



## A Stroll down Willoughby Drive

by  
**Brian  
HIBBITT**

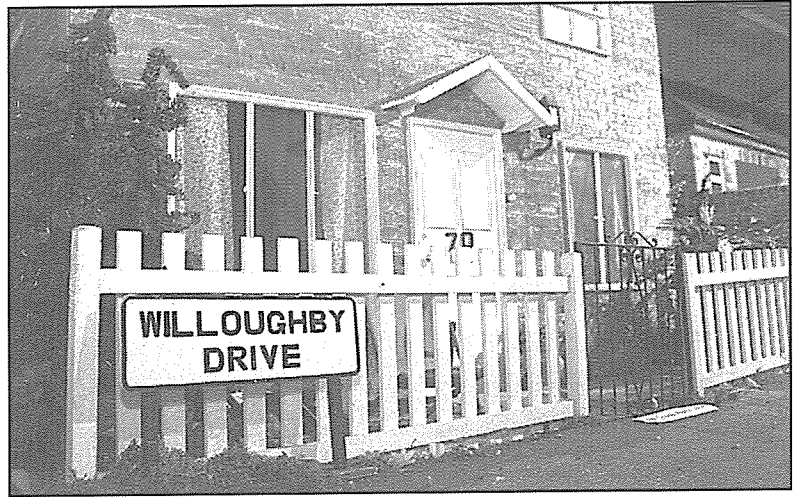
It's an unfortunate truism that you often travel long distances to see something new, but all too often you miss something that is almost on your doorstep. This was certainly the case with animator Tana Fletcher who lives and works just a dozen miles away from me.

I became aware of Tana's work through my video connections and this summer took the opportunity to find out more, and what a lot there was to find out!



Tana lives at Dolphin Cottage in Maidenhead and her company Dolphin Puppet Films produced a series of stop motion animated films all based around a suburban road called Willoughby Drive. The idea of making this series came from stories which had originally been published weekly in *Punch* in the 1920's, and were later published as two books called *Simple Stories* and *Simple People* for grown ups and children. They

Tana Fletcher  
alongside one of  
the sets from her  
films ▷▷



were amusing satirical sketches about diverse characters, such as a detective, a burglar, an inventor, a brigand and many more and in each episode one of these characters was introduced into the lives of three lots of next-door neighbours living in Willoughby Drive.

Tana created the thirteen episodes of *Willoughby Drive* and produced them all in a converted garage at the bottom of her garden, which is still an Aladdin's cave full of sets, puppets and props. Before starting to make puppet animation films she had a family rod puppet theatre and it was this that originally led her into filming stop motion puppet animation.

Each set is made a quarter of life size, so the puppets are 16 to 18 inches high (one quarter of a 6ft man) and each scene therefore needs quarter of life-size props, most of which had to be specially made. To find craftsmen who would make furniture, as well as doors, windows, and all the other props needed for the film sets, she roamed round craft fairs talking to wood turners, metal workers, toy makers and any other craftsmen who were selling

things in miniature. Each episode presented new hurdles.

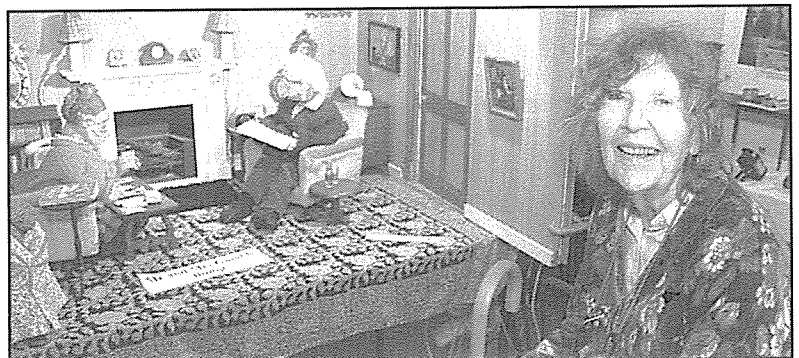
For instance in *The Conman* she needed an old fashioned chemist's shop and for this she found a gifted glass blower from Oxford who produced a huge amount of miniature glass jars, of different shapes and sizes filled with brightly coloured bath oils and powders to imitate the cures for all kinds of Victorian sickness.

