

ANIMAL FARM Programme Notes

The power of George Orwell's visionary prose is demonstrated by the fact that we live in 'Orwellian' times. Further still, in that each successive generation during the past 70 years or so has also believed themselves to be doing so. The author's political and social themes are proving to be ever-relevant, though you do suspect that Orwell himself might have enjoyed the old gag in which he submits a novel entitled '1948' and his publisher insists on changing the title...

Within a decade of the publication of Orwell's allegory 'Animal Farm', a feature movie version was produced – and it came not from any of the major studios, nor from Ealing (for whom it might well have been a good fit), but from Halas and Batchelor. John Halas and Joy Batchelor were a productive husband-and-wife team working in advertising and wartime information shorts; 1945's 'Handling Ships', commissioned by the British Admiralty as a Royal Navy training aid, ran for 70 minutes and so could be considered the first British animated feature film (despite it being specifically designed for limited viewing).

Halas and Batchelor's success in the field of propaganda had not gone unnoticed – for no less a body than the United States' Central Intelligence Agency contracted the company in late 1951 to adapt 'Animal Farm' for cinema, with the C.I.A. also putting up the budget for the production. Their aim was to fund the creation of an anti-communist piece – ironically or even crassly reducing the universally accusatory tone of the novel (it's worth mentioning here that the 1955 movie version of Jack Finney's 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', roughly contemporary with the eventual release of 'Animal Farm', is another mid-fifties production where one's interpretation of the message is almost entirely dependent upon one's politics – a further example of wide-ranging symbolism or satire being co-opted in an attempt to express a narrower reading). Daniel Leab, a renowned scholar of America's post-war approach to communism, published his book 'Orwell Subverted' in 2007, a detailed account of the shady involvement of the C.I.A. in manipulating and influencing the filming of 'Animal Farm'. Other analysts have speculated that the team working on the production may have been unaware of their major funding source – whether this is true or not, and whether any unwitting conflict of interests or outlook therefore feeds into the finished work, is a point that viewers may wish to ponder as they watch the movie. The question as to why the film was produced in England as opposed to the States has caused additional theorizing – some suspect, this being the era of the House Un-American Activities Committee and all, that certain Hollywood-based animators may have been considered too subversive to obey the rules and convey the requirements of the C.I.A., though it seems far more likely that producer Louis De Rochemont's wartime friendship with two of the writers, Philip Stapp and Lothar Wolff, had bought Joy Batchelor to his attention (as Stapp had recently worked with her).

Pernicious external influences aside, the strength and commitment of Orwell's aims and beliefs surges through 'Animal Farm'. The palette is frequently and purposely dull and oppressive, despite the use of Technicolor, and the stark bleakness on offer throughout would be a pointer to British animation of later eras (Martin Rosen's takes on Richard Adams' 'Watership Down' and 'The Plague Dogs', Gerald Scarfe's inserts for 'Pink Floyd: The Wall'). Talented voice artist and radio comedy regular Maurice Denham was called upon to perform all of the vocal chores (barring the narration, done by Gordon Heath), a decision that may have been simple expediency, recognition of Denham's immense skill in this department, or perhaps a subtle nod to the book's central tenet concerning the impossibility of true equality – by hiring a single artist to characterize each separate creature, there's a certain level of inherent 'sameness' which is gradually and cleverly teased out and shifted aside, merely via the ability of the actor.

'Animal Farm' and the world of animation may not quite be finished with one another, as Andy Serkis is known to have a project in development to adapt Orwell's novel. This may be some years away, as the ever-busy Serkis has a whole raft of upcoming movie assignments in the pipeline, but it would appear to be something of a dream venture for the popular actor/director. Serkis' intention is to create a motion-capture version of the story, presumably involving himself (possibly in multiple roles) and employing the physical and vocal expertise of an all-star cast (he has bandied around such big names as Benedict Cumberbatch and Christian Bale, though any confirmed participation seems purely speculative rather than concrete at this early stage). Serkis has stated "boy, there couldn't be a better time to make 'Animal Farm'!" – though, as noted earlier, that's a view that could easily have been expressed equally by Halas & Batchelor, and one that may continue to be put forward by future filmmakers.

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