

CREATIVITY

MONKEYING AROUND

Imagine churning out idea after idea, seven days a week, always using the same style and characters. How would you stay fresh and invigorated? Cartoonist John Kovaleski can teach us a thing or two about that.

John Kovaleski easily fits the cartoonist look: Crack-voiced when excited, he's bald with dark eyebrows that bumper-car theatrically into each other when he's perplexed. His pockets are lined with lists of gag ideas like "mummy made of caution tape" and "frozen guy from the '80s" and, exuberantly underlined, "traffic cones!!"

He's a guy who can karate-chop his way through creative block like nobody's business.

Kovaleski draws the daily comic strip "Bo Nanas" for The Washington Post Writer's Group. Bo is a big-nosed, childlike monkey, a magnet for strange characters looking for a friendly ear. For Kovaleski, drawing



ILLUSTRATOR
John Kovaleski

LOCATION
Gettysburg, PA

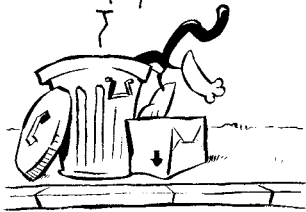
CONTACT
(717)334-5926;
john@kovaleski.com



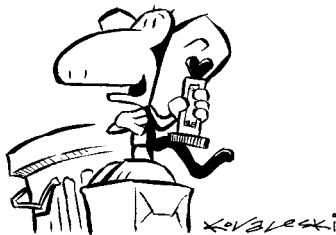
At any given time, John Kovaleski has 48 to 60 "Bo Nanas" strips in the hopper.

let's see what interesting stuff people are throwing out.....

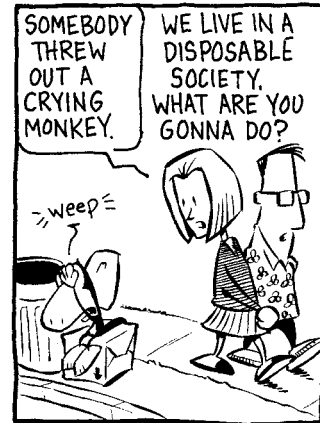
hey, a home-made trophy!



i'd like to thank the academy for this...



"world's greatest mom award?"



MOM TROPHY

"I had trouble with this one," Kovaleski says. "Initially, [in the fourth panel] I had him crying and saying: 'That's the saddest piece of garbage I've ever seen.' It wasn't the greatest ending. So I said, OK, what would an outside observer think about this? The idea of throwing out a specifically crying monkey—that's funny right there. Sometimes it just needs a whole new point of view."

this strip is the culmination of a lifelong dream, nursed on the side during his 15-year graphic design career.

Cartooning is an old-fashioned grind of an art job: Seven days a week, cartoonists dig deep for a gag, then hand-draw and ink it on real paper with a real pen. To the hardscrabble, smoke-and-joe-fueled cartoonist crowd, the idea of creative block is for sissies who have the luxury of time to indulge it.

If anything, the loopy, otherworldly appeal of cartoons owes a lot to the pressure that comes from that daily obligation to navel-gaze—to create something today.

Kovaleski and I recently hit a New York City diner to discuss how he keeps Bo's world fresh and compelling to him and to his readers.

PLAN AHEAD

Kovaleski describes Bo as "a stand-in for other people, commenting on the world. I picture Bo as having the same disease as [my fiancée] Jocelyn and my mother:

People just talk to them." He grins. "I knew I was going to run out of monkey jokes. I used to kid with my friends: When would I resort to throwing feces and rainbow-colored asses?"

Kovaleski's fight against creative block starts by knowing and respecting his own work style. "Some [cartoonists] will actually start and finish a gag in a day, but I can't do that. The pressure is just too weird for me. I feel better writing ahead, being able to shuffle and rethink ideas." At any given time, Kovaleski has 48 to 60 strips ready—eight to 10 weeks' worth—plus dozens of ideas in what he calls the "gag file."

Unlike most design projects, a comic-strip world can endure indefinitely—even past a cartoonist's lifetime. Sustainability is important even in developing a character's physique. Kovaleski once drew a weekly strip with a triangle-headed character and immediately ran into trouble. "You use that character three or four times, and then you realize: That doesn't work, I didn't give him a chin," he laughs. "It made his head really awkward to move." Each daily strip offers so little room that every gesture must convey personality, mood and narrative facts—and triangle-heads weren't going to sustain those.

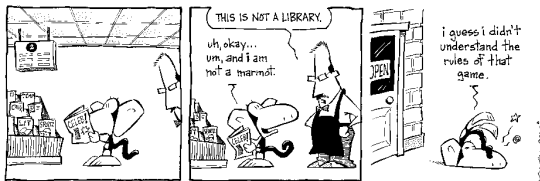
PENCIL SKETCH



INKING IT IN



FINAL STRIP

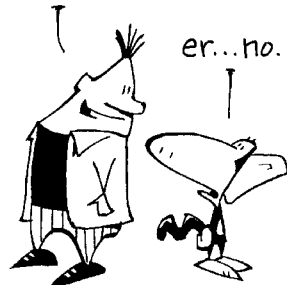


MIND YOUR (FUNNY) ELDERS

Like any other art form, cartoons have a legacy of in-jokes to draw upon. Occasionally, Kovaleski references older strips as a springboard for a new gag. Kovaleski shows me another strip. "There's a tradition in comic strips of babies that are always called Baby-something, like Baby Huey. I like drawing this kind of egg-shaped, generic baby, with no arms unless he needs them. ... He'll do stuff that's just beyond baby, like throwing things. I decided to call him Baby Karl. Karl-with-a-K is such an un-baby name."

