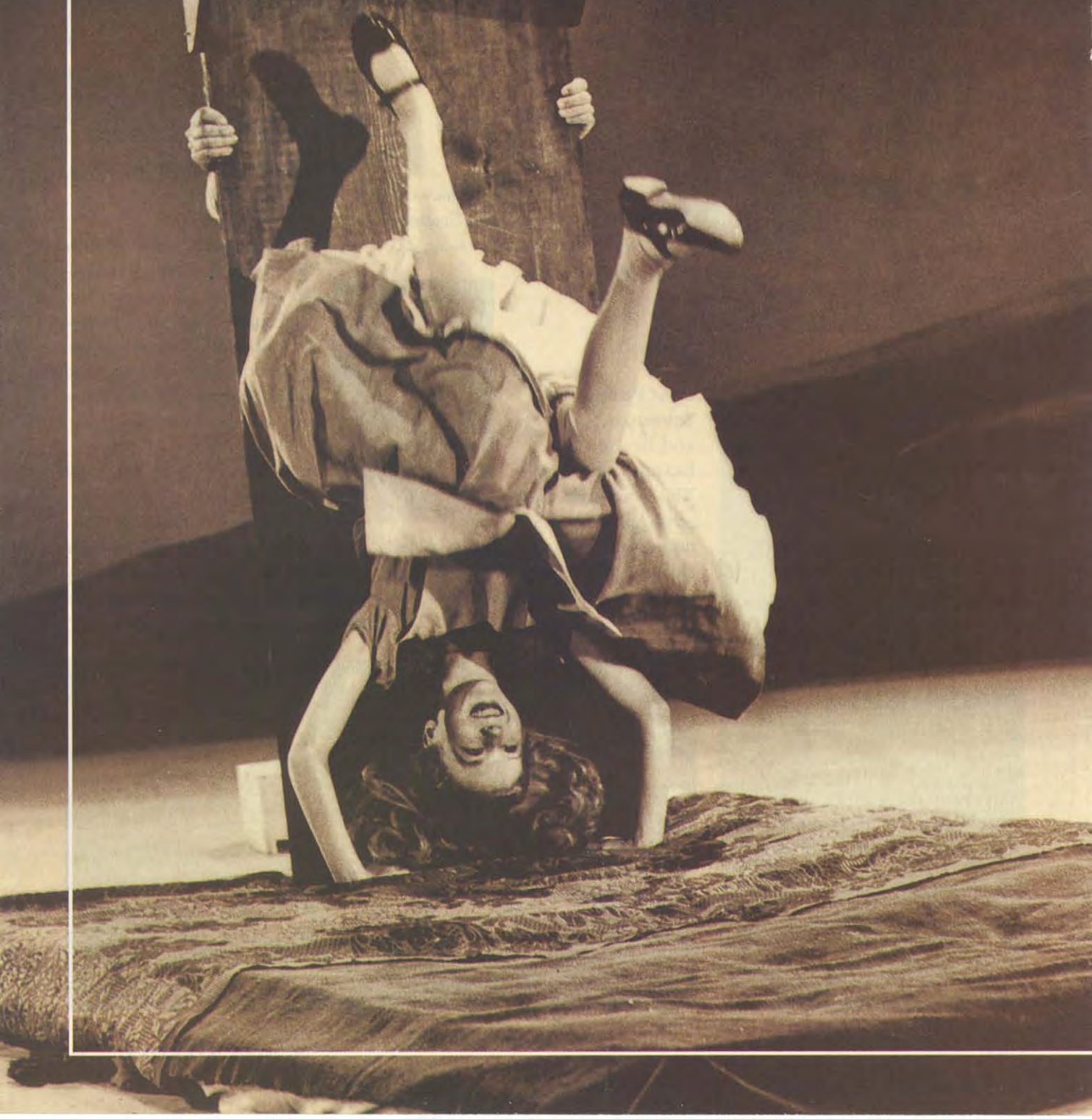


Through the



Looking Glass

*The curious
live-action
adventures of Alice.*

By John Canemaker

SINCE the early days of the animation industry, artists have used live reference films to help them depict realistic action. In 1915, producer Max Fleischer filmed footage of his brother Dave dressed as a clown, and used a device he invented called a rotoscope to draw a clown that was amazingly life-like. The rotoscope was a projector that beamed single frames of a live-action film onto a drawing table. The animator could then trace those images onto paper. Instead of

ON A ROLL: Kathryn Beaumont pantomimes Alice (above) tumbling over at the bottom of the rabbit hole.





