

THE BUSINESS, TECHNOLOGY & ART OF ANIMATION AND VFX

November
2021

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MAGAZINE

MIPCOM 2021 Edition



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Cover: Netflix limited series *Maya and the Three* premieres Oct. 22. (Image by visual development artist Bryan Lashelle.)

MIPCOM Cover: *Beardy Bodo*, Riki Group's popular animated preschool series, is ready to conquer the world.



El Maestro and His Muse Dazzle Us Again!

There are days when we get so much animation news that we wish our print magazine was a daily and not a monthly. Today was one of those days. My amazing colleague Mercedes Milligan, who works her magic on our daily news site each and every day, told me that we had reached our daily online news limit at 11 a.m. Of course, according to Murphy's Law, just when you file the last story of the day, suddenly all hell breaks loose and you have to reshuffle priorities and pay attention to bigger news items that land in your email inbox.

Yet, that is just one part of being a busy animation journalist. We also have the honor and privilege of bringing you exciting profiles and interviews with the creative forces behind some of the latest, coolest projects. For example, this month's cover story is one of those fantastic shows that we've all been dying to see and write about: *Maya and the Three*. Is there anyone in the world who doesn't love and admire animation auteur Jorge R. Gutiérrez and his talented wife and muse, Sandra Equihua?

Here at the magazine, we are always thrilled when Jorge has a new short, TV show or movie in the works, and he never disappoints. We were so happy to feature his previous projects *El Tigre* and *The Book of Life* on our covers in years past, and I have to say, this month's cover image for his hot Netflix show is among our all-time favorites. Not only that, the dynamic duo are amazing interviews — funny, smart, kind and insightful. Why can't everyone be more like them?

Jorge has also kindly agreed to open our World Animation & VFX Summit with one of his brilliant keynote speeches. If you want to catch the maestro live in the L.A. area (on the beautiful grounds of The Garland hotel — strict COVID rules apply!), make sure you sign up for the event (Nov. 7-10) on our website and take advantage of the early bird rates (www.animationmagazine.net/summit). We will announce more news about the summit (which is finally live and in person) on our daily news website in the next few weeks, so make sure you sign up for our e-newsletter.

Our fall preview issue also includes informative pieces about Locksmith Animation's first movie, *Ron's Gone Wrong*, penned by the amazing Karen Idelson; a behind-the-scenes feature about the new *Star Trek: Prodigy* series by the always entertaining Tom McLean; a sneak peek at Netflix's hot new adult animated show *Inside Job* by talented journo Michael Mallory; and fun pieces on shows such as *Lucas the Spider*, *A Tale Dark & Grimm*, *The Smurfs* and *Beardy Bodo*. Read on, and we promise you'll be the best toon insider in your circle. Maybe you'll also get some new creative ideas for this year's Halloween costumes for the whole family!

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QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"I am so excited to participate in this press release, but I should mention that my deal for *Fairview* and *Washingtonia* is not yet closed. The main sticking point is money. I want more and they don't want me to have more. I look forward to airing these projects as soon as this issue is resolved."

— Stephen Colbert on his upcoming animated series *Fairview* and feature *Washingtonia* which are being produced by CBS Studios for MTV Entertainment's Comedy Central.



KINGDOM OF NONE



8+
52 x 11'



Ferly LITTON
STUDIO

aliens in my backpack

Created by
Rob Lee



7+
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telegael

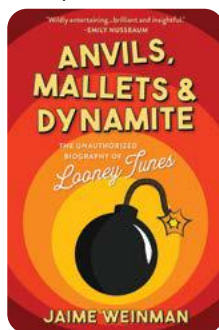
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Stuff We Love

Anvils, Mallets & Dynamite: The Unauthorized Biography of Looney Tunes

TV critic Jaime Weinman goes down the rabbit hole to retrieve a complete, meticulously researched story of how an unlikely band of directors and artists at Warner Bros. created the visually stunning, oh-so-violent comedy and iconic characters now synonymous with classic animation. Published by Sutherland House. [Oct. 5, \$28]



The Art of gen:LOCK

Rooster Teeth and VIZ Media are paying homage to the star-studded mecha adventure, created by Gray Haddock and exec produced by/starring Michael B. Jordan. This hardcover collection takes fans behind the scenes with exclusive commentary from the writers, animators, creators and artists through 160 pages illuminated with exclusive full-color artwork and original sketches and notes from the show's development. [Oct. 12, \$30]



The Legend of Korra: The Art of the Animated Series - Book Two: Spirits (Deluxe Edition)

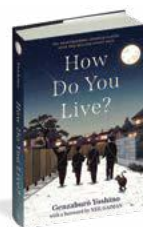
Reprinted to celebrate the upcoming 10th anniversary of the acclaimed Nickelodeon series, this limited edition hardcover from Dark Horse contains hundreds of development art pieces from the show's second season and commentary from series creators Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko, and producer Joaquim Dos Santos, with foreword by P.J. Byrne (voice of Bolin). This run comes packaged in a deluxe slipcase with a commemorative lithograph featuring our Avatar heroine. [Oct. 5, \$80]



