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Cartoons in Paradise: How the Fleischer Brothers Moved to Miami and Lost Their Studio

by Donna Dial

Disney World may reign as Florida's most dazzling connection to the world of animated cartoons, but long before Disney there was Fleischer. Thirty-five years before Walt Disney packed Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck off to central Florida, his biggest competitors, Max and Dave Fleischer, built their own magic kingdom a couple of hundred miles farther south.

Pioneers in the field of animation, the two brothers spent the 1920s developing celluloid images. They dreamed up KoKo the Clown and Bimbo, his canine sidekick, and brought the "bouncing ball" sing-along cartoons to the screen. In the early thirties, the beguiling and guileless Betty Boop and Popeye, that irascible sailor, emerged from their studio in Manhattan. Then, in 1938, with two decades of innovative cartoon shorts behind them and their first feature-length cartoon before them, the Fleischers moved to an impressive new studio in Miami. Nowadays movie-goers do not hear much about the Fleischer brothers. That is because they did not live happily ever after.

Max and Dave Fleischer's arrival in South Florida came in answer to Miami's recurring visions of a motion picture trade to call its own. When the news broke that the Fleischers and Dade County Commissioners had worked out the details of the studio's move,

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the *Miami Herald* could barely suppress either its elation or expectations: "Miami's dream of a motion picture industry at long last seems about to be realized. . . . Fleischer Studios is a success. . . . Establishment of Fleischer Studios here will be the beginning of that industry which has been so eagerly sought as a balance to the city's position as the world's greatest winter playground. . . . Miami wants, needs this new enterprise."¹

Incorporated in 1896, Miami had come of age after World War I. Town boosters spent most of the Roaring Twenties developing their own kinds of images. They envisioned Miami as a tropical paradise for the rich and famous. Indeed, the town made—and unmade—many a paper millionaire before the Florida land boom went bust. Throughout the era, its ephemeral motion picture industry ebbed and flowed as studio after studio sprang up, made a movie or two, and folded. Just as the real estate boom bottomed out, the infamous 1926 hurricane ravaged the city, leaving one hundred people dead and eight thousand homeless. The storm exposed the precarious economic foundation upon which the town had built its image and tumbled Miami into the Depression three years ahead of the rest of the country.

Miami spent most of the 1930s reinventing itself, building back the tourist trade and looking for light industry to help revive the economy. Even the Depression could not shake the city's aspirations of displacing Hollywood as the nation's film capital. There was room for hope. Whenever California threatened to raise taxes on the industry, studios started talking about moving to Florida. Attracting an established studio—one that would not go bankrupt like all those in the twenties—became Miami's ambition for the thirties.

By then, the Fleischers had been part of the motion picture trade a good long time. Max Fleischer had entered the new world of animation in 1915 as the inventor of the rotoscope, a machine that converted the movements of filmed actors into amazingly life-like cartoon characters. Using the prototype built by his brother Joe, Max rotoscoped his youngest brother, Dave, into KoKo the Clown and combined the character with live-action footage of himself at the drawing board. The resultant cartoon series, *Out of the Inkwell*, made Fleischer's reputation. In 1921, the same year Max

1. "Film Dream Nears Reality," *Miami Herald*, 3 February 1938.

and Dave became independent producers for Paramount Pictures, the young commercial artist Walt Disney started his own animation company, appropriating the Fleischers' *Out of the Inkwell* drawing-board convention.² Both Paramount and Disney would play roles in the history of the Fleischer studio; but, in the beginning, Paramount merely distributed their products and Disney, in Max Fleischer's opinion, was but a young upstart.³

In 1929, Max and Dave Fleischer forged an unequal partnership with Paramount, forming Fleischer Studios, Incorporated. Under the terms of the agreement, Paramount owned 51 percent of the stock and copyrights to all cartoons.⁴ Max assumed the role of president and producer while Dave became vice-president and director. In time, all five Fleischer brothers worked at the studios. Lou Fleischer headed the music department; Joe Fleischer served as electrician and machinist. Later, Charlie Fleischer also joined the company as a machinist. Only Max and Dave were partners. Dave's daughter Joyce Fleischer Weinberg recalled, "They were all really geniuses, every one of them. All the other brothers worked for the studios, and they should have all been partners. I don't know why Dave and Max left them out."⁵ Max and Dave endured a relationship fraught with quarrels and misunderstandings. Perhaps they just could not bear the thought of more partners.

Neither, for that matter, could they bear the thought of Walt Disney. As the 1930s unfolded, competition between the two studios intensified, especially after Disney lured away some of the Fleischers' best animators. Max's son, director Richard Fleischer, remembered, "At my parents' house 'Disney' was a dirty word. If you said it at dinner you were sent away from the table."⁶

If Disney and the Fleischers shared the same medium, they hardly shared the same artistic vision. Disney productions harkened back to the moralistic stories and lush illustrations of Victorian children's books. Fleischer cartoons reflected the gestalt of New York City. Ethnic gags abounded, drawn not only from vaudeville traditions, but also from the Jewish neighborhoods of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn where the Fleischers had grown up.

2. Richard Fleischer, *Just Tell Me When to Cry: A Memoir* (New York, 1993), 99.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Leslie Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story* (New York, 1988), 43.