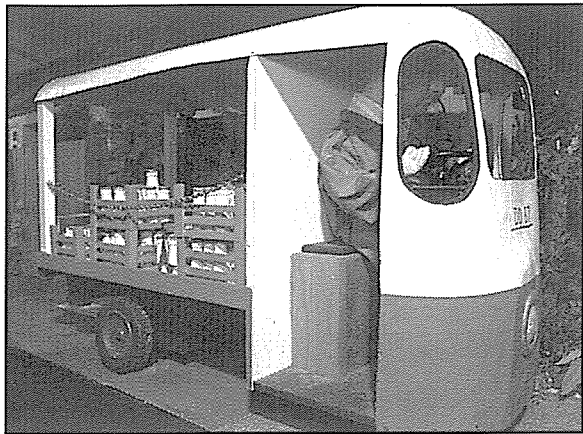
The minute detail contained in the labels of innumerable remedies for such ailments as *Blushing* or a *Torpid liver* or for *Faded Faces*, and other embarrassing disorders which raise a smile today and one wonders how much of this detail was missed by the audiences of her films.

She also needed actors for the puppets' voices, puppet-makers, artists for the backcloths, dressmakers for puppets' clothes, a film editor, a composer, a sound man and a good processing lab.

The sequence of events in making a single film was very prolonged and took immense patience.

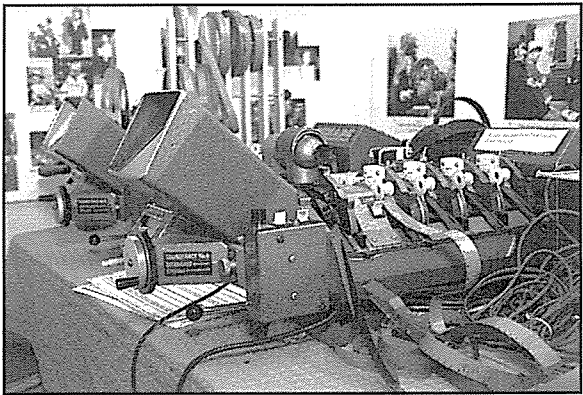
The first step was to write the script, and record the voice overs. Two actors, Jonathan





△The milk float which with ingenuity can be changed into a double decker bus! ▷▷

Cecil and Anna Sharkey made a formidable team and by the end of the series between them they had done 66 different adult character voices. Feedback then revealed some difficulty in distinguishing between the two children's voice so Gillie Robic (puppeteer and actress) took over as one of the children (as well as other parts) and making a huge contribution to the whole series.



△The complex film editing and sound dubbing equipment

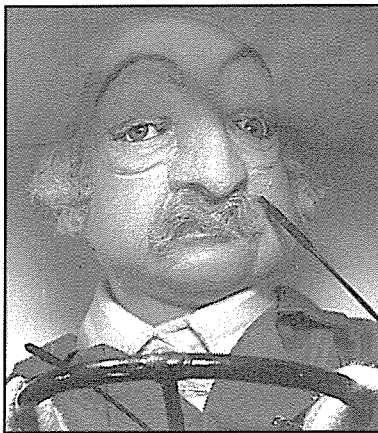
Before animation can commence however, every second of recorded voice has to be broken down into frames (twenty-five frames per second) since the puppets' mouths have to be animated in lip sync with the dialogue. The tape with the voices is played through the editing machine, in slow motion and the number of frames each



Bus Driver, Doctor, Policeman, all play their part in Willoughby Drive▷

word will require is noted on the *dope sheet*. A very slow job indeed.

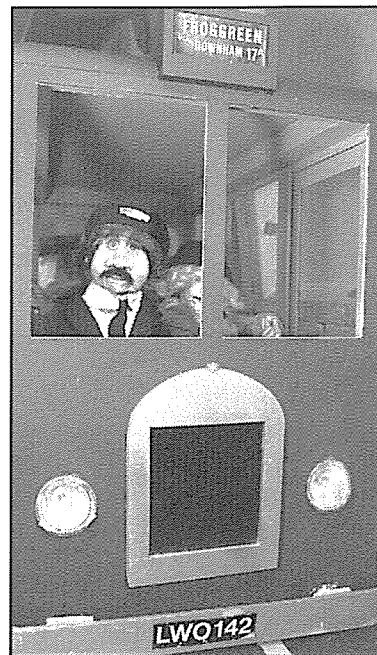
Meanwhile puppet heads with moving eyes and mouths had to be made, involving several experts in its many stages. For example Mrs Gumble Bump, the first puppet to be made, was modelled in clay by Lilian, a Maidenhead sculptress. This model was taken to Bob Keane at Pinewood Studios where he endorsed her nasty personality with a mechanism to make her frown.



Over several years, another puppet maker Brandon Corns made eight expressive puppets, with easy to animate mouths and eyes.