Avatar: The Last Airbender fans may also want to snap up *The Kyoshi Novels* hardcover box set (Abrams Books), collecting both of F.C. Yee's *NYT* bestselling books. This thrilling duology follows Earth Kingdom-born Kyoshi's journey from a girl of humble origins to the merciless pursuer of justice across the Four Nations, still feared and admired centuries after becoming the Avatar. [Oct. 19, \$38]



Hayao Miyazaki's favorite book, *How Do You Live?* by Genzaburo Yoshino is available in English for the first time from Algonquin Books. The translation by Bruno Navasky features a foreword by another film and literary icon, Neil Gaiman. [Oct. 26, \$18]



Gain a new perspective on iconic superheros and supervillains through the eyes of Captain Marvel's chaotic pet, Chewie, in Nao Fuji's Instafamous comic *Marvel Meow* – now available in Hardcover from VIZ Media. [Oct. 12, \$15]



The Signs Are All There

It's still summer somewhere, and you couldn't do better for warm weather wardrobes than the zodiac tees from Warner's *Looney Tunes ACME Intern* collection. BYO-meme wherever you go and warn others about your personal flaws with one convenient purchase! [\$25 each, shop.looneytunes.com]



Get Graphic (Novels) in the Library!

Library Pass and *TKO Studios* have teamed up to make the comics publisher's entire digital catalog available to libraries and schools through the *Comics Plus* app, including day & date access to new releases! Catch up on *Sentient*, *Djeliya*, *Scales* & *Scoundrels* and thousands more with unlimited, simultaneous online and offline access.



New on Disc:

Space Jam: A New Legacy, d. Malcolm D. Lee, Warner Bros. / WBHE [Oct. 5, \$35 DVD | \$40 BD | \$50 4K]
Little Vampire, d. Joann Sfar, Magical Society / StudioCanal / Shout! Factory [Oct. 5, \$20 DVD | \$23 BD]
Injustice, d. Matt Peters, Warner Bros. Animation / DC / WBHE [Oct. 19, \$30 BD | \$40 4K]
Coppelia, d. Jeff Tudor & Steven de Beul, Submarine / 3 Minutes West / Lunanime BVBA / MotionWorks GMBH / Shout! Factory [Oct. 19, \$27 BD]
Shirobako: The Movie, d. Tsutomu Mizushima, P.A. Works / Eleven Arts / Shout! Factory [Oct. 26, \$27 BD]
Superman: The Complete Animated Series - 6-Disc Collector's Edition, Warner Bros. Animation / DC / WBHE [Oct. 26, \$70 BD]



— Mercedes Milligan

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November Animation Planner

1 The **American Film Market** goes online for five days of “Bringing Film to Life.” [americanfilmmarket.com]



5 Marvel’s latest star-studded blockbuster **Eternals** arrives in theaters.



Animaniacs Season 2 brings more totally insane-y laughs to Hulu.

7 The **World Animation and VFX Summit** in L.A. kicks off with an Awards Gala toasting industry luminaries, followed by three days of meetings and inspiring panels. [animationmagazine.net/summit]



8 Portugal’s **Cinanima** festival returns to Espinho for the 45th edition this week. [cinanima.pt]

14 **Manchester Animation Festival** is going hybrid this year, so anyone around the world can tune into six days of programming beaming from North West England. [manchesteranimationfestival.co.uk]

15 Burbank, CA gathers animation artists of all stripes for the weeklong **CTN animation expo**.



Today is also the general entry categories submission deadline for the **94th Oscars**! [ctnanimationexpo.com | oscars.org]

19 Sony zaps **Ghostbusters: Afterlife** to theaters, continuing the original film franchise. On streaming, catch Amazon Prime Video’s new fantasy series adaptation **The Wheel of Time**, or compare Netflix’s live-action **Cowboy Bebop** to the anime classic.



24 Disney whisks audiences away to Casa Madrigal for the magical misfit tale **Encanto**, set in Colombia and directed by Byron Howard & Jared Bush.



Fright fans will be in the other theater, catching Sony’s **Resident Evil: Welcome to Raccoon City**.

26 The **London Int’l Animation Festival** brings 10 days of global film gems to the U.K. capital. [liaf.org.uk]

27 The holiday season gets off to a cozy start with Aardman’s **Robin Robin**, exclusively on Netflix.



30 European toon auteur Patrick Imbert’s latest feat **Summit of the Gods** arrives on Netflix streaming following a select theatrical release Nov. 24.



To get your company’s events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail edit@animationmagazine.net.



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Magnificent Malfunction

The creative team behind the new animated feature *Ron's Gone Wrong* discuss the making of this fall family release.

By Karen Idelson

Navigating the challenging and at times cruel world of middle school has never been easy. In *Ron's Gone Wrong*, the new 3D CG feature from Locksmith Animation, the filmmakers explore a young boy's harrowing trip through this world when his father gives him a "B-bot," the personal robot that every tween wants. Barney, the film's main character, thinks his new digital friend Ron will make him cool and become a surrogate friend. Instead, the robot quickly breaks down and embarrasses him beyond words.

"It's a universal experience," says Sarah Smith, who co-directed the film with J.P. Vine and co-wrote it with Peter Baynham. "We all feel that everybody else has got it all sorted and that we're the one who's feeling awkward. The message of our movie is that everyone feels that way and you will find your friends along the way: You are worthy of friendship."