5. Joyce Fleischer Weinberg, telephone interview by author, 28 April 1995.

6. Fleischer, *Just Tell Me When to Cry*, 97.

The brothers often seasoned their cartoons with sexual innuendo and sight gags. Until Will Hayes enforced the Production Code in 1934, Betty Boop spent much of her time flirting shamelessly, staving off the advances of lecherous men, and fighting a losing battle to keep from exposing her underwear.

For the occasional patron left unfulfilled by seven minutes of low humor, Fleischer cartoons offered yet another dimension: that of the mutable and surreal. The funeral scene in the Fleischers' "Snow White" (1933), for instance, features Cab Calloway roto-scoped into KoKo the Clown, who in turn metamorphoses into a ghost. Wailing "Saint James Infirmary Blues," KoKo joins the funeral procession of Snow White (played by Betty Boop) on its march through Mystery Cave. All manner of flying specters swarm around his head as he wambles past a tableau of the unearthly remains of drunkards and gangsters and gamblers. In keeping with the lyrics, his head transforms briefly into a liquor bottle, his body into a twenty-dollar gold piece. As the Seven Dwarfs carry Snow White's coffin of ice, her evil stepmother changes from queen to witch to a dragon with three improbably benign ducks atop its ferocious head. The witch freezes both KoKo and Bimbo into statues, but smoke from her fire-breathing alter ego thaws them, along with Snow White. When the funeral march reaches the end of the cave, Bimbo grabs the dragon by the tongue, turning it inside out and reversing its direction. KoKo, Bimbo, and Betty emerge from the cave to join hands in a victory dance.

This kind of gritty, over-the-top humor defined the New York style of animation; but by the late thirties, most of the city's studios had either gone bankrupt or followed their distributors to Hollywood. The influence of the New York environment waned. Throughout the Depression, cartoons, mirroring the motion picture medium, grew increasingly less gag-driven and more story-oriented. Furthermore, now that cartoons had survived their infancy and the novelty had faded, it became evident that their primary audience was going to be children. Disney's more artistic, realistic cartoons—what Max Fleischer called "animated oil paintings"—became the standard by which most critics judged the medium.⁷

In time, animation's coming of age, the 1934 Production Code, and Disney's influence combined with Depression sensibili-

7. Max Fleischer to Shamus Culhane, ca.1945, Fleischer Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

ties to transform the Fleischer style. Their earthy presentations yielded to a more respectable, if somewhat blander, product. As penance for her misspent youth, Betty Boop exchanged her minuscule dress and garter for a demure frock with raised neckline and lowered hem. She spent the rest of her career playing the part of a maiden aunt, complete with a little lapdog, Pudgy. Betty's indelicate pal Bimbo was supplanted by Grampy, an inventive old man who constructed Rube Goldbergesque contraptions to solve her day-to-day problems. Grampy often upstaged Betty, as did most of her new co-stars. Though she would appear in her own series until the end of the decade, she was frequently relegated to a supporting role.

Betty's identity crisis amounted to nothing compared to the one about to beset the Fleischers themselves. When change came, it came from within, initiated by the employees at the bottom, then gathering enough momentum to alter the studio's complexion forever and land the Fleischers in Miami.

In the thirties, creating a cartoon involved a slow, exacting process entailing multiple levels of artists. Each second of a cartoon consisted of twenty-four frames of film. The animator drew the primary pictures with the aid of an assistant animator who often "cleaned up" rough drawings and worked out timing and other logistics. The inbetweener, a position created at Fleischer Studios, drew the secondary pictures between the extremes of action. Inkers then traced the pictures onto clear sheets of celluloid, or "cels." Opaquers or painters filled in the outlines. The completed cels were placed one at a time in front of a painted background or three-dimensional set, where they were filmed frame by frame. A seven-minute cartoon comprised between twelve and fourteen hundred cels.

Over two hundred employees worked for the Fleischers in the cramped studio occupying three floors of an office building at 1600 Broadway. Many animators had been with them for years, working their way up from the opaquing department. Max Fleischer, whom animator Shamus Culhane described as "a Victorian father," took pride in his studio's family atmosphere.⁸ "Everyone in this organization can come right into my office and air their grievances and their troubles and speak directly to me," Fleischer

8. Shamus Culhane, telephone interview by author, 24 March 1995.

claimed. "Everyone in this organization calls me 'Max.' No[t] merely as a convenience, but I feel I have actually earned this salutation."⁹

So it must have been a bitter pill when his employees walked out in the spring of 1937, protesting long hours and short pay. Although strikes disrupted other animation companies, including Disney's, over the next five years, Fleischer Studios took the first blow. Caught off guard, Max saw himself as the victim of ingratitude. Perhaps on the advice of Paramount officials, he stubbornly refused National Labor Relations Board arbitration.¹⁰ Most of the high-salaried animators continued to work, but many of the underpaid inkers, opaquers, and inbetweeners stayed out for six months. Sporadic violence erupted between union members and employees crossing the picket line. While the strikers finally won a modest pay raise and other concessions, they failed in their attempt to make the studio a closed shop.¹¹ The strike ended October 13, 1937, but it would haunt Fleischer Studios as long as they existed.

