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Trailers

ANIMATION CELEBRATION

Animation shows can leave you exhausted. Watching a series of shorts, many of them crammed with invention, you may be worn out by the speed of it all. But the 22 films in the new *Animation Celebration* (put together by the folks who present the yearly *International Tournée of Animation*) whiz by. Well selected and sequenced, the program is long on variety — it features several examples of computer animation, a dramatization of William Henry Drummond's sea narrative "The Wreck of the *Julie Plante*," and the experimental "Travelling Light," which uses stop motion to trace the paths of sunbeams through a house. But if there's a prevailing influence here, it's Looney Tunes. The best of these shorts offer basic comic situations as the jumping-off point for trips into the near-surreal. With a healthy disrespect for authority and an utter disdain for rational behavior, these cartoons feature people, objects, and buildings whose only purpose is to be transformed into props or weapons; at times, the sight gags seem to spring up out of the landscape itself.

Les Drew's "Every Dog's Guide to Complete Home Safety" features surface normality that threatens to collapse at any moment. The hero is a brainy dog who's spent his time in the pet shop figuring out how to keep his eventual home safe for all concerned. His preparations are put to the test when he's purchased by an especially careless couple who possess that most calamitous of cartoon icons, a smiling infant (it wreaks innocent havoc every second of every waking hour). The dog no sooner gets one hazard fixed up than he finds the baby happily sticking hairpins in a wall socket or yanking at a tablecloth, forcing him to catch the dinnerware as it falls off piece by piece and then to keep it aloft in a display of juggling mastery. But even junior is no match for his parents, who, in the midst of preparations for a dinner guest, literally bring the house down. Their innocent belief that they know what they're doing as they go about every task with complete incompetence nicely counterpoints the dog's vigilance.

The first in a series of three commercials by British animator Richard Williams — an ad for a diet cola rendered in black line drawings that have the elegance of classic black-and-white fashion photography — is anything but loony. The other two pieces manage to sell their products and transcend their commercial origins. In a mouthwash pitch, an erudite dragon explains that his bad breath is keeping the damsel he has tied to a stake less than enamored. She warms up after he gargles, and the spot ends with the line "Listerine — strong enough to take your breath away." Williams's best is an ad for Long Life ale, during which a cat gives up most of his nine lives for the frosty pilsener he spies on a window ledge. A gauge in the corner of the screen keeps a running tally of his lives, as the spot goes through a perilously funny countdown to one.

The most inspired short here may be the simplest. Kirk Henderson's "Cat and Mouse at the Home" has a nifty premise: that the two quintessential cartoon rivals have taken up residence at the Home for Cartoon Actors. Confined to wheelchairs, they while away the time in a never-ending game of gin, which the now emaciated cat, worn out by years of physical abuse, loses to the crafty mouse, who's developed a paunch and a fondness for cigars. The two start reminiscing about the old days, and it's not long before they're going at it, the mouse sending the cat's false teeth flying out of his mouth, the cat responding by bashing the mouse with a two-by-four. The battle escalates into a full-scale wheelchair chase that sends the casual sadism of so many cartoons careering over the edge.

In the midst of the chase, the cat runs over his old nemesis the bulldog, who's now getting around with a walker. Remembering how the bulldog used to torture him, he backs up and runs over the poor decrepit mutt four or five times for good measure. At the beginning of the short, the mouse sighs, "They don't make cartoons like they used to," and the cat, perhaps remembering the beatings he took, says he thinks it's better for kids that today's cartoons are less violent. But a funny thing happens when the cat commences his old antics: he becomes revitalized — he has a *purpose* again. Watching Henderson's short, you realize that the best cartoons have kept us watching the same basic conflict for years (think of the Road Runner); this cat and mouse may not be growing old gracefully, but at least they're not doing it peaceably. *At the Coolidge Corner.*

— Charles Taylor