Standing Up to Cyberbullies

Smith, who directed *Arthur Christmas* (2011) and co-exec produced *The Pirates! Band of Misfits* (2012) for Aardman Animations before founding Locksmith with Julie Lockhart and

Elisabeth Murdoch in 2014, says she was also struck by how the older child of one of her colleagues was being bullied online. "The other kids were bullying him online by anonymously saying things like, 'You should kill

yourself,'" she notes. "I just thought that never would happen in a world where kids could see each other. We all know that communicating by text is dangerous. We don't handle it well emotionally. We just thought, these are



"It's a universal experience. We all feel that everybody else has got it all sorted and that we're the one who's feeling awkward. The message of our movie is that everyone feels that way and you will find your friends along the way."

— Co-director Sarah Smith

Growing Pains: The maiden voyage for London-based Locksmith Animation, *Ron's Gone Wrong* centers on a kids' companion robot who is malfunctioning.



the things that parents worry about and that kids are going through, and we wanted to do a movie that focused on those themes.”

The film’s screenwriter, Peter Baynham, whose credits include the *Borat* movies and the first *Hotel Transylvania* feature, adds, “It used to be that you could have your miserable day at school — and I could go home and go to my room and read Stephen King books. But now, it follows you home, so that was part of what we wanted to talk about.”

Co-director J.P. Vine had the same connection with Barney. “I still don’t know if I’ve figured it out,” he laughs. “But I’m still intensely terrified by meeting people in L.A., because it’s just not knowing the codes of behavior. And I think that was something we talked about with Barney. It’s like he’s just terrified. He doesn’t know the physical code, the language codes, the group tribal codes. You can tell that some of the people that animated Barney, I think, intensely identified with him as well.”

The filmmakers wanted to push the comedy of how Barney related to his new robot, so they turned to some classic inspirations. For the design of the B-bot, animation director Eric Leighton and Vine referenced Buster Keaton and the aliens from the film *Galaxy Quest*. In the case of the aliens, they were outsiders who didn’t know the social norms of any of the humans around them, which made them just perfect.

“The design team were able to create this really special world for our character,” says Baynham. “Ron is part of this kind of technology which we always thought of as something from

two years in the future. We wanted it to be a world that kids especially could see as their life, and that makes it all the more relatable. I remember us having discussions in the beginning about the world that they were in, and making sure that it was not drab and depressing, but that it was somewhere in middle America that people see around them. Then the devices light up that world that kids are familiar with.”

Vine saw the B-bots in a very specific way and related to many of our familiar modern tech developments. “They have these elegant shells, and you can download your own skin and make it an incredible kaleidoscope of

characters,” says Vine. “However, we thought of Ron as broken. He’s the basic version of a computer — just like the DOS prompt. He’s the very basic code that runs the motherboard. We thought of him as a Game Boy, or like simple black-and-white pixels: We wanted the animators to use those pixels in really cool ways and kind of break him.”

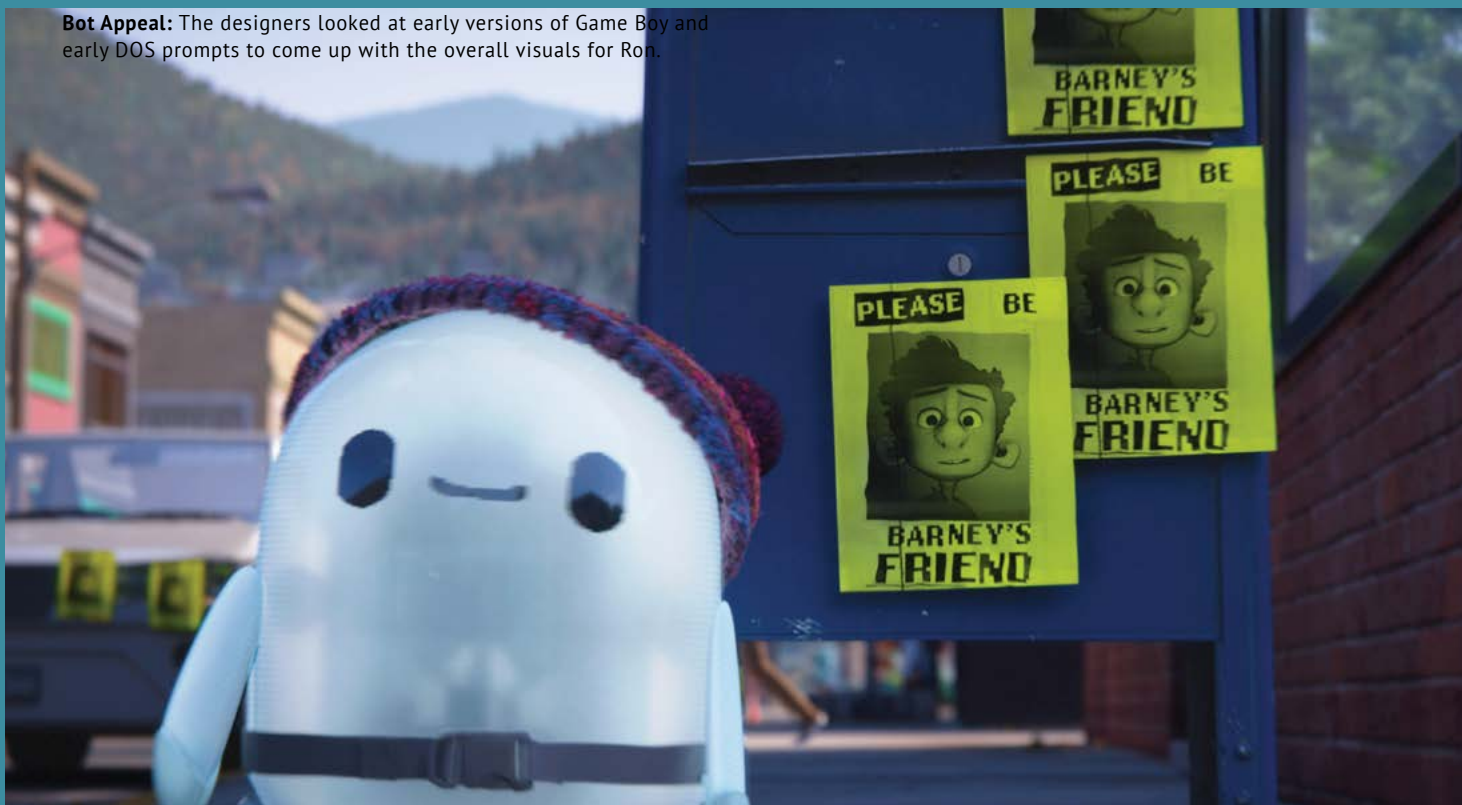
The film features the voices of Zach Galifianakis as Ron and Jack Dylan Grazer as Barney, as well as Olivia Colman, Ed Helms and Justice Smith, among others. However, the physical acting created by the animators was central to the storytelling.



