



Animation magic: the cartoons of Halas and Batchelor

John Halas and Joy Batchelor are famous for the groundbreaking animation *Animal Farm*, but their output also included science, educational and experimental films. As a new documentary spotlights their work, their daughter **Vivien Halas** uncovers the story behind their partnership

This year marks the 80th year since my parents, John Halas and Joy Batchelor, founded Halas & Batchelor Cartoons – in its day a household name responsible for over 2,000 animated films. Their story and that of their studio is the subject of a new documentary, *The Animated World of Halas and Batchelor*, directed by Richard Shaw and soon to be broadcast on Sky Arts.

Their best-known film *Animal Farm* (1954) was the first animated feature to be made in the UK. It has become increasingly relevant, as George Orwell's fable of power, revolution and corruption continues to have fresh resonance today, 70 years after the writer's death. Students are still amazed by the wonderfully fluid 2D animation that was made long before the introduction of computers or digitisation to animation-making.

The studio's output covered a huge number of genres from propaganda and information films during World War II, including *Dustbin Parade* (1941) and the *Charley* series that introduced the idea of social welfare (1946/7), to entertainment

pieces such as *The History of the Cinema* (1957), *Tales from Hoffnung* (1964) and the *FooFoo* series (1960). They also made films for children, such as *Hamilton the Musical Elephant* (1961), the *Snip and Snap* series (1964) and experimental films such as *the Owl* and *the Pussycat* (1952) and *the Figurehead* (1953). Their output also included early computer animation such as *Dilemma* (1979) and educational films, including *the Evolution of Life* (1964) and *What is a Computer?* (1967).

With the money made from these they were able to make personal films that expressed their own beliefs, such as *Magic Canvas* (1948), an experimental film celebrating hope and freedom after the war, *The Question* (1967), in which a little 'everyman' searches for truth, and *Automania 2000* (1963), which was the first animated film nominated for an Oscar and is remarkable for its script (written by my mother) foreseeing the terrible effects of consumerism. "John

and Joy were true pioneers," says Shaw, director of the *Sky Arts* film. "I hope our documentary helps new audiences discover their work and its relevance in the world today."

My father was born Halász János (later anglicised to John) in Budapest's Pesterzsébet district on 16 April 1912. He

was the seventh son of a Jewish couple, Győző Halász, a journalist, and Bertha Singer, who had been a dancer in Vienna when young. Their comfortable life before my father was born ended with the country's increasing

intolerance of Jews. The family was forced out of the centre of Budapest to a shared house in an outer suburb, where my father remembered sleeping under the table. His family was so poor that my father was sent to stay with an aunt in Zurich so he would be better fed. He remembered the Red Cross giving him food on the train and how his greed made him sick. It was the first of many journeys John made during his

"Automania 2000 was the first animated film to be nominated for an Oscar"



formative years that fuelled his appetite for escaping his background.

Although clever at school, John spent his time truanting, playing football with a gypsy friend, hiding under cinema seats to see films for free and running errands for his father. He made money from painting film poster hoardings and eventually got a job at Hunnia Film, putting subtitles onto silent movies. It was here that he met George Pal, the renowned puppet-film maker, and together they taught themselves to animate.

With no available money, John bagged his way into art school. He persuaded the painter and graphic designer Sándor Bortnyik to hire him as an assistant at the renowned Műhely Ateliér that taught Bauhaus principles. This brought John into contact with the artists Victor Vasarely and Moholy Nagy. He was able to help them with their kinetic experiments while they imbued him with the Bauhaus ethos. He said about the experience: "I learnt construction from them and how to look behind the surface to solve a problem."

It was here that he also met his future film partners Gyula Macskassy and Felix Kassowitz. They started their first studio in 1932, making ads and short films. When in 1936 a client asked them to set up a studio in London to make an entertainment series, John jumped at the chance and set off, undaunted by his lack of language. He was a natural communicator.

Once in London, he put an ad in a newspaper calling for animators. This was how he met my mother, Joy. His drive and my mother's talent for drawing, animating and writing ensured their success in difficult times and underpinned their belief that animation was the most complete art form – and one that could make the world a better place.

Joy was born in Watford, England on 12 May 1914. Her father Edward Joseph Batchelor worked in London as a lithographic draughtsman. Her mother Ethel gave up running a prestigious golf club to marry Edward, and Joy was born nine months after the wedding.

Joy was interested in drawing from an early age, encouraged by her father, who brought home

long paper off-cuts for her to draw on. Always top of her class in everything, Joy won a scholarship to grammar school, and later to the Watford School of Art. Though offered a scholarship to the Slade, she could not afford to go, so instead looked for work.

The best she could find was painting trinkets on an assembly line, but after criticising the working conditions she was fired.

In 1934 she went to work for Dennis Connelly's animation studio in London. She had no training in animation but learned quickly on the job and was soon promoted to key animator and trained the other animators. By the time she saw John's ad for an experienced animator, she was ready.

John and Joy started working together on *Music Man*, a film loosely based on the life of Liszt. John returned to Budapest with the production – and Joy – as he had a studio there. Joy remembered that time with great nostalgia as she was made a great fuss over by all the partners. By then she and John were in love. But the idyll ended when Hitler entered Vienna and their funding was abruptly cut off. In fear for their safety, the couple borrowed money to flee on one of the last trains out of Budapest, in June 1938.

Once back in London they took any graphic design work they could find. John's English was almost non-existent, so it was Joy who looked for employment. She found illustration work for newspapers, *Harpers* magazine and cookery books. John was an expert with the airbrush, and Moholy Nagy, who was briefly art director for the department store *Simpsons on the Strand*, gave him a few ads to design.

Eventually they found work at the

Clockwise from far left: Halas and Batchelor's 1954 animation *Animal Farm*; Joy Batchelor and John Halas in Budapest, 1937; John and Joy with the layouts for *Animal Farm*, 1951

Walter Thompson agency at Bush House. Despite a shortage of paper there was still a film unit and at last they were back in business making animated ads for Lux soap and Brook Bond Tea. As the war started in earnest, the agency was taken over by the government and the couple found themselves making information and propaganda films for the war effort, for which my father was given special dispensation to stay in England. However, in order to be paid they were obliged to set up a company, which they did in May 1940. In the same month, to save John from

internment as an enemy alien, they got married.

This backfired slightly: by marrying my father Joy found herself stripped of her British citizenship and was suddenly considered Hungarian – an enemy alien in her own country!

"I ended up being Hungarian on paper.

There were some inconveniences, like observing an 8pm curfew, or not being allowed to own a bicycle, but John and I survived this period quite well," she said of the experience. During the war they made over 70 films, two of which were feature-length training films. In this way they honed their skills and developed a sophisticated style. My mother in particular had the knack of turning dry subjects into engaging films.

After the war they continued making information films for the Marshall Plan and the reconstruction of Europe. One of them, *The Shoemaker and the Hatter* (1949), explaining how lowering trade tariffs and working together would encourage prosperity, led to an invitation to make *Animal Farm* in 1951.

After the success of *Animal Farm*, they expanded the company and continued making films until the early 1980s, becoming the most influential animation studio in Western Europe and responsible for employing and training many new generations of animators. Without them British animation would not have flourished as it did and continues to do. ■

Vivien Halas is a graphic designer and director of *The Halas & Batchelor Collection Limited*. *The Animated World of Halas and Batchelor* (dir. Richard Shaw) will be shown on Sky Arts later in the year. For details of this and other upcoming screenings of Halas and Batchelor films see halasandbatchelor.co.uk and *What's Happening* p62.