Not that the brothers had time to dwell on in-house adversity. Other challenges awaited them. A few months after the strike ended, Walt Disney released his *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first feature-length cartoon. It had been four years in production at a cost of a million and a half dollars, but its extraordinary success proved that a full-length cartoon could sustain audience interest. Now Paramount encouraged the Fleischers to produce their own animated feature.¹² The profit margin on shorts was always going to be narrow. Nobody bought a theater ticket just to see the cartoon. Already the Fleischers had produced a pair of Popeye two-reelers. They would now begin work on their first feature, a loose, very loose, interpretation of Jonathan Swift's novel, *Gulliver's Travels*. Doing so meant doubling the staff and abandoning their cramped facilities. The Fleischers, instead, abandoned New York altogether. On February 1, 1938, they completed negotiations with the Dade

9. "Max Fleischer Autobiography," press release from Fleischer Studios in Miami, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York, mimeographed, 11.

10. Harvey Deneroff, "Popeye the Union Man: A Historical Study of the Fleischer Strike" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1985), 131, 150; Shamus Culhane, *Talking Animals and Other People* (New York, 1986), 201.

11. Deneroff, "Popeye the Union Man," 264.

12. Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic* (New York, 1987), 115; Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 144.

County Commission to relocate their studios.¹³ They financed the move with a ten-year loan from Paramount, a decision they would come to regret.¹⁴

Other than a warm welcome and mild winters, it was not immediately apparent what Miami had to offer an animation company. "As far as motion picture facilities were concerned," Shamus Culhane observed, "Miami might just as well have been in Tibet. Every foot of film would have to be shipped to New York laboratories for development; any breakdown of equipment would have to be serviced from the East; there were few experienced sound engineers in Florida, no actors, no labor pool of experienced artists. In the face of all these problems, the move to Miami was mad."¹⁵

The Fleischers had their reasons. Land in Miami came cheaply, and in 1933 Florida had begun to exempt relocating film companies from property taxes.¹⁶ In addition, both Max and Dave already owned winter homes on Miami Beach. Most important of all, however, was what Florida did not have: a well-developed union movement. It would seem a safe place to expand a labor force. In fact, Max had begun negotiations with the Miami Chamber of Commerce in June 1937, just one month after the strike began in New York.¹⁷

The Fleischers broke ground for the new studio on March 1, 1938. Ironically, the following day union labor brought work to a halt when they picketed the site, protesting non-union, out-of-town construction labor.¹⁸ This time, though, the Fleischers were protected from union activity. They had little to do with the actual construction. Technically speaking, they did not even own the studio. Instead, they held a five-year lease with an option to buy from local real estate developer John Ware Jr.¹⁹

Ware built the studio in a sparsely populated, working-class neighborhood in the northwest section of the county, an area *Architectural Record* described as "a part of Miami that had been ne-

13. "Miami Gets Film Plant," *Miami Herald*, 2 February 1938.

14. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 144.

15. Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 202.

16. Richard Alan Nelson, *Lights! Camera! Florida!: Ninety Years of Moviemaking and Television Production in the Sunshine State*, (Tampa, 1987), 53.

17. "Miami Studios Plans Slated For Parley," *Miami Herald*, 4 February 1938.

18. "Idle Men's Protest Halts Studio Work," *Miami Herald*, 22 March 1938.

19. "Miami Gets Film Plant"; Mark Langer, "Institutional Power and the Fleischer Studios: *The Standard Production Reference*," *Cinema Journal* 30 (1991), 11, 22 n. 58.

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Welcomes
Miami's newest residents
Popeye
Betty Boop
and Mr. Fleischer's other
funny little characters

Watch for—
The World Premiere of the
first Fleischer cartoon
completely made in Miami
at your Paramount Theatres

Within a year of their arrival in Miami, the Fleischers retired Betty Boop, but they produced Popeye cartoons as long as their studio existed. Paramount's official welcome to the Fleischer Studios, *Miami Herald*, 4 September 1938.

glected in the hasty, boom development of the city."²⁰ The studio's most venerable neighbor was the Musa Isle Seminole Indian Camp, a tourist attraction on the Miami River a few blocks away.

Ware had a vision of his own. He meant to make Fleischer Studios the nucleus of Delaware Park, an upscale housing development surrounded by lush landscaping and natural limestone pools. According to newspaper advertisements, his plans included "establishing an ideal community—with every home a modern, permanent concrete and steel reinforced structure, with absolutely no fear of destruction by hurricane, fire, or termites."²¹ Unfortunately, every home was also uniquely and profoundly unbeautiful. "There were a few homes put up and a few people bought them," head an-

20. "Light, Sound, and Atmosphere Controlled in Studio Design," *Architectural Record*, January 1939, 33.