“We thought of Ron as broken. He’s the basic version of a computer — just like the DOS prompt. He’s the very basic code that runs the motherboard.”

— Co-director J.P. Vine

Bot Appeal: The designers looked at early versions of Game Boy and early DOS prompts to come up with the overall visuals for Ron.



"One of the things that I do with my animation crews, wherever possible, is to have this mandate about truthful acting – even if it's a comedy about robots," says Leighton, who led animation teams on *Sherlock Gnomes*, *Coraline*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and directed Disney's *Dinosaur*. "I will try and force the animators to get physical, act it out, improv and to find new ideas and do what I call catching lightning in a bottle."

Spontaneous Combustions

The animation director says he doesn't like to make everything smooth and cleaner in CG, but prefers capturing spontaneous moments from the actors or animators. "You want to catch those beats and then just protect them as much as you can, all the way through so that they're still fresh and real by the time that you get to the end," he explains. "The other thing that I did early on with Ron when I came on, was to add a whole tracking pass with him as far as how broken he was. That was very important to the story, to show that he was learning and developing."

Pre-production for *Ron's Gone Wrong*, which is London-based Locksmith Animation's first feature, began in 2015. The producers assembled a crew of about 80 animators who began production in-person but later had to go remote when the pandemic lockdowns were put in place in the United Kingdom. Vine and Leighton believe it helped the crew to have had some time to see one another before they had to work from home since it made communica-

tion easier later on in the production. The film's production pipeline was provided by leading British VFX and animation house DNEG.

As the filmmakers await the film's release this month, they hope they have been able to capture feelings and nuances that audiences will respond to all over the world.

"For me, the absolute killer films that are classics and have stood the test of time are the ones that tap into emotions that are so strong that they become part of the psyche of the adult," says Smith. "For example, *Toy Story*

is about the new baby that comes along, but you do spend the whole of your adult life going, 'Who's the new person coming up?' Those emotions stay with us because they are imprinted on us as a kid as part of who we are. So, I would hope that *Ron's Gone Wrong* is resonant for everybody because those childhood experiences are part of who we are." ♦

Disney's 20th Century Studios releases Locksmith Animation's *Ron's Gone Wrong* in theaters October 22.



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Brave Warrior: A young princess (voiced by Zoe Saldana) sets out to fight the forces of darkness in *Maya and the Three*.

Making Some Mesoamerican Magic

Jorge Gutiérrez and Sandra Equihua share the delicious details of their eagerly anticipated new Netflix miniseries *Maya and the Three*.

Ever since acclaimed animation auteur Jorge Gutiérrez (*El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny Rivera*, *The Book of Life*) announced details of his new project with Netflix a few years ago, fans have been buzzing about the debut of his epic miniseries *Maya and the Three*. The beautifully crafted four-and-a-half-hour project centers on a rebellious teenage princess who embarks on a quest to save her people from the schemes of the gods of the underworld. We had a chance to chat with Gutiérrez and his frequent collaborator Sandra Equihua (a.k.a. his muse/wife), who is character designer and a voice actress on the show. Here is what they told us about their ambitious miniseries:

Animag: Congrats on the delivery of your beautiful animated baby. Can you tell us a little bit about the origins and inspirations for the show?