Kovaleski points to a strip titled "Dollar Bill." "I grew up on MAD magazine," he continues. "When I was reading it in the '70s, there wasn't as much pointing-out of how ridiculous stuff is in the world. So the very pointing out with a twist was funny. Now we live in a world that's tremendously humor-conscious; senses of humor have progressed. You have to go the extra mile."

THE NAME'S WILLIAM BUT THEY CALL ME "DOLLAR BILL." DO YOU KNOW WHY?

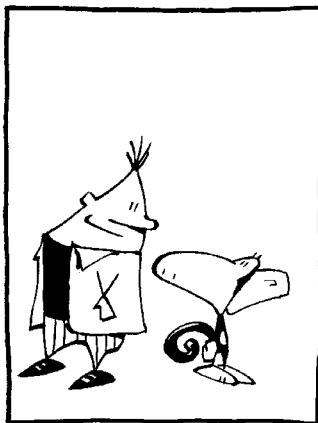


er...no.

IT'S BECAUSE EACH ARTICLE I'M WEARING COST NO MORE THAN A DOLLAR. IRREGULAR PANTS. SHIRT WITH NO BUTTONS. CARDBOARD SHOES.



THRIFTINESS RUNS IN MY FAMILY.



MY SISTER "PENNY" GETS A LOT OF STARES.



KOVALESKI

DOLLAR BILL

When "Bo Nanas" launched in May 2003, Kovalski had revised and reworked his characters. Bo's ears had shrunk to a manageable size, his tail's stance reveals his emotional state, and he's the only one whose voice is drawn in lowercase letters.

"Sometimes I grab onto an idea, something people have touched on before, so I need to do something different. Here the joke isn't really obvious," he says. "You have to go back. Early 'B.C.' strips were like that—quirky and very surreal, like Beat poetry."

DRAW OUTSIDE THE LINES

Just like any brand's development over time, rules—whether style guides, prior campaigns or the confines of a talking monkey's universe—set the boundaries for experimentation. The more established a creative world becomes, the more experimentation is crucial to move the story forward. "This is one of my favorites," Kovalski remarks, handing me a strip with Bo hanging over a grandma and a teenager, switching their hats.

"I just did another one like this: He's hanging, and he notices these little sticks coming toward him. He says, 'Hold it!' and comes down, and there are three kids with sticks. 'So he says, 'Were you kids going to hit me?' And they go, 'Ye-ess, Mis-ter Nanas.' And he goes, 'What did I tell you kids?' And they say, as if they're quoting him, 'A monkey is not a piñata.' 'And?' 'No matter how hard we hit you, you won't give us candy.' I like the whole concept of hitting somebody so hard that they just give up, like, 'OK! here's candy!'"

He pauses. "It's tough. Bo is a subtle character, and his personality doesn't come through in some of these. Sometimes these could be gags with anybody in them. I know sometimes it's a question of, 'Will this sell?' I need to start doing more quirky things that just occur to me." Freshness, in graphic design or cartoons, comes from a clearly felt personality and the right telling details more than the broad strokes.

FROM LUNCH TO THE PRESSURE COOKER

Kovalski had pledged earlier to sketch out a gag in my presence, so I could watch him overcome problems in real time. We pay the tab and head to my apartment. This is a setup, so he's had time to contemplate.

"OK," he says. "Think of that old-fashioned gag where you're reading a magazine in a drugstore, and the druggist says, 'This is not a library.' What would Bo say?" He pauses. "He'd misunderstand the guy's purpose, like, 'Oh, I get it. This is not an apartment house! This is not a jazz club!'" He stops again. "I'm thinking of changing [that] to Bo saying: 'And I am not a marmot!' Which is funny, although truthfully, I have to look up in the dictionary what a marmot is. Either way, he gets thrown out. So let's look up marmot," he says, pulling a dictionary from my bookshelf.

"A rodent with coarse fur"—oh, that's funny," Kovalski remarks, clearly tickled. "That'll work. Mar-MOT, right? I almost wish it was spelled mar-MET, with an E," he notes. "Marmet is funnier than marmot."

Drawing the strip is a miracle of distillation: Every detail does triple duty. The original four-panel plan is ditched for three panels. Bo is drawn from his feet upward, to control his scale. Bo's response in frame two requires surprisingly rigorous editing: "I will actually think if I should use 'oh,' 'um' or 'er' at different times," Kovalski notes. "'Uh' is more of a thinking thing." Even more surprisingly, it matters. Without the "uh," Bo seems less confused, more of a smart aleck, less like Bo. Bo's thrown-on-pavement stance must be fact-checked against prior thrown-on-pavement strips, a touch of consistency that punches up the gag for regular readers. Voilà: The monkey is finished.

Not quite. Tomorrow, Bo will dust himself off and rejoin the Christmas elves who summer as ice-cream salesmen, or tango with a caution-tape mummy. And Kovalski will be ready to send him there. **HOW**

Jude Stewart writes frequently for design magazines, including *I.D.* and *Ready Made*. She lives in Brooklyn, NY. jude@judestewart.com