21. Delaware Housing Association, Inc. advertisement, *Miami Herald*, 9 October 1938.

imator Myron Waldman recalled, "but most didn't want any part of them. They looked like blocky little factories."²²

Dade County honored its commitment to the studio by building Delaware Parkway, a boulevard linking the plant to 27th Avenue, the nearest thoroughfare. If all went as planned, the county promised to build a bridge over the Miami River, thus incorporating Delaware Parkway into a trunk road between Miami's two major airlines, Pan Am and Eastern.²³ For good measure, it also contributed a corps of WPA workers to clear roads and property around the studio.²⁴

The building, constructed of steel-reinforced poured concrete just like Ware's homes, was one of the first completely air-conditioned facilities in Florida.²⁵ A diesel plant supplied electricity and water. The cream-colored studio wrapped around a landscaped courtyard, at the rear of which stood a detached "sound-recording building." During recording, its air conditioning was shut down to prevent vibrations and air currents from affecting sound reproduction.²⁶ Banks of windows equipped with Venetian blinds allowed employees to work by natural light. When their eyes got tired, they could rest them by walking down the long corridors, illuminated only by twenty-five watt deflecting lights.²⁷

In September 1938, as construction continued on the studio, the staff started to move in. Max Fleischer would never forgive the strikers, but he found himself in no position to deny jobs to experienced artists.²⁸ Two hundred New Yorkers made the move to Miami. The Fleischers hired another hundred cartoonists from California, offering high wages to entice people away from Disney and other West Coast studios.²⁹ They were able to reclaim several of their most talented animators. They also acquired some mediocre animators who misrepresented their expertise. In one case, an in-betweenner passed himself off as his animator brother.³⁰ For the rest

22. Mark Langer, "Working at the Fleischer Studio: An Annotated Interview with Myron Waldman," *Velvet Light Trap* 24 (fall 1989): 11.

23. "Actual Work of Drawing Animated Cartoons Begins in Miami this Week," *Miami Herald*, 4 September 1938.

24. "Group of 60 Movie Artists Due Sept. 7," *Miami Daily News*, 7 August 1938.

25. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 144.

26. "Light, Sound, and Atmosphere," 36.

27. *Ibid.*, 35.

28. Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 203.

29. Langer, "Working at the Fleischer Studio," 9; Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 203.

30. Langer, "Working at the Fleischer Studio," 13.

of the staff the Fleischers turned to the only source in town: the Miami Art School.

At Max Fleischer's request, the art school instituted animation classes.³¹ After studying drawing techniques for three months, students applied for positions as opaquers. The notion of working in a film studio, at the starting salary of \$18.75 a week, proved especially appealing to recent high school graduates.³² "Jobs were not easy to come by if you weren't trained for any particular job," opaquer Jeanette Kronenfeld Simon remembered, "so it was some prestige to say you worked there—if it didn't mean anything else. The pay for those days was good."³³

For Jewish residents, employment opportunities offered by the Fleischers took on added significance. During the Depression, anti-Semitism permeated Miami; Myron Waldman's mother, for instance, had to remind the real estate agent not to take her into any neighborhoods posting "No Jews allowed" notices.³⁴ Jewish job-seekers faced a restricted market. Fleischer opaquer and inker Bernie Leiter pointed out, "The jobs were just not around unless you were of the right stature and color and hair and eyes. If you think Miami in those days was so marvelous . . . well, it was for the tourists, but not for the natives."³⁵

While Miamians familiarized themselves with the field of animation, resettled Fleischer employees acquainted themselves with their new home. As Myron Waldman sat drawing at his desk his first week in Miami, he glanced over his shoulder in time to catch a curious Seminole girl and boy peering at him through the window.³⁶ When animator Frank Spalding looked out his window, he was just as startled to see an all-black chain gang installing the sidewalks around the studio.³⁷

Mosquitoes, flying cockroaches, and enormous spiders horrified Shamus Culhane, but many Fleischerites found aspects of Miami appealing.³⁸ Although Myron Waldman acknowledged some employ-

31. "Ink Flies as Art Students in Metropolitan Miami Train in Methods Used in Studios Where Fleischer Animated Cartoons are Produced," *Miami Herald*, 16 April 1938.

32. Gladys Dunn Fortner, telephone interview by author, 9 April 1995.

33. Jeanette Kronenfeld Simon, telephone interview by author, 14 April 1995.

34. Myron Waldman, telephone interview by author, 15 March 1995.

35. Bernie Leiter, telephone interview by author, 9 April 1995.

36. Waldman interview.

37. Frank Spalding, telephone interview by author, 24 April 1995.

38. Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 203.

ees "never had their noses out of those beer joints," he attended the theater and ballet and heard Metropolitan opera stars at Miami High School.³⁹ Bernie Fleischer, who worked with his father, Joe, in the machine shop, liked to watch trainloads of wealthy Northerners disembark at the downtown station. Then, for fifty cents he could watch a stage show or a movie at the Olympia Theater.⁴⁰

The cultural differences between New York and Miami made for an interesting first year. Inker Milton Wohl thought Miami a paradise, although it took time to adjust to the area's "completely different rhythm."⁴¹ While many local people, especially those in business, appreciated the studio's presence, a substantial number regarded the employees with suspicion. "Well, you know," Wohl explained, "New Yorkers were considered city slickers. They couldn't take us. Like, 'Here they are, ready to take over.'"⁴²

Then there was the Ku Klux Klan. In April 1938, the *Herald* had taken city officials to task for allowing the Klan to parade through downtown without a permit and with license plates concealed, bringing traffic to a halt.⁴³ In June, the KKK had held their state convention in Miami.⁴⁴ Music director Lou Fleischer managed to wind up on the wrong side of the Klan (or Klan sympathizers) when he invited Cab Calloway to his house one evening. The next morning he found a note under the door: "Don't have any more niggers in your house. The Ku Klux Klan."⁴⁵