Jorge Gutiérrez: I have had this idea about a warrior princess from Mesoamerica for the longest time. I remember when I was six years old, my father showed me this painting of St. George fighting a dragon in a book, and he said, "That

guy is St. George and your name is Jorge, just like him. Jorges kill dragons and you, Jorge, are going to kill dragons." I became obsessed with fantasies, warriors, dragons and witches. Then later, I visited the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico. The guides were talking about these crazy gods, and wizards and serpents. That's when it dawned on me: That's our version of that. But for the longest time, I felt like I wasn't ready and there was too much weight attached to telling the story about Mesoamerica. As the years went by, eventually I came to the point where I told Sandra, "I have an idea about this warrior prin-

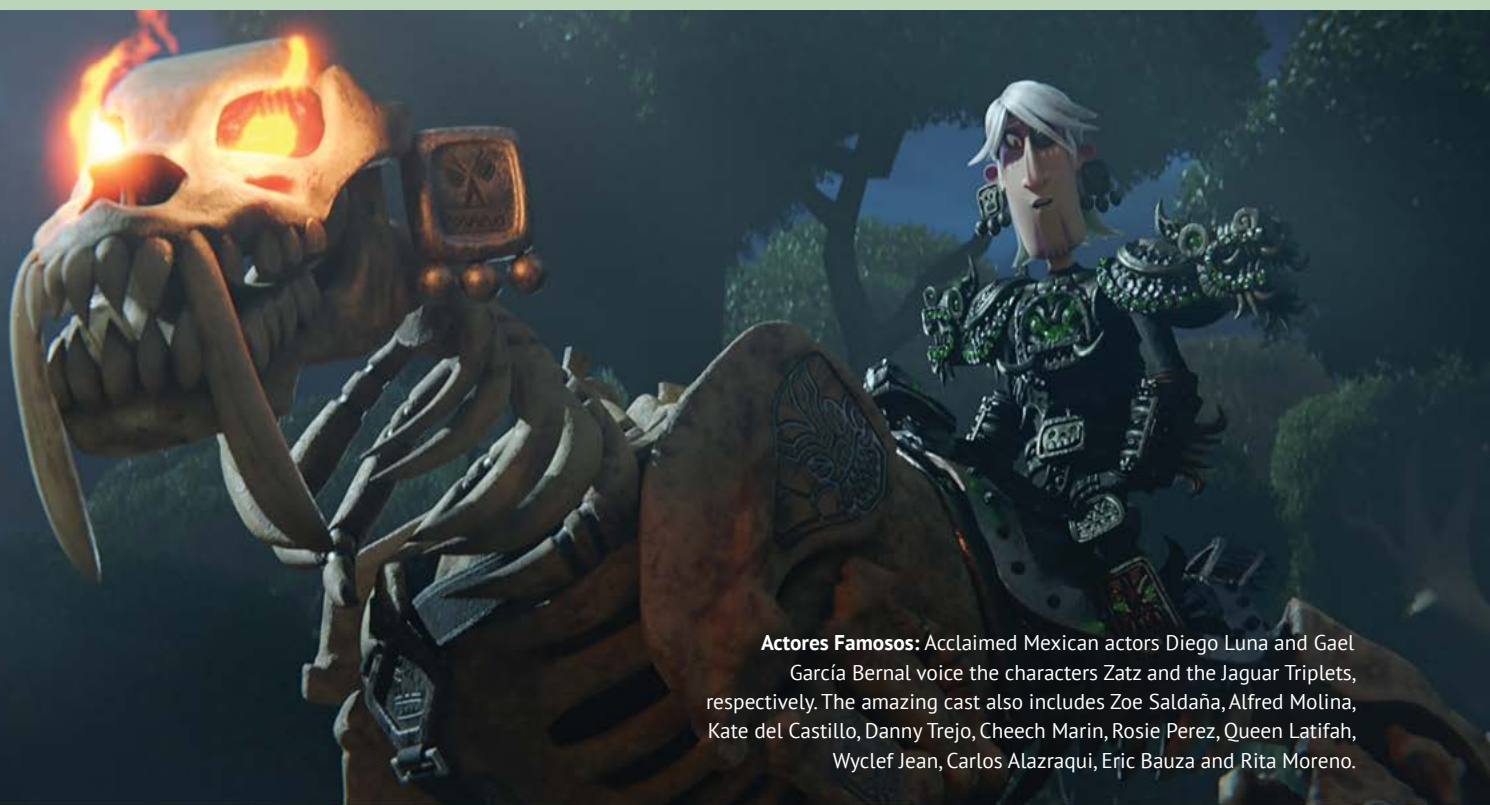
cess." She is always the one who hears ideas before anyone else. She suffers no fools.

Sandra Equihua: I have to say, one of the reasons that I love Jorge, other than the fact that he gave me a child, is that he has always been very pro-female and always considering the female gender. I think it's because of his family. He has very strong females in his life — his mother is very loving and kooky. There are lots of inspirations in his life. So, I loved the fact that he said, "How about this Mexican culture of ours, and how come almost all of the mythologies are all male?"

Jorge: And it's all made up. So why not go into



Zatz and Maya concept art by Maya Colmillo.



