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Disney Sweeps the Dust Off 'Fantasia' at 50

By MAX ALEXANDER

TO WALT DISNEY IN 1940, IT WAS classical music illustrated for the masses. To highbrow critics in 1941, it was a vulgarization of taste. To hippies in 1969, it was a psychedelic freak out. And to children of the past half century, it was Mickey Mouse versus the multiplying brooms.

Whatever it was, "Fantasia" will be one more thing when it reopens in 550 theaters Oct. 5: newly restored. For the film's 50th birthday, the Disney Studios spent two years bringing out the blush in the animated feature, which over the decades has had its ups

Max Alexander, a reporter at Variety, writes frequently on film preservation.

and downs — both financially and physically. It has never been seen on television or released on home video.

The two-hour film sets eight well-known orchestral works to animation — or is it the other way around — ranging from dreamlike celestial interpretations of musical instruments (in Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor) to the nightmarish yellow-eyed demon, Chernabog, in Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain." Along the way are dancing hippos (in tutus, of course), voyeuristic cupids and bare-breasted female centaurs ("centaurettes") — not to mention Mickey Mouse as the title character in Paul Dukas's "Sorcerer's Apprentice."

But as critics over the years debated the picture's tastefulness and artistic significance — a murky question at best — the film itself grew steadily more murky. The origi-

nal negative had been banished to Disney's vaults in 1946, and subsequent releases were duplicated from a lesser quality master.

"In 1946, master-duplication technology was not really wonderful," says Pete Comandini, the engineer who supervised the restoration at YCM Laboratories in Burbank, Calif. To make matters worse, he says, along the way additional dupes were made from other dupes.

"So," he added, "we're talking about a Xerox of a Xerox of a Xerox."

By the time of its last theatrical run in 1984, "Fantasia" was less than fantastic. In the segment for Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite," a once-pristine pond, laden with waterlilies and reflecting brilliant hues of or-

Leopold Stokowski's fame, which went far beyond "Fantasia," endures. Page 18.

ange, pink and blue, had taken on tones more suggestive of a toxic waste dump.

To bring back the original Technicolor to the wildly eclectic pictorial elements of "Fantasia," Disney and YCM went back to the original 1940 negative. But the vaults refused to yield "Fantasia" easily; some of the original negative was lost, and the rest of it was in pieces.

Complicating the restoration was the existence of two incompatible formats for the original negative — one for the film's animated scenes and another for the live-action sequences showing the orchestra. The two formats were necessary because early color photography was considerably more cumbersome than today's, requiring three separate exposures — representing the three primary colors — that would later be united

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in a laboratory. In the animated sections of "Fantasia," each of the thousands of celluloid illustrations, or "cels," that make up a cartoon was exposed three times in successive order on one length of film. But in the movie's live-action sequences, all three exposures had to be made at once, in special cameras that held three negatives.

Making single prints from those two separate formats proved costly and explains why Disney abandoned the original negative in the first place. "That was a terribly tough time," recalls Ollie Johnston Jr., a former Disney animation supervisor and one of the thousand artists and technicians who labored on "Fantasia."

The film opened in November 1940 at only 14 theaters, because the complicated equipment needed to repro-

duce the stereo soundtrack dictated playing the film in legitimate theatrical houses — a costly proposition. Meanwhile, Americans were nervously eyeing the war in Europe and had little interest in a movie starring a mischievous mouse. Although "Fantasia" ran for nearly a year in New York and Los Angeles, it found few admirers in the heartland and failed to earn back its production cost of \$2,280,000.

But like Disney's "Pinocchio," which also failed when it opened earlier that year, "Fantasia" had legs; after seven re-releases the film is now profitable. A notable reincarnation was in 1969, when "Fantasia" was embraced as a mind-altering "head" movie that was way ahead of its time.

"We'd talk in schools then," recalls Mr. Johnston, now 77, whose hand is responsible for the close-ups on those racy centaurettes in Beethoven's

During the restoration, each of the film's 535,680 frames was examined literally by hand.

"Pastoral." Students would ask, "What were you on, anyway?"

"I didn't know what they were talking about," says the animator, whose third book, "Walt Disney's 'Bambi': The Story and the Film," is will be published next month by Stewart, Tabori, Chang.

Restoring "Fantasia" required a combination of detective work, luck

and technology both high and low: although YCM employs sophisticated chemical and optical trickery to bring out the best in old negatives, Mr. Comandini says that a manicurist's orange stick, available in any drugstore, remains the best tool for removing dirt from film.

It took six months to piece together the original negative, from film cans with markings like "Fantasia: Reel One, Deletions." "It was a giant jigsaw puzzle," remembers Mr. Comandini. About 10 percent of the film could not be found, though, and the studio was forced to substitute later material in those parts.

Another six months went into cleaning 50-year-old dirt off the negatives, some of it the result of the original processing, which was less precise than today's. Each of the 535,680 frames was examined literally by hand. "The fingertips are more

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Mickey Mouse congratulates the conductor Leopold Stokowski.

sensitive than the eyes in this case," says Mr. Comandini, adding that although such nitrate negatives are highly inflammable and chemically unstable, the surface is much tougher than today's film stock. "Handling is the least of its problems," he says.

The next step was to shoot a new master negative from the refurbished original, using a process called liquid-gate photography. The negative is photographed while immersed in a liquid that fills in many of the remaining blemishes and makes them invisible.

Finally, the new master was taken to the Technicolor laboratories for color timing, the process by which color values are adjusted and chemically assigned to the positive prints. For that, says Jeff Miller, vice president of manufacturing at Disney, "we brought in the animation department and went through all their research." That meant primarily studying the existing original cels to verify, for example, exactly how yellow a yellow-eyed monster's eyes were supposed to be.

"Fantasia" is far from perfect now, but it's as close as it will ever be, according to Mr. Comandini. The most difficult section, he says, was the opening scene of the "Pastoral," in which the only existing shots of the winged horses are on film stock three times removed from the original negative. There, he says, "you're dealing with dirt that has been photographed in. Luckily it ends in a fade-out, since the next scene, of the centaurs and centaurettes, was original material. If it had been a direct cut, the difference would have been very obvious."

And about those centaurettes in this G-rated movie: "We didn't think we were doing anything out of line," says Mr. Johnston. He pauses, then adds, "We would have if we had shown Snow White's or Cinderella's breasts." □