Although a number of New Yorkers accepted the Fleischers' offer of a ticket back home if they left before the first year ended, the California contingent seemed to adjust to Miami effortlessly.⁴⁶ An intercoastal rivalry sprang up among the animators. The California artists thought the New Yorkers too haphazard in their work, while the New Yorkers found the Californians arrogant.⁴⁷ Max Fleischer surrounded himself with New York loyalists; Dave Fleischer associated with the Californians.⁴⁸

39. Waldman interview.

40. Bernie Fleischer, interview by author, Pembroke Pines, Fla., 20 April 1995.

41. Milton Wohl, telephone interview by author, 12 April 1995.

42. Ibid.

43. "City Officials Condone Klan," *Miami Herald*, 27 April 1938.

44. "Gold Satin Robes of the Color Guard," *Miami Herald*, 12 June 1938.

45. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 154.

46. Culhane interview; Waldman interview; Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 207.

47. Spalding interview.

48. Langer, "Institutional Power and the Fleischer Studios," 11; Culhane, *Talking Animals*, 207.

Miami-hired employees knew little about the dissension in the upper ranks. They were adjusting to both groups. The New Yorkers proved particularly intriguing. They talked differently; and although they had come down on business, they dressed like tourists, working in shirt sleeves, shorts, and sandals.⁴⁹ As a whole, however, the animators proved an amusing group with their penchant for pranks (the hot foot gag was a perennial favorite) and spoofing one another with comics left tacked up in the hallways.⁵⁰

If the Fleischers moved to Miami to rid themselves of the union, they realized their hopes October 31, 1938, when, in a 66-58 vote, the art production employees rejected the CIO-affiliate United American Artists as their bargaining agent.⁵¹ The union was defeated. "The action of the studios' art production employees," the *Herald* commented, "is a happy understanding of local conditions. It augurs well for success of the motion picture plant in adapting itself to the norms of thought of this community which it has selected for its new home."⁵²

The Fleischers came to a somewhat less happy understanding with Dade County's tax assessor. Despite the state's promise of property tax concessions to motion picture studios, it was not until their case arrived at the Florida Supreme Court in 1941 that they received their promised exemptions.⁵³

Max and Dave's turbulent partnership continued to plague the studio. Between the oldest Fleischer brother and the youngest lay eighteen years and a history of personality conflicts. The move to Miami did nothing to relieve the friction between them. Dave later contended that his extramarital affair with his secretary, Mae Schwartz (whom he eventually married), infuriated Max, further deepening the rift between the two brothers.⁵⁴ There has been much speculation about the quarrel's effect on the studio, especially because Max and Dave no longer spoke to each other. Script-writer Jay Morton recalled the brothers being civil to each other at

49. Fortner interview.

50. Wohl interview; Fortner interview.

51. Deneroff, "Popeye the Union Man," 234.

52. "Artists Reject C.I.O. for Miami," *Miami Herald*, 3 Nov. 1938.

53. Nelson, *Lights! Camera! Florida!*, 55; *Fleischer Studios, Inc. v. Paxson*, 147 Fla. 100 (1941).

54. Dave Fleischer, "Recollections of Dave Fleischer," interview by Joe Adamson, 1969, An Oral History of the Motion Picture in America Collection, University of California at Los Angeles, 121-22.

work; however, Dave Fleischer's daughter, Joyce Fleischer Weinberg, noted, "Through the years I guess there was a certain jealousy between them. They needed both signatures to approve things, and it became spiteful. If one would sign, the other one wouldn't."⁵⁵

Mounting tension between the partners must have troubled Paramount; but most of the lower-echelon workers, the Miamians, did not detect any fraternal strife. In fact, they marveled at the familial atmosphere and the benevolence of the Fleischers. "They didn't go out of their way to impress anybody. They were just naturally nice people," opaquer Marie Rand Trudeau explained.⁵⁶ When she left after two years to join the Navy, the Fleischers sent her a paycheck for several months.⁵⁷

By May 1939, with work on *Gulliver's Travels* accelerating, the studio had outgrown its plant and spilled over into two of Ware's bungalows. A two-hundred seat cafeteria neared completion. The studio now employed over four hundred people, including a hundred Miamians. Its ever-expanding weekly payroll topped \$18,000.⁵⁸

In the midst of all the *Gulliver* preparations, Paramount released Betty Boop's final cartoon. The darling of a bygone time and place, she survived a scant year in sunny Florida. Some say putting her to rest was an act of kindness. But Popeye, as cartoony as ever, retained his celebrity status. The foremost business at hand, of course, was *Gulliver's Travels*. The Fleischers were attempting to produce a feature film in eighteen months. Since Disney had already started work on *Pinocchio*, the challenge lay in bringing the world's *second* feature-length cartoon to the screen—although Max Fleischer denied he was racing Disney. "When we began the picture in May, 1938," he maintained, "we set a release date for Christmas, 1939. The release date stands. There is no change. Naturally, in view of the fact that the new personnel required special training, it has proved a little more difficult than we anticipated."⁵⁹

The Fleischers based their film on one episode from Swift's novel, *Gulliver's* visit to Lilliput. They discussed several approaches

55. Jay Morton, telephone interview by author, 15 April 1995; Weinberg interview.

56. Marie Rand Trudeau, telephone interview by author, 10 April 1995.

57. Ibid.

58. "Film Studios Are Enlarged," *Miami Herald*, 28 May 1939.