Actores Famosos: Acclaimed Mexican actors Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal voice the characters Zatz and the Jaguar Triplets, respectively. The amazing cast also includes Zoe Saldaña, Alfred Molina, Kate del Castillo, Danny Trejo, Cheech Marin, Rosie Perez, Queen Latifah, Wyclef Jean, Carlos Alazraqui, Eric Bauza and Rita Moreno.



Jorge Gutiérrez and
Sandra Equihua



Royal Couple:

Jorge and Sandra also voice King and Queen Teca on the show!

that culture and hack mythology? One of the most iconic figures is the Aztec eagle warrior – it's always portrayed as a man who is rescuing this woman and carrying her on his back. So, I said I want to honor my wife, my sister and my mother, which I saw as warriors, and take on very, very sexist Mexico. This is the backstory ... As I was trying to come up with this stuff, I kept thinking, well, this is too big for a movie and needs to be serialized because it's a very complicated story.

Then, I got invited to this pizza party at Netflix where they had brought together all these crazy show creators, and Melissa Cobb [VP of Kids & Family] asked me the greatest question any creator could ever be asked: "Pitch me something that you love, your passion project." At that mo-

ment, the tombs of my ancestors began shaking as they started to dance and rejoice. Out of my mouth came, "I want to do this epic, Mesoamerican, epic, three-movies-at-once." To her credit, Melissa said, "OK, let's do it!" I remember driving home and telling Sandra, and she said, "Are you nuts?"

Sandra: I thought the three-movies-in-one, stretching it out was pretty epic. I knew it was coming, and I thought I was prepared for it, but wow!

Jorge: Well, I thought we'd done a TV show (*El Tigre*) and a movie (*The Book of Life*), so really how hard can this be? But holy cow, it was so crazy hard! I remember I put it in my contract that I wanted to start on Cinco de Mayo, 2018.

Where was the animation produced?

Jorge: I got to give a thousand percent credit to the now-defunct Tangent Animation, the studio in Toronto and Winnipeg who had done the movie *Next Gen*. This was more than a collaboration – it was a true marriage, creatively. The crew was from

all over the world; I stopped counting after we hit 40 different countries. We were so in sync. I am super hands-on and generally love collaboration. I'm a terrible dancer, but if the person who is dancing with me leads, I can do it.

Sandra: [Laughing] I am a witness to that!

Jorge: This was a real dance. My producer brain and artist brain had to work in sync. Feature animation has over one-and-a-half to three seconds a week quota: We are doing 10 to 12 seconds a week quota, so we all had to be on the same page and be very smart with it. Our journey was always, what can you do with the time allowed and the budget we have? So we had about 40 people here in L.A. and about 400 people in Toronto and Winnipeg. Half the boards were done in Canada by House of Cool and half the boards were done here in L.A. by various freelancers. I tried to hire as many *El Tigre* and *Book of Life* rock stars as we could find, and scoured for new talent on Instagram and Twitter.

Maya character turn by Esteban Pedrozo Alé.



Is there a certain sequence or character of which you're particularly proud?

Sandra: Oh, I don't know where to begin. Everything is so pretty!

Jorge: I am a huge fan of *Paddington 2*. My favorite thing about that movie is that everything that gets set up in the beginning pays off in the end like clockwork. So, everything that is set up in *Maya* in the beginning pays off in Chapter Nine! Everyone should get a box of Kleenex because that last chapter is just crazy!

Please talk a bit about the visual cues and inspirations for the show.

Jorge: Absolutely. When we started researching Mesoamerican culture – specifically Aztec and Mayan and Incan cultures and the modern-day Caribbean influences – I realized that I don't want to do a documentary. I don't want to make this super historical, because there are a lot of schools of thoughts on the history of these things. Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Fand others gave us the artists' interpretations of those cultures. Just like *El Tigre* was our version of superheroes and *Book of Life* as our version of Day of the Dead, this was our version of Mesoamerican mythology.

Sandra: There is so much richness all over Mesoamerica, so much color and mythology. Sometimes you just want to bunch it up together and make your own milkshake.

Sandra, how did you and Jorge work together on this project?

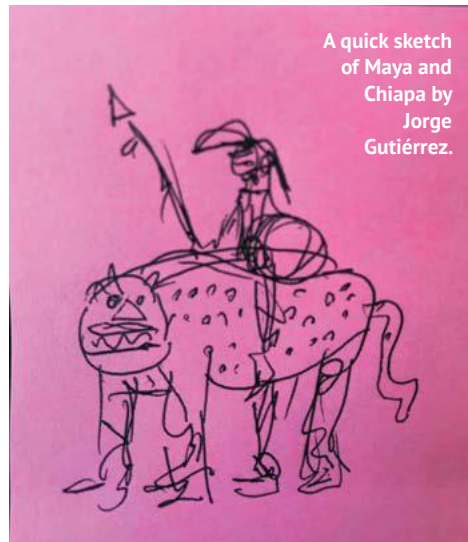
Sandra: As Jorge already mentioned, I am the first person to kind of look inside his head. I am not always that mean. I tend to be very receiving of what he tells me. I'm also technically the character designer. Most of the time, he tends to design and develop the male characters, and I tend to lean towards more feminine and kids characters, animals and the cute stuff. I do like to dip my toes once in a while in designing the males, but I'm so much better at the other stuff.