The puppet mouths open and shut in two different ways. The first is by a camera cable release, which pushes the mouth open and shut in easy stages.

However the cable must be out of sight and although it seldom gave trouble, when animating the animator must not touch the puppets' clothes, hair, moustache or beard or a flutter of movement will show on the film. The second system has heads made of a hard material with a simple hinge joint in the jaw to open the mouth



which is moved manually, as are the eyes fixed inside the head, which are moved from the front either by hand or with a long hatpin, which fits into a tiny hole, drilled into the centre of the eyes.

The bodies for the puppets presented a different challenge. Properly made bodies for animation have very precise joints, accurate and strong enough to control the extremely fine movements needed during the stop motion filming process.

These were far above Tana's budget. However Timon Maniolis, an animator himself, made her four simple bodies which had jointed plastic limbs and with changes of heads they were always being swapped into the main characters. The rest of the bodies were adapted from mannequins bought in art shops or others made mainly with wire.

The level of detail in the sets and props is incredible and I am sure much is missed by the casual viewer. Ingenuity was



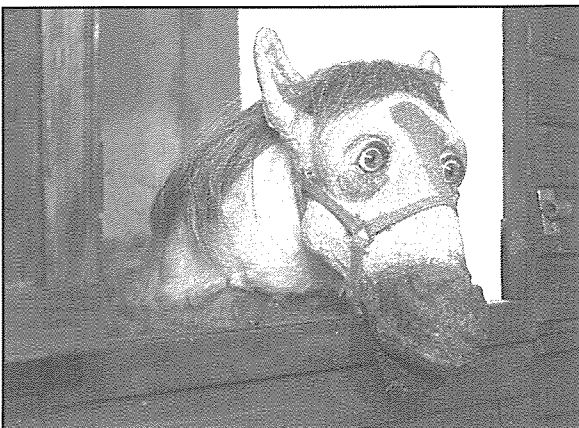


very necessary on a tight budget and one ingenious prop maker regularly converted things made for one purpose into another, which considerably cut the cost. For example when different cars such as a van, a police car or a taxi, were needed, he made aluminium covers that fitted over the one basic body to convert it to its new identity.

With sets built, puppets made and all their words recorded and charted on the dope sheet its now time to visualize the shape and structure of the film. This is planned on the storyboard, showing every camera shot of the film.

#### Lights Camera Action!

With the set built and the puppets placed ready for action the lights are set and two film cameras are set up ready. One of the cameras is set to take a wide shot of the whole scene and the other takes a closer view of the person or object relevant to the action. Since the precise movement of the figures is so time consuming this dual filming is a sensible safeguard since if it transpires that there is a mistake in one of the shots the other will probably be OK. Many a mistake is saved in the editing in this way. For



example if a pair of spectacles is accidentally joggled by as little as one millimetre, or a picture on the wall slips unnoticed, these tiny movements stick out like jumping frogs when seen on film.

As the complexities emerge it makes you wonder who would want to be an animator? Tana maintains however it can be exhilarating and fun, cocooned in this world of make believe, making the characters unfold their stories before you. Depending on the number of puppets and their actions and the different camera angles, the rate of progress is horrendously slow - anything from 5 to 20 seconds a day.



The filming is still not the end of the process however, the individual *takes* still have to be edited and for this Tana involved her son whose *day job* is as an editor of wildlife films for TV programmes.

It is at this stage that the film begins to come to life, the characters became voluble, their words pouring out as the dialogue is matched to their animated mouths. Gradually the film takes shape but not without much soul searching, mistakes being cut out or replaced; sometimes whole scenes fell to the cutting room floor despite the hours of wasted work that they represented. This stage is then closely followed by the addition of sound effects and music which was specially composed by Jennie Muskett and finally the dialogue, the sound effects and

the music have to be blended into a cohesive whole, prior to creating the master final print. The statistics of this enterprise are mind boggling - working roughly 45 hours a week, it took 10 months to a year to make just one episode.

The 13 episodes of Willoughby Drive with all its innumerable changes, cuts and remakings took somewhere near fourteen years to complete, a real labour of love.

The Museum of the Moving Image on the South Bank commissioned an exhibition of photographs on the history and making of Willoughby Drive and later this exhibition has

toured festivals, art centres and libraries. Some episodes have won awards at international film festivals and the series has been shown on some overseas TV channels, but sadly as yet none have appeared on UK TV.

For more information or to purchase copies of the Willoughby Drive DVDs visit <http://www.dolphinpuppetfilms.co.uk>

