

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

Miracles of clay in the greatest story ever told

ARTS

frame at a time, 24 frames a second, for films such as the original *Mighty Joe Young* (1949) and *One Million Years BC* (1966).

Harryhausen is alive and kicking but has been in retirement since *Clash of the Titans* (1981), for reasons that might be explained by a quip from TNT movie commentator Joe Bob Briggs: "Who wants to watch clay-animation monsters five years after *Star Wars*?"

Perhaps there is a minor god complex brought on by the clay animation process, particularly when the subject matter is biblical: just as God made Adam from clay, a

team of British and Russian animators have done the same for Jesus and his disciples to create the film *The Miracle Maker* (ABC, Sunday, April 23, at 7pm ET).

Loosely based on the Gospel of St Luke, this production intersperses 70 minutes of clay modelling (directed by Stanislav Sokolov), with 20 minutes of drawn animation (directed by Derek Hayes) to tell the story of the resurrection.

This dual format seems discordant, mixing not only materials but also two-dimensional forms with three-dimensional ones.

But the logic takes shape

quickly; as executive producer Christopher Grace says: "The 'reality' is depicted in clay animation, while the fantasies and parallels are drawn."

Even in this age of George Lucas, the clay figures were tweaked by hand for each shot. Grace said: "For the clay portion of the film, we were only able to shoot two to four seconds per day for each of the six directors. It took two years."

The problem with stop-motion photography is that the figures move jerkily, as though they are dancing under a strobe light. Yet, when handled skilfully, as in

this case, the prodded putty can convey all the expression it needs to; raised brows and an outward-stretched face convey Jesus' beatitude, and when he rolls his eyes, one can feel his disdain.

The bronzed clay faces, with their short foreheads, square jaws and enormous wide-set almond eyes, uncanonically resemble the portraits featured on mummies of Egypt's Roman era (which currently happen to be on display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York), but their provenance is far more amusing.

Their appearance arose from a culture clash between

the production's two animation teams. Grace says: "The Russian animators originally came up with a Byzantine, iconic look, while the western team gave the figures a more comic-strip style. Neither liked the other's style, so we came up with an amalgam."

Ralph Fiennes plays Jesus and his visage began to trickle into the face of Jesus, because, jokes Grace, "the female animators probably fell in love with Ralph".

Perhaps the drollest aspect of the film is the characters' accents. Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* titillated audiences by

featuring disciples with unadulterated Brooklyn diction. Scorsese's rationale was that the disciples were chosen among common working-class men.

The Miracle Maker seems to essay this approach, transposing it to the British: one hears a dialect range including Yorkshire, cockney - and Peter is a Scot (the voice of esteemed Edinburgh-born actor Ken Stott).

The effect is as comical as Grace's explanation: "Ralph has a slight northern English tone to his voice, and we thought that, since the Galileans were in the

category, then, clay animation, the bastion of pagellation?

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