Jorge: She just wants to take over!

Sandra: [Laughs] I had the great opportunity to develop Maya first. Jorge will come up with a concept. He will flesh it out in the script. Then, we'd sit down and have this back and forth as every artist will do. We actually doodle. Jorge showed me this very rough version of Maya. I think we were having ice cream with our son, and he drew it on the napkin, and we went on from there, back and forth. The same with the rest of the characters. He would describe them and tell me about their personalities and motives. I would whip something up and he would tell me, "Oh, I love it. Keep going in this direction."

Jorge: She is the first one to read everything I write. I get an unfiltered reaction from her. And with the voice acting, she does scratch for all our projects. She didn't want to play a character on Maya, so I had to trick her, for the

A quick sketch of Maya and Chiapa by Jorge Gutiérrez.

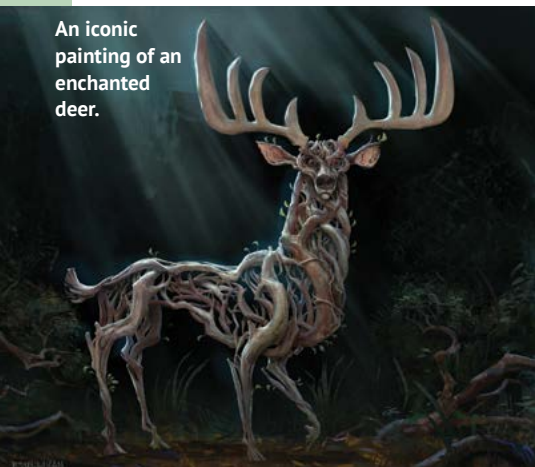


good of humanity!

Sandra: Jorge told me, you have to do some scratch voices for me because you are the only one who can speak the English and the Spanish. I looked at him like, you're not going to do that to me again, are you? He said, "Oh no. Don't worry, we're going to find the actress later on." The project kept developing and I noticed that the right final voice wasn't being added. I really started freaking out when they started bringing in the actual voiceover actors, and I was still dubbing for the 'real actress.' In the end, they started using me.

Jorge: [Laughing] Seeing the character de-

An iconic painting of an enchanted deer.



A beautiful forest painting by Paul Sullivan.



signed by her with her voice coming out of her yelling at a character that is voiced by me was quite jarring!

What do you think of the state of animation and the growth of diversity and representation in the business?

Jorge: It has never been better for minorities and for people who didn't usually get to have their own series or movies, but it can still be better. But it's the best it's ever been. I'm meeting a lot of creatives and witnessing their journeys. We are seeing so much more diversity behind the scenes now. That's having a big impact on a lot of things getting greenlit.

Sandra: We have had a lot of champions along the way, both male and female.

Jorge: A lot of times people used to ask us, "Who is the audience for your work?" Now we see that the audience is demanding to see themselves. And analytically, the executives note that the movies and shows that are diverse, they are now getting better ratings and bigger box office numbers, so it's almost like if you don't want to make money in Hollywood, then don't do diversity!

Sandra: We are beginning to realize that a lot of people in the Latino-American com-



Painting of a plaza on Luna Island, one of the show's key locations.



munity are older now and they show episodes of *El Tigre* to their kids. When we meet them now, they tell us, "You have no idea what a big impact you had and you opened our eyes. You guys were the only ones who portrayed us the way we were as Latinos, and we were so proud to have that series representing us." That is so nice to hear.

Jorge: We meet people who tell us they grew up with *El Tigre*, and I tell them, "Oh, I grew up making *El Tigre*!" Sometimes people ask me, "Don't you want to do a non-Mexican thing?"

And to me that's like someone asking me, "Don't you not want to be you?" I understand why other directors and creators do that, but for me, the way I see it is that I'm a musician and this is the music I love: These are my rhythms and my flavors. This is our happy place. We don't live in Mexico: Mexico lives in us. Wherever we go, we carry our culture with us.

Sandra: Our house looks like someone threw up colors all over the place. It's about nostalgia, too – not just about us leaving Mexico and living here. Whenever we go down to Mexico, we are constantly looking for visuals, tastes, sounds, everything to bring back with us and use it in the work that we do.

What are some of the early reactions to *Maya*?

Sandra: I feel like we took a bomb and left it in the middle of the field and we ran and hid in our bunker. We're just waiting to see what

happens next!

Jorge: The trailer had over 25 million views in its first week of release. Because of the stuff we made over the years, we didn't exactly get a lot of marketing. When *El Tigre* and *Book of Life* came out, they weren't gigantic hits. We were like an indie band. This time, the spotlight and love that we are getting from Netflix to help promote it is very different. We're shocked. I couldn't be prouder of the stuff that we have made and the brilliant work that our team has done. When people watch the whole thing, it's a full meal. Every dish is delicious and connected. That's what I'm excited about. I can't wait for people to consume it all.

Sandra: It's like a symphony where all these instruments and musicians came together and now they're playing this beautiful melody.

