

Beloved Animator Don Duga, Known Best For His Work On Frosty The Snowman And Other Holiday Classics, Dies At 87

Donald “Don” Jerome Duga, renowned animator whose work included iconic favorites such as *Frosty the Snowman*, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, *Mr. Magoo* and the Emmy-nominated *The Little Drummer Boy*, died May 30th in Westhampton, New York. He was 87.

The fun-loving Mr. Duga had an innate connection with the magic of childhood that he carried into his art. Mr. Duga was fittingly best known for his work on *Frosty the Snowman*, which debuted on television in 1969 and ran once a year ever since, and which taught millions of viewers the values of friendship, sacrifice and the magic of believing.

Mr. Duga was born on January 1, 1934 in Hollywood, California. After serving in the US Army during the Korean War, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Chouinard Art Institute, where he planned to be an abstract artist. His life changed while studying with the famous animator Don Graham, who was hired by Disney to teach the animators how to draw Snow White. “I was never going to be in animation,” Mr. Duga once told *Dan’s Papers*. “I was going to be a painter! But my drawing teacher said that you actually get paid if you do animation.”

After graduation he worked for United Pictures Association, which produced *Mr. Magoo* for television. Mr. Duga once described his big break into the industry working on *Mr. Magoo*, the creation of legendary John Hubley, who was blacklisted by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Mr. Duga was called on to replace the head writer and took on all the aspects of creating the animation, including writing the stories, creating the storyboards, layouts and design.

A few years later, he drove his Volkswagen bus across the country, winding up in New York City. He landed a position as an art director for movies, television and commercials at Pelican Films, an animation studio on Madison Avenue. “Animation was hot back then, and it was a whole new experience to work in the New York atmosphere,” Mr. Duga told *Newsday*. While in New York, he met fellow artist Irra Vertbitsky, whom he later married.

Mr. Duga decided to try a new adventure when he found out he could ship his VW bus to Belgium for only \$200. He and Ms. Vertbitsky traveled around Europe before settling in Rome and then Milan, Italy, creating animation for Olivetti typewriters and other Italian products. They later moved back to Manhattan, married, and formed their own animation company, Polestar Films and Associated Arts, in 1976.

Mr. Duga’s storied career in animation included working with Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment, Sesame Street and individual animators such as Seamus Culhane and

others. His work ran the gamut from the iconic Christmas specials, to Saturday morning cartoon classics such as *The Jackson 5ive* and *The Osmonds*, educational triumphs such as *Owen* (narrated by Sarah Jessica Parker) and *Goodnight, Gorilla*, as well as pop culture favorites like *Mad Monster Party* (with Phyllis Diller and Boris Karloff) and *The Last Unicorn* (featuring Mia Farrow and Jeff Bridges). Mr. Duga and partner Verbitsky won several awards including the prestigious Carnegie Medal for Best Children's film of the year and the ASIFA East Award for their work on *Owen*.

Mr. Duga firmly believed in the artistic underpinnings of animation. "I learned Renaissance techniques in art school that have helped me with animation," he once enthusiastically told a reporter. "Animation should have started in the Renaissance. Only the camera hadn't been invented yet." Much of Mr. Duga's work was in continuity design, essentially giving the characters life. "I work out the whole sequence, the continuity, the shot plot, I bring the emotion to it. The board is the key that makes the whole film work," Mr. Duga was once quoted as saying.

Mr. Duga was a mentor to up-and-coming animators, teaching for 50 years at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. Much-loved by his students, Mr. Duga formed lifelong bonds with many of them as they pursued their own careers in the "art of animation" as Mr. Duga always referred to it. He taught his students classical animation techniques including hand-drawn storyboards and individually painted backgrounds.

Mr. Duga lived much of his life with his family in Greenwich Village, in New York City. In his later years he spent most of his time in the family summer home in Baiting Hollow, New York, where he enjoyed kayaking and socializing on his beloved beach. He was a staple of the East End arts community, hosting annual art shows and crafting a special cover for *Dan's Papers*, considered the Bible of the Hamptons.

Mr. Duga was predeceased by his parents, Joseph Duga and Bess Landau Duga, his sister, Sharon Kamens, and his brother, Lawrence Duga.

He is survived by his wife, Irra Verbitsky, his daughter, Amanita Duga-Carroll, his son, Brady Duga, and four grandchildren, Jacob, Kyle, Lila and Cameron, as well as his son-in-law Bruce Carroll and daughter-in-law Gina Pisello.

Mr. Duga donated his body to science, therefore there will not be a funeral. There will be a family gathering immediately, with plans for public memorial later this summer.