

arts

So, I Interviewed a Strange Person

Bill Plympton talks about his new full-length, “hairy” spectacle

Words: Tiffany Owens



Bill Plympton isn't your typical animator, but then you already know that if you've frequented "Spike & Mike's Sick & Twisted" festivals or were riddled with insomnia in the '80s, glued to MTV's late-night "Liquid Television." From the early sci-fi superpowers of "So I Married a Strange Person" to the hilarious "Plymptoons" shorts, his off-the-wall animation is a macabre and madcap romp through every hand-drawn frame.

In early August, Plympton fans packed Portland's Crystal Ballroom for the Northwest premiere of the Oscar-winning animator's newest full-length feature, "Hair High." With a star-studded voice cast (assembled by distant cousin Martha Plympton) featuring David and Keith Carradine, Beverly D'Angelo, Matt Groening and Dermot Mulroney, the film is a humorous spin-off on '50s teen movies complete with giant pompadours, greaser gangs and a prom-night-gone-wrong plotline.

Plympton says the idea for the film originated from a dream. "Usually I don't use dreams for ideas for my films, but this one dream was so compelling, I thought it would make a good movie: There's a car underneath a lake and fish are swimming in and out of the decomposing bodies. The car suddenly turns on and lurches forward in the mud and muck, then up on shore, down a small, middle-American town—like Oregon City—and on to the high school where there's a prom going on. But what had happened to them?" Plympton ponders madly.

"So, I went back to my 1962 yearbook, when hair was very important—bouffant hairdos and Elvis styles—and got into hair as a design motif. Shots of hair [in the film] are very extravagant, four feet high and decorative, lots of swirls and circles and bows."

However, the primary source of his creativity sprouted from a childhood spent in rainy Portland. "I spent a lot of time indoors amusing myself by drawing," Plympton explains. "I saw Daffy Duck and Disney animation on TV. I fell in love with it and started copying those drawings," he admits.

"As a young kid, I was always interested in sex and violence. Like a lot of people, I find that violence done right can be very funny. Sex is also a wonderful form of humor, but everyone has strong feelings about it. It's the verboten topic because of our American Puritanism. People don't want to talk about sex, but it becomes the power of relief. People find it funny and it releases their pent-up sexual urges."

Plympton discusses his early integration with art, which almost sounds like a cross of a strange toddler experiment and sheer luck. "I was always running out of drawing paper, so Mom would bring back huge pieces of butcher paper from the market with stains and droppings that I would incorporate into my drawings—like war scenes where people's heads were blown off, recycling the blood stains on the paper," he chuckles.

"Later, in high school, a friend of mine (Mike McCullaugh) was running for student body president and asked me to design a poster, so I did a very voluptuous drawing of Marilyn Monroe that read: 'Vote for MM! Not Marilyn, Mike.' It was very scandalous. Later that day over the loudspeaker, they said, 'Will Bill Plympton, the pornographer, please report to the principal's office?' I realized then that people like it best when I push the boundaries of good taste and get folks all riled up."

The rest, as they say, is history. Check out hairhigh.com for more details on the film and look for "Hair High," coming soon.

