a century before any astronaut had left and then reentered the earth's atmosphere. "I think it would be a terrific idea," he said, "that idea of endless space."

And, as the film so brilliantly demonstrates, his artists found a way to put that "terrific idea" on the screen for him.

To better understand the dynamics of those meetings, I have interviewed or studied interviews with scores of collaborators who watched Walt operate. "Innocence in action" is the way one of them described him. From their accounts, it is not surprising that Walt got on so well with his principal collaborator on *Fantasia*, the crowd-pleasing conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski. They both had an abiding faith in the ability of the average person to appreciate the good, the true, and the beautiful.

"In my business, we'd say it another way," explained Disney. "We say that the public—that is, the audience—would always recognize and appreciate quality. It was this faith in the discrimination of the average person that led us to make such a radically different type of entertainment as *Fantasia*. We simply figured that if ordinary folk like ourselves could find entertainment in these visualizations of so-called classical music, so would the average audience."

Walt's original dreams for *Fantasia* were aimed at capturing an audience of millions for a musical film. He wanted it to be seen on a wide screen and heard with dimensional sound, so that in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, for example, when the brooms escape Mickey's control and march to the fountain with their water buckets, the sound would surround the audience, and the shadows of the marching brooms would reach the sides of the theater. He considered showing the abstract sequence to Bach's *Toccata and Fugue* in 3-D, providing cardboard Polaroid glasses with the program. He even discussed wafting flower scents through the audience as he presented a flower ballet to *The Nutcracker Suite*.

Disney wanted the theaters to showcase *Fantasia* as they had showcased *Gone with the Wind*, with reserved seats and matinee and evening performances, so that word of mouth could gradually build the movie's reputation as a new and revolutionary kind of film entertainment. RKO, Disney's distributor, had little enthusiasm for Walt's daringly innovative plans. They readily relaxed their contract with him and let Disney set up his own distribution unit headed by a young film salesman named Irving Ludwig. Ludwig, who was later to found Disney's own distribution company, Buena Vista, engaged

prestige theaters in major cities, installed dimensional sound systems at thirty thousand dollars a unit, put in special lighting and curtain controls to set off each sequence in the film, and hired and trained the theater staffs so that audiences would be treated with the courtesy later to be associated with Disneyland.

So Disney *did* present the first stereophonic sound in *Fantasia*, calling it Fantasound; but stereoscopic cinema, aromatic cinema, and the cameras and projectors for the double-width frames needed for a wide screen were experiments that were too expensive for him in 1940.

When *Fantasia* did not immediately prove popular with the mass audience, the bankers brought pressure on Disney to cut it from 130 minutes (with intermission) to 81 minutes, and RKO took it from two shows a day and put it in general distribution on a double bill with a Western. Marketed that way, it produced a loss for Walt Disney Productions.

Fantasia was reissued once, in 1946, restored to its original length, and still did not recoup its original investment. "But I don't regret making it," Walt said in 1951. "It's what we should have been doing with our medium at that time."

In 1956 Disney reissued *Fantasia* a second time. And suddenly this sixteen-year-old film was appreciated by the millions for whom it was made. *Fantasia* has now been reissued numerous times, and has been in continuous release—always playing somewhere in the world—since 1969. It is among the two hundred highest-grossing films of all time. But even when it represented a financial loss to Walt Disney, after two releases and more than ten years, he spoke of it with enthusiasm in his voice and eyes. So it is easy to understand how he inspired his artists to make it in the first place.

Stokowski wrote: "I enjoyed working with Walt because of his boundless imagination and simple direct approach to everything. He had the ability to find and attract highly talented designers in form and color. His instinct for perceiving great gifts in young artists reminded me of Diaghilev."

It was an apt comparison. Serge Diaghilev, founder of the Ballet Russe, integrated the ideals of other art forms—music, painting, drama—with those of the dance to fulfill his ideal of the combination or interpenetration of the arts. Walt Disney, founder of the Walt Disney Studio, combined the ideals of music, painting, drama, and dance with those of film to create an entirely new form of film art, so that Erwin Panofsky, the distinguished art critic and historian, would write in his seminal essay, *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*: "Within their self-imposed limitations, the earlier Disney films, and certain sequences in the later ones, represent, as it were, a chemically pure distillation of cinematic possibilities."

By the time they began their collaboration on *Fantasia*, Disney was thirty-six, a slim, dark-haired intense man with a film star's thin mustache and eloquent eyebrows; Stokowski was fifty-six, tall, imperious-looking, and crowned with a halo of white hair that caught spotlights wonderfully—and both men were old hands at realizing



Albert Hurter was a Swiss-born artist who, in the words of master animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, "could find a face and a personality in everything around him." Walt used Hurter not as an animator, but as an inspirational story sketch artist. When Walt began to plan his Concert Feature, he had Hurter do these inspirational sketches for the Greek mythology sequence.

possibilities. Since making the first sound-on-film cartoon in 1928, Disney had produced the first three-strip Technicolor film of any kind, *Flowers and Trees* (1932), and played so adeptly with images that changed shape and size and color to music that historian Lewis Jacobs, in *The Rise of the American Film* (1939), called him "the first of the sight-sound-color film virtuosos." But beyond that, he was recognized around the world as possibly the greatest fantasist since Hans Christian Andersen. He had just released *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first feature-length cartoon ever made, and during most of the time that *Fantasia* was in production, *Snow White* was earning box-office revenues that would make it the highest-grossing film in history. (It would take second place to *Gone with the Wind* in 1940.) There were only two filmmakers in those days who were always described as geniuses, without argument: Chaplin and Disney—and Chaplin was having difficulty with the transition to sound.