MODEL BEHAVIOR: Above right, Kathryn Beaumont acts trapped as a stagehand makes the "bottle" wobble as if floating in water. Above, the celluloid Alice, shrunk to mouse-size, bobs along in a sea of her own tears. Below, Beaumont and Alice peer into the keyhole of the pun-loving, talking doorknob.



dreaming up the details of, say, how the clothing of Snow White moves as she runs frightened through the forest, the animator merely had to consult the tracings made by an assistant on the rotoscope. The best animators used live-action film as a starting point, a means to a creative end.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, animators used the rotoscope to draw

convincingly the movements of not only the princess, but also the prince, queen, and witch. Walt Disney improved on the original technique by printing each film frame onto photographic paper, making it easy to flip frames of film from action sequences back and forth. These photostats were used both as a general reference and as a sort of blueprint for specific actions. Animators on Disney features have con-

tinued to use live-action references, including a martial arts routine for *Mulan* and a canoe sequence for *Pocahontas*.

The photos you see here are from the making of a live-action film used for Disney's 1951 feature, *Alice in Wonderland*. They are curious, indeed. The black-and-white pictures of a barren stage look quite different from the lushly detailed Technicolor version of the final film. And then there are the contraptions that 10-year-old actress Kathryn Beaumont (who was also Alice's voice) interacts with, such as a slide, a seesaw, a tiny door, and a larger-than-life bottle.

We spoke with Beaumont recently at her Los Angeles home. "They wanted to develop the concept of Alice floating





A BREEZE: In the film, Alice floats down the rabbit hole, thanks to the parachute-like action of her skirt. Her pinafore flips up as an errant gust of wind blows past her (*bottom right*), though in the reference film a crew member had to lift Beaumont's apron (*top right*).

down the rabbit hole," she explained with a laugh as she recalled a round table she sat on that rotated and tilted, with stirrups underneath to hold her steady. "The drifting, weightless look is what they wanted. The skirt looked like it was ballooning out thanks to the table, and a fishing-pole

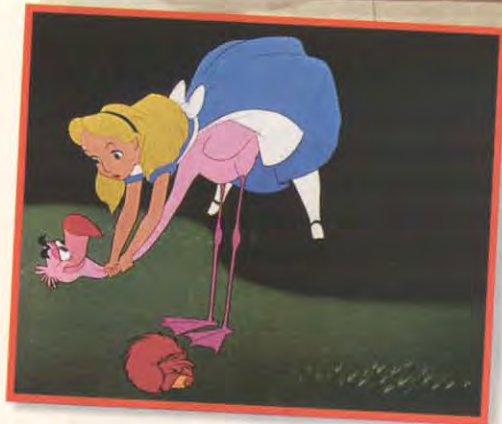
device lifted the apron when a little [gust of] air would come through [the rabbit hole]."

The shooting of this live-action film and the final animation of the Alice-through-the-rabbit-hole sequence was supervised by co-director Hamilton Luske, who had

been the principal animation supervisor for Snow White in the 1930s. Beaumont performed actions staged by Luske and Alice's two other directors (Wilfred Jackson and Clyde Geronimi) while she lip-synched to a recording of her own voice to help match the action to the storyboards and script. On the set, key animators Les Clark, Frank Thomas, Milt Kahl, Ollie Johnston, Marc Davis, and



MOST CURIOUS: At left, getting Beaumont on a real flamingo wasn't feasible, so the crew concocted a simulation. Below, Alice's meeting with the caterpillar was intimidating for the actress, who was starry-eyed working with Richard Haydn.



Ward Kimball would drop by, offering different interpretations and suggestions for mapping out Beaumont's movements.

Occasionally, Walt Disney himself would turn up, mostly to show off his miniature train. The train tracks were on the periphery of the *Alice* set within Stage One on the Burbank studio lot. "Here he is, the head of the studio, but so much a part of the group," recalled Beaumont. "He'd say, 'Kathy, hop on!' and we'd take a ride around the stage. Then he'd walk off, and we'd go back to work."

Work entailed getting into some odd situations. Beaumont was put inside a plastic container to evoke the cartoon Alice navigating an ocean of tears in a bottle. "I did have to be lifted out [of the container]," she said. "Two stagehands had to move the platform, balanced on a sphere, back and forth as if I was bobbing along in the waves." A seesaw apparatus helped the animators visualize Alice playing croquet while atop an uncooperative flamingo-mallet. The imperious, hookah-smoking caterpillar was played by actor Richard Haydn (who was also his voice) on a platform above Beaumont. Not shown here is the mad tea party sequence she filmed with

veteran comics Ed Wynn and Jerry Colonna. "As a child," she said, "I was in awe of working with such well-known people."

Beaumont was involved with the creative process for more than two years, from storyboards to live-action filming. What did she think of the result? "It was fascinating for me to look at this moving drawing and recognize some of the movements or an expression, almost like looking in a mirror," she said. "I was amazed how they captured the personality. How closely it represents what I am like." **DM**

John Canemaker is the director of the animation program at New York University Tisch School of the Arts. His latest book, Walt Disney's Nine Old Men and the Art of Animation, will be published by Disney Editions in October.

