

'The Ducks & Us Songbook Movie' takes flight

BY ANNE JANSA

When Pamela Sackett began "The Ducks & Us Songbook Movie" journey nearly four years ago, she never imagined that path would lead to 11 cinema screen bookings, including the Columbia City Cinema. The participating theaters began showing the movie as a pre-feature short July 9, and it's booked through Sept. 9.

From science to the screen

On warm summer days, people in parks can often be seen casually throwing breadcrumbs to nearby ducks and other animals, thinking they are doing their part to help. But as it turns out, that small act can have significant fallout.

Human food ingested by ducks can cause serious damage to their wings. It can also cause the animals to contract parasites and disrupt their migratory patterns.

For example, waterfowl should, by nature, fear humans, but human interaction can cause birds to lose that fear. Additionally, some of the parasites the ducks contract from eating human food find their way into local ponds and lakes. Swimmer's itch is one unpleasant result of a swimmer taking a dip in the contaminated water.

As soon as Sackett, founding artist for the nonprofit organization Emotion Literacy Advocates (ELA), heard some of the science behind what hap-

pens when wildlife consumes human food, she said she was convinced that this problem needed to be addressed.

"I didn't want to be mute about it or let it go on without at least trying to help change the situation," Sackett said.

After various attempts to stop people from sharing food with the ducks in her neighborhood park — such as urging the city to put up more informational signs in parks — Sackett said she realized she might need to take an alternative route.

During Sackett's daily walks in the park, she gathered information and listened to peoples' stories about sharing food with ducks over the course of a year, which provided her with the inspiration for each character's story in "The Ducks & Us" song.

From there, the project took off on an unexpected path, leading to "The Ducks & Us Songbook Movie." As Sackett ventured out, she said she had no idea where the project would take her, but with a large investment of time, many volunteers and four dedicated interns from the Art Institute of Seattle, the project came to completion in a way she said she could never have imagined.

Only after Sackett saw the finished product did the idea occur to her to put it on the big screen, she said.

Columbia City Cinema agreed to show it on their screens for a month during August, Far Away Entertainment booked it on seven screens for a



photo/BILL ZAMA

■ This promotional photo for 'The Ducks & Us Songbook Movie' features a silhouette (made by the Emotion Literacy Advocates interns) that comes up in the last frame of the movie.

month and the Northwest Film Forum will show it on Aug. 28 as a pre-feature to "Pee-Wee's Big Adventure" at the Seattle Bike-In at Cal Anderson Park on Capitol Hill.

A different way to learn

Sackett said she decided to coordinate the project through ELA because it ties in with its mission. Emotion Literacy Advocates is a for-profit, arts-based organization focused on using

art to create learning tools that promote social-emotional learning, and in the case of "The Ducks & Us," environmental learning as well.

For many, the information in the short movie is new. Animating intern Reese Kindle said he had no idea there were negative consequences for feeding ducks. "I guess there are not a whole lot of people out there that know the message," he said.

"Teaching is a challenge because

people get habituated," Sackett explained. "You can't just go up to people and expect them to be open."

The movie was meant to add a visual component to "The Ducks & Us Song" that Sackett wrote about the issue, along with a study guide that addresses many aspects of the problem. In 2008, the CD and study guide were integrated into Seattle

‘Ducks’ focuses on simple message

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Audubon Society’s and Graham Visitors Center’s outreach and education programs.

Sackett created the format of a virtual storybook for the movie, with the lyrics as the main narrative. She said she wanted the emphasis on the language rather than flashy imagery.

The Northwest Boychoir lends its voice to the song and movie, adding to the theme of a children’s storybook.

Once the interns finished the storybook, Sackett quickly found out that to show it on a big screen meant transferring it to 35mm film. After many phone calls, Deluxe Entertainment Services Group in Los Angeles agreed to donate its time and resources to make the expensive conversion.

Classified as a pre-feature short, “The Ducks & Us Songbook Movie” runs a little under seven minutes.

“It is not a Pixar film, but we wanted it this way,” Sackett said. “We wanted it to be minimalist because we want people to focus on listening to the song and reading along with the song.”

Catherine McConnell, the intern who took on the role of project manager, thinks the simplicity of the movie is one of its best selling points.

“I like it because it is simple and easy to follow,” McConnell said. “I also like how it has all the different forms of visuals: still image, video and animation.”

Kindle described the animation as “whimsical,” and said he likes the classic animation because it is a step away from more high-tech computer animation that is common today.

Reflecting life

Each character in the movie has a different perspective about why they share their food with the ducks, and by communicating their stories to one another, they are able to learn from each other, she added. Sackett thinks this often mirrors the way things happen in life.

“People are well-intentioned,” she said. “We are doing this because we want to shed a little bit of light on the social-emotional piece, as well. You have to ask, ‘What is the narrative going on inside someone’s head that steers them?’ If that internal narrative allows damage to occur, then a new narrative can help change that. In the spirit of lifelong learning, ELA’s movie offers that new narrative.”

More information, the movie’s tour schedule and updates about the project can be found at www.emolit.org.