59. "Fleischer and Disney Race To Make Second Animated Cartoon Feature," *Miami Herald*, 2 July 1939.

to the character of Gulliver. Someone suggested Popeye for the role.⁶⁰ Dave wanted to combine live action with animation, as they had in the KoKo cartoons. He thought Gary Cooper would make an ideal Gulliver, but Max balked.⁶¹ In the end, they settled for rotoscoping their protagonist. Miami radio station WIOD broadcast for "tall, dark, handsome" men to audition to model for Gulliver; however, the role eventually went to announcer Sam Parker, who also provided the character's speaking voice.⁶²

Despite moving a studio, training new staff, and sending film back and forth to Hollywood for editing, the Fleischers made their Christmas deadline. Since Disney did not release *Pinocchio* until the following February, *Gulliver's Travels* opened as the world's second feature-length cartoon. It had been grueling work. According to a Paramount press release, by the time the film was finished, 678 artists had created 665,280 drawings, used sixteen tons of paper and 49,000 pencils, and swallowed 27,600 aspirins for headaches.⁶³ The final product consisted of twelve tons of paint brushed on a half million cels.⁶⁴

December 18, 1939, the evening of *Gulliver's Travels'* premiere, marked the pinnacle of the Fleischers' tenure in Miami. The weekend preceding the Monday night opening brought a host of *Gulliver*-related activities. Saturday morning, "Gulliver," in the form of an eight-foot tall actor, flew in from Hollywood bearing the cans of film. He bestowed them upon Mayor E. G. Sewell, who, in turn, presented them to Miami Beach's Sheridan and Colony theaters, sites of the double premiere. "Gulliver" then made his way to Bayfront Park, where he helped judge a contest to select the Princess of Lilliput and six ladies in waiting. The competition culminated with a motorcade of miniature cars. Then the giant put in an appearance at the local Sears Roebuck.⁶⁵ Monday morning, Lanny Ross, CBS radio announcer and the singing voice of Prince David,

60. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 119.

61. Beatrice Fleischer Stone, telephone interview by author, 25 April 1995.

62. Mary Hamman, "A Giant Comes to Town," *Good Housekeeping*, February 1940, 145-46.

63. "Cinema: *Gulliver's Travels*," *Time*, 1 January 1940, 29.

64. "Movie Industry Turns Eyes on Miami's 'Gulliver' Premiere: First Showing of Cartoon To Be At Sheridan and Colony Theaters Monday Night," *Miami Herald*, 17 December 1939.

65. Elizabeth Hemphill, "Writer Feels So Lilliputian as Gulliver Picks Princess," *Miami Herald*, 17 December 1939; Sears, Roebuck and Co. advertisement, *Miami Herald*, 16 December 1939.



About *Gulliver's Travels*, Walt Disney reputedly said, "We can do better than that with our second-string animators." Advertisement for *Gulliver's Travels*, 1939. Courtesy of Donna Dial.

broadcast his show from Miami's WQAM radio station. He and Jessica Dragonette, the singing voice of Princess Glory, warbled songs from *Gulliver*.⁶⁶

66. "Miami Ears Soothed by Lanny and Jessica," *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1939.

Of greater significance that day was the luncheon at the Columbus Hotel honoring Paramount and Fleischer executives. Attended by local politicians and civic leaders, it provided the forum for Mayor Sewell's advancement of Miami as a movie production site. The *Miami Herald* duly noted the city's latest strategy: "Miami . . . will concentrate its initial activities on inviting cartoon production units to use Miami as the site of their operations rather than Hollywood, where labor difficulties and mounting taxes beset the studio operators."⁶⁷

The premiere itself, followed by a charity ball, proved a local sensation as well as an opportunity for publicity-conscious Miami to capture a spot in the newsreels. Floodlights lit the area, and mounted police controlled the crowd. Over the Colony Theater, streamers spelling out "Gulliver's Travels" and "World Premiere" floated beneath an enormous helium balloon—which had to be patched and re-inflated after a prankster with a .22 caliber rifle shot it down.⁶⁸ Animator Frank Spalding recalled, "They had a big mob of people—just like a Hollywood opening. I remember driving up and walking up the red carpet; we all did. Like I was some big Hollywood actor. They even did that to the office boys."⁶⁹

The crowd astonished Dave Fleischer's fourteen-year-old daughter, Joyce, when they reached across the restraining ropes to touch her as her family arrived at the theater. Still, the film itself disappointed her. Except for trying to identify the frames she had opaqued, she found little to hold her interest.⁷⁰

The local press, however, acclaimed the film unreservedly. *Herald* amusement editor Charles E. Ward exulted,

The triumph of the Fleischers was recorded in the face of headshakings by leaders of the industry when the studio was moved here. Make a full-length cartoon in two years? Impossible, said the industry. Get artists in Miami? Never, the Fleischers were told before the change was made. But the Fleischers were determined and the studio came to Miami. . . . Then portions of the film were previewed and the

67. "Miami Opens Campaign To Lure Movie Studios: Film Leaders City's Guests," *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1939.

