

Contemporary Collectibles: 101 collectibles

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

It has often been said that Disney's villains are more interesting than the heroes, and if there's one vintage movie that proves the point, it's "101 Dalmatians." We all may have some vague memory of the virtuous human characters Jim and Anita or the lovable canines Pongo and Perdita, but no one will ever forget the indelible, larger-than-life, flamboyantly evil Cruella DeVil, whose very name was a stroke of genius.

Based on a juvenile novel by Dodie Smith, "101 Dalmatians" was released in 1961, placing it between "Sleeping Beauty" and "The Sword in the Stone" in the Disney canon, and was the first animated feature to be set in a contemporary time frame. The plot line, briefly, centers on the clever dog Pongo and his wooing of Perdita (and the same time uniting his master Roger with Perdita's mistress Anita), resulting in a litter of 15 puppies. The pups become the target of the malevolent Cruella, who wants to dognap them to make a fabulous Dalmatian fur coat - she has already captured 99 other puppies, held hostage in her creepy mansion, Hell Hall.

In the end, of course, after an adventurous car-chase pursuit of Cruella and her dimwitted cockney henchmen, Jasper and Horace Badun, the pups are rescued and all live happily ever after. Cruella stands out as a humorously designed caricature, with white-streaked black hair and her omnipresent cigarette holder, from which swirled clouds of smoke. She was animated by Disney vet Marc Davis, who admitted she was in part inspired by Tallulah Bankhead.

"101 Dalmatians" is especially noteworthy for one particularly influential technical innovation, which originated in the brain of Walt Disney's first partner, Ub Iwerks, the man who had drawn the original Mickey Mouse and was also responsible for many technological advances in animation. It was he who adapted the Xerox process to create "Xerography," which transferred the animators' drawings to celluloid mechanically, rather than having each of them hand drawn and traced in ink onto a cel. Doing so allowed for a greater freedom of line and an entirely different and fresh look to the film. If those 100-plus spotted dogs were to have been drawn individually for each of the many crowd scenes (some mad Disneyphile has actually totaled up the number of Dalmatian spots in the film at 6,469,952), the movie might never have been made. Even so, an animation staff of 300 worked on the film for a full three years, bringing the cost of the production to \$4 million.

The enduring popularity of the characters in this film - the good and the evil - is attested to by the supply of and demand for the objects made in their image, both vintage and more recent. As with all animated films, prime among them are the original concept and background drawings, and animation cels.

There were also numerous figurines of the spotted dogs and human characters and other items, from a 10-piece wooden puzzle by Playskool to sheets and pillowcases populated by pups. Of later vintage are a Mattel 1996 Barbie Cruella DeVil doll modeled after the live-action villainess later depicted by Glenn Close, complete with spiked heels and scarlet cigarette holder, a McDonald's Happy Meals set of toys, 1997 Bradford Exchange plates, a Walt Disney Classics Collectors model of Cruella's long, red limo with monogrammed

hubcaps and chrome-plated grille and horn, a Marx Disneykins series including a figure of Jasper running, and a limited-edition Fossil watch with the cheerful face of Lucky and a leather band embossed with Dalmatian spots, not to mention toothbrush holders, plush dogs, lunch boxes, cookie jars and cake pans, snow globes, books, watches and other jewelry.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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