Sound was Stokowski's playground. "He took over a provincial orchestra in Philadelphia in 1912," wrote Harold C. Schonberg, former chief music critic of the *New York Times*. "Soon he made it the greatest virtuoso orchestra in America and, most likely, the world." Through his concerts, his recordings, and his films—and his widely publicized romance with the preeminent screen goddess, Greta Garbo—Stokowski had become, by 1938, perhaps the best-known symphonic conductor of all time.

The flamboyant Stokowski was an adventurer in sound as the down-to-earth Disney was an adventurer in film. The *New York Times* called Stokowski an "audio prophet," and his biographer, Abram Chasins, wrote that "whether we're listening to an FM radio or an LP recording or a stereophonic soundtrack of a film, we must never forget how big a role Stokowski played in its effectuation." *Fantasia* was the medium through which Stokowski made his greatest contribution to sound-on-film—which was just what Disney had wanted.

Disney's natural self-confidence was greatly reinforced by the phenomenal success of *Snow White*. The average theater admission in 1938 was twenty-three cents, and most children were admitted for a dime, yet Disney's \$1.5 million feature grossed \$8.5 million around the world in its first release. With the profits he began building the new, superbly equipped, \$3 million Studio in Burbank, into which he and his staff moved over the period from August, 1939, until the spring of 1940, and where *Fantasia* was completed the following November. He wanted to do things with the animated film that had never been done before, and he was sure that with *Snow White's* profits, his new studio, and a staff that had mushroomed from eight hundred in 1937 to more than a thousand while *Fantasia* was in production, he would do them. "*Fantasia* was made at a time when we had the feeling that we had to open the doors here," Disney answered, when he was asked why he made the film. "This medium was something we felt a responsibility for, and we just felt that we could go beyond the comic strip, that we could do some very exciting, entertaining, and beautiful things with music and pictures and color."

Indeed, before *Fantasia*, the most usual thing for the ani-

mated film to be compared to was the comic strip. And it is true that the taproots of the early animated films were such comic strips as Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo*, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, and Bud Fisher's *Mutt and Jeff*. Comic strip graphics were crossbred with the broad, visual comedy of the slapstick film shorts, those of Charlie Chaplin particularly, and the result, broadly speaking, was the animated film before Disney.

Disney upgraded form and content until, after *Fantasia*, Sir David Low would write, "In *Fantasia* he lifts the art of drawing movement right out of the 'comic' and essays for the first time serious studies of a higher plane. *Walpurgis Night* (*Night on Bald Mountain*) and the prehistoric sequences (*Rite of Spring*) drive right to the foothills of the New Art of the Future."

It is not true, as Deems Taylor wrote of the origin of *Fantasia* in his 1940 book on the film (a canard that has had wide circulation), that "it all began as a search for a starring vehicle for Mickey Mouse." Disney never said that; and Ben Sharpsteen, *Fantasia*'s production supervisor and Disney's close collaborator from 1929, has flatly denied the oft-reported story that, as Sharpsteen put it, "*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was made to . . . upgrade Mickey Mouse as a character. There was no such thing."

Essentially, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* sprang from Disney's desire to go beyond the usual animated cartoon with its combination of comic strip graphics and slapstick comedy. And the most important combination in *Fantasia* was the wedding of film graphics to classical music. Indeed, the most important factor carrying the animated film beyond its roots in comic strips and slapstick film shorts was music.

"Music has always played a very important part since sound came into the cartoon," said Walt. And, indeed, he had created the Silly Symphonies in 1929 precisely to let music take precedence over action in some of his cartoons.

Whereas in the Mickey Mouse films it was the job of the composer and/or musical director to fit the music to the action, in the Sillys, it was up to the directors and animators to fit the action to the musical score. Most often these were original scores by studio musicians; but sometimes the scores included snatches of popular songs or concert music. In fact a few bars of *Dance of the Hours*, one of the selections in *Fantasia*, can be heard in a 1929 cartoon called *Springtime*. But Walt had been trying to figure out a way to use what he called "the great music of all times," because "for my medium, it opens up unlimited possibilities."

Ben Sharpsteen, in spelling out what those possibilities were, recalled that the general public, the audience at which Walt Disney always aimed, was not so comfortable in the late 1930s with music written for the concert hall. "*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* was—to use a term—highbrow music," said Sharpsteen. "Considering it was highbrow music, it was in the reach of the public. . . . There was talk about using Dopey in it—but no, Walt didn't like the idea of taking somebody from *Snow White*, and so Mickey Mouse was, when you come right down to it . . . a good choice."