68. "Sun Glasses Hide Husing," *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1939.

69. Spalding interview.

70. Weinberg interview.

world of the motion picture began to take notice. By the time they could see it all, executives were talking of box-office gross in the millions.⁷¹

Gulliver's Travels went on to receive mixed but overall positive reviews, although most critics considered it not as well-crafted as Disney's *Snow White*.⁷² More than one pointed out the Fleischers' debt to Disney.⁷³ In truth, the Disney style with its bright backgrounds and naturalistic characters had seeped into the Fleischer product. Inker Milton Wohl explained, "They had a good handful of Disney people working at the Fleischers. If you have several Disney animators working for another company, that Disney effect is thrown right into the new studio they work for."⁷⁴

Unfortunately for the Fleischers, among many other cartoon producers, nobody could create "that Disney effect" quite as well as Disney. The *Herald's* optimistic predictions notwithstanding, *Gulliver* did only moderately well at the box office. It recovered expenses; but, partially because the war had eliminated lucrative European markets, the film posted little profit.⁷⁵

By the time *Gulliver* premiered, Paramount had already given the Fleischers a "definite assignment" to produce another cartoon feature—at half the budget allotted *Gulliver*.⁷⁶ Despite Paramount's underwhelming show of confidence, a new production, the *Herald* observed, meant that "upward of 600 artists and workers will be kept busy at the Miami plant and that a major portion of the picture's cost of more than a million dollars will go into circulation here."⁷⁷

It was a good thing, too, since Miami did not appear destined to replace Hollywood as the film capital. By March, the *Herald* was forced to report that for all Miami's best efforts, producers would not defect from California as costs would increase and employees

71. "Gulliver Outshines Bright Expectations: Hap-Hap-Hap-Happy Day," *Miami Herald*, 19 December 1939.

72. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 118-119.

73. Review of *Gulliver's Travels* (Paramount movie), *Time*, 1 January 1940, 29; Frank S. Nugent, review of *Gulliver's Travels* (Paramount movie), *New York Times*, 21 December 1939.

74. Wohl interview.

75. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 118; Waldman interview.

76. Charles E. Ward, "Fleischer Studio Will Make Another Feature-Length Cartoon," *Miami Herald*, 13 December 1939; Fleischer, "Recollections," 72.

77. Ward, "Fleischer Studio," 72.

did not want to leave their homes.⁷⁸ It looked like Fleischer Studios, Inc. was Miami's film industry.

The plot of the Fleischers' second feature film, *Mr. Bug Goes to Town*, revolves around a community of insects who live in New York City just a few feet off Broadway. Their attempts to find a haven safe from the dangers caused by humans eventually lead them to immigrate to the rooftop garden of a new skyscraper. The first cartoon feature based on an original story, it promised—despite a cast of talking bugs—to be neither fantasy nor fable, but a modern drama. Max Fleischer argued, “Solidly constructed screen stories can be produced with pen and ink characters just as well as with human characters. The animated cartoon must mature and the only way to mature is to tell feature length modern and dramatic stories naturally. In our feature we'll retain droll whimsy whenever a situation presents itself but we don't strive for it where the story situation doesn't call for it.”⁷⁹

Mr. Bug did seem to represent a maturation in the Fleischer style. The studio spent four months constructing a three-dimensional set of New York City.⁸⁰ Dynamic animation and experimentation with camera angles produced some striking scenes, especially the opening sequence of New York streets shown from an insect's perspective and the climactic confrontation with construction machinery. As much as Fleischer stressed the importance of story, however, the plot of *Mr. Bug* remained bromidic and the characters insipid rather than engaging. The story just was not “solidly dramatic” enough to overcome its paucity of whimsy, droll or otherwise.

For solid drama, the Fleischers—at Paramount's behest—turned to Superman. Conscious of the cost and labor involved in creating the realistic animation necessary to bring the popular Action Comics hero to the screen, director Dave Fleischer hesitated to undertake the project. He quoted Paramount an estimate of \$100,000 per cartoon, four times the cost of the average animated short.⁸¹ Paramount accepted.

78. Idem, “Film Producers See Florida Move Remote: Movie Makers Like Hollywood,” *Miami Herald*, 9 March 1940.

79. Manuscript by Aileen St. John Brenon, “About ‘Mr. Bug Goes to Town,’” n.d., Fleischer Collection, Film Study Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

80. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 186.

81. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 120.



The Fleischers not only borrowed the title of their second feature cartoon from Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, they also modeled their protagonist on Jimmy Stewart, the film's lead. Later, Paramount reissued the cartoon as *Hoppity Goes to Town*. Advertisement for *Mr. Bug Goes to Town*, 1941. Courtesy of Donna Dial.

In spite of their initial reluctance, the Fleischers took great pains with their new project, rotoscoping the man of steel from animator Ed Fortner and utilizing storyboards and pencil tests, infre-

quent practices in the studio's past.⁸² Special effects and unusual camera angles became hallmarks of the series. Initiated in 1941, these cartoons, boldly stylistic and often steeped in war propaganda, departed almost completely from the Fleischers' trademark "cartoony" style. Theater audiences loved them.⁸³ Sadly, we will never know what direction the Fleischers might have taken from that point of departure. As it turned out, Superman could preserve the American way of life, but he could not save Fleischer Studios.

When the house of Fleischer started to crumble, it fell with stunning swiftness. Three days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, *Mr. Bug* opened at the Olympia Theater to little fanfare. When Paramount finally released it to the general public the following February, it suffered the proverbial box office death. Although it had come in under its \$600,000 budget, it failed to recoup expenses. After the release of *Gulliver's Travels*, the Fleischers owed Paramount \$100,000; after *Mr. Bug* they were \$473,000 in debt.⁸⁴

By then, however, it did not much matter. Events had already transpired against the Fleischers. On New Year's Eve 1941, Paramount announced Dave Fleischer's resignation and plans to take a position with Columbia Pictures supervising the cartoon production unit in Hollywood.⁸⁵ Although Dave later claimed he fled Florida to avoid repercussions from his divorce, his daughter, Beatrice Fleischer Stone, noted that he knew Paramount was poised for a takeover.⁸⁶ Perhaps, Myron Waldman suggested, Paramount executives grew tired of losing money.⁸⁷ Or they may have been spurred by a message from Max Fleischer. According to a story recounted by Fleischer chronicler Leslie Carbarga, toward the end of *Mr. Bug's* production, Max telegraphed Paramount that he "would no longer, under any circumstances, work with Dave Fleischer."⁸⁸

In any case, in late May, Paramount seized the studio, renaming it Famous after its sheet music division. Since five years remained on the Fleischers' loan schedule, how Paramount was able to take control remains unclear.⁸⁹ Joe Fleischer's son, Bernie,

82. Langer, "Institutional Power and the Fleischer Studios," 7-8.

83. Idem, "Max and Dave Fleischer," *Film Comment*, January-February 1975, 55.

84. Idem, "Institutional Power and the Fleischer Studios," 22 n. 58.

85. *New York Times*, 1 January 1942, 37.

86. Fleischer, "Recollections," 125; Stone interview.

87. Waldman interview.

88. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 190-191.

89. Fleischer, *Just Tell Me When to Cry*, 101; Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 124.

thought Paramount encouraged the quarrel between his uncles so they would not align themselves against the takeover.⁹⁰ Later, both Max and Dave sued Paramount to little avail.⁹¹

When the lease on the building expired, Paramount moved the studios and a greatly reduced staff back to New York. They invited a few Miamians to go along. While at least one became an animator, many young men had already gone into military service or found war-related employment; and for most young women, leaving home was, as Gladys Fortner said, simply "too much of an adventure."⁹²

Unlike Mr. Bug, the Fleischers did not find sanctuary back in New York City. Max took a position with Jam Handy producing army training films in Detroit.⁹³ Before his death in 1972, he worked in Hollywood on television animation.⁹⁴ Dave left Columbia Pictures after two years to work on special effects for Universal.⁹⁵ He died in California in 1979. After they left Miami, the two brothers never spoke to one another again.⁹⁶

If Miami's aspirations for its own movie studio appeared doomed, its unwavering desire for fame and fortune was fulfilled, ironically, by World War II. The Army Air Corps opened an Officer Candidate School on Miami Beach. The municipal golf course became a drill field, and military personnel filled 85 percent of the hotels.⁹⁷ At the Port of Miami, the Navy opened the Submarine Chaser Training Center through which passed half a million recruits, all billeted in downtown hotels.⁹⁸ The old Fleischer plant housed the Ware Lens Grinding Company, where Lou Fleischer worked making artillery sights.⁹⁹

After the war, both the city's population and its tourist industry boomed once again. Miami became a popular site for movies shot on location, but none were produced there until the 1960s when the medium of television brought the Ivan Tors Studios to town to produce *Flipper*.

90. Fleischer interview.

91. Ibid.; Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 124; Fleischer, "Recollections," 127-29.

92. Fortner interview.

93. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 124.

94. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 202.

95. Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic*, 124.

96. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 205; Langer, "Max and Dave Fleischer," 56.

97. Helen Muir, *Miami, U.S.A.* (Miami, 1990), 208.

98. Arva Moore Parks, *Miami: The Magic City* (Miami, 1991), 136.

99. Carbarga, *The Fleischer Story*, 205.

Although South Florida's movie industry has boomed in the past decade, the images the Fleischers created in Miami over half a century ago have never found their way into local history. The Fleischer Studios plant remains, but no marker recounts its contributions to the local economy or to the entertainment world. Today it houses a county school for emotionally disabled adolescents. The old sound studio serves as a gym. An eight-foot chain link fence surrounds the lot, and brown Bahama shutters cover the windows where Seminoles once watched animators create giants and talking bugs and men of steel.

The neighborhood surrounding the old studio seems to have awakened from John Ware's dream of a planned community with rock-solid homes and limestone pools. Remnants of the project can yet be found among the latter-day houses and duplexes. Time has been kind to the quirky houses, tempering their homeliness into a character distinct from the rest of the neighborhood. Delaware Parkway, the road Miami built to lure the Fleischers into town, remains a four-lane boulevard with a broad median strip. Less than a quarter of a mile long, it runs off past the studios and some apartment buildings on one side and the old power plant and waterworks on the other. At the Miami River, amid boatyards and salvage shops, it vanishes.