Jorge: We joke all the time: Now that we've made *El Tigre*, *Book of Life* and *Maya*, if we never ever get to make anything else, we're good! ♦

***Maya and the Three* premieres on Netflix on October 22.**



Envisioning a Brighter Future

Star Trek: Prodigy continues to boldly go where few animated series have gone before on Paramount+.

By Tom McLean

It's been 55 years now since the original *Star Trek* series started its journey to boldly go where no one has gone before. And after hundreds of hours of seeking out new life and new civilizations across nine TV series (with more on the way), and more than a dozen movies, Gene Roddenberry's creation is still boldly going — this time, into CG animation with *Star Trek: Prodigy*, the first TV series in the franchise aimed at younger audiences.

Developed by Kevin and Dan Hageman, *Star Trek: Prodigy* follows a crew of young aliens who come together aboard an abandoned Federation starship to search for a better future. Guiding their voyage and exposing them to the ideals of Starfleet is an emergency training hologram with the likeness and voice of the legendary Captain Kathryn Janeway of the USS Voyager.

Kate Mulgrew reprises her role as Janeway, joined by a cast of young talent playing aliens both familiar and new. Among them: Rylee Alazraqui as Rok-Tahk, a bright but shy eight-year-old female Brikar whose hulking body resembles a pile of rocks; Brett Gray as Dal, a hopeful, 17-year-old maverick from an unknown species; Angus Imrie as Zero, a formless Medusan who wears a containment suit to keep others

from going mad at the sight of its true self; Jason Mantzoukas as an argumentative, 16-year-old Tellarite named Jankom Pog; Ella Purnell as a 17-year-old Vau N'Akat named Gwen, who's always dreamed of exploring the stars; and animation veteran Dee Bradley Baker as Murf, a blob-like alien who likes to eat ship parts.

Produced by the Nickelodeon Animation Studio and CBS's Eye Animation Productions, *Star Trek: Prodigy* is animated by Technicolor and its first season is set to premiere this month on Paramount+ in the U.S., followed by a linear TV run next year on Nickelodeon.

Embracing Optimism

The approach had immediate appeal for Nickelodeon, says Claudia Spinelli, Nick's senior VP of animation development. "It was just immediately apparent that this is a story we needed to tell and needed to have become part of our library," she says. "It captures so many of the things that are just inherent in kids today, and also those qualities that are always about what it is to be a kid."

Director, co-executive producer and creative lead Ben Hibon says *Star Trek: Prodigy* was a great chance to reconnect with the ever-pres-

ent and overarching themes Roddenberry established for the series.

"It's a story of the many rather than the story of a few, or the one," he says, paraphrasing a classic line from Mr. Spock. "That's something that always really connected with me. There's also that positivity of *Trek* ... this idea of finding that better version of yourself by empathy, by connecting, by integration, by trying to understand others."

Hibon says much of the first season was already written when he beamed aboard. "There was a great sense of the arc of the characters and how they were fleshed out, and the arcs of the story — but there was no visuals whatsoever," he says. "I came on board as a storyteller, but also to start visualizing what the show and that world would look like."

Building the look of the show required using his storyboarding skills to find visual narrative ways to express concepts and figure out what was the right amount of newness required to extend the look of *Star Trek* without making it unrecognizable. He also, as director, worked on the tone of the show.

"The cinematic style was very important for the show," he says. "It needed to have a grand



sense of adventure, humor and honest emotion." In establishing the look, Hibon says his approach to camera work, lighting and blocking incorporated live-action techniques.

That follows the original approach of *Star Trek*, which set out to tell believable and realistic science-fiction tales. "We really paid attention to keeping things within the realm of reality, of realism, in terms of action," Hibon says. "We really love the idea of never breaking that glass ceiling. We never go into the fantastical for the sake of it, or for the action's sake of it."

Art director Alessandro Taini comes to *Star Trek: Prodigy* from the videogame world. "I always wanted to work in animation because it's all about storytelling," he says.

A show like *Star Trek: Prodigy* presents a lot of opportunities. "You need to, first of all, respect the history of the show," Taini says. "You need to make sure anything you do, even if it is something new, you need it to still be related to the style of *Star Trek*, without going too crazy." That gave Taini an opportunity to create new alien planets and explore variations on the look of *Star Trek's* foundational design for things like starships, via elements such as signage. Colors also were pushed in ways that suited CG animation, shooting for the right mixture of stylization while still being grounded.

While the potential of animation to create a universe with depth is unlimited, CG animation has to work within the limits of budget, schedules and technology.

Star Trek character design also has its tradition, and *Prodigy* adds elements of classic *Trek*



"It's a story of the many rather than the story of a few, or the one ... this idea of finding that better version of yourself by empathy, connecting, integration and trying to understand others."

— Director, co-exec producer and creative lead Ben Hibon

with Jankom Pog, an alien known as a Tellarite that dates back to the original live-action series; as well as the holographic version of Janeway. Even though she is the only human-looking member of the *Prodigy* team, Janeway is an iconic live-action character whose design had to look like part of the same world as alien characters designed for animation.

"We've been trying to find a real balance between realistic and stylized," Taini says, adding that he is pleased that Mulgrew was happy with the final design.

The ship is a major element in any iteration of *Star Trek*. A focus on details over a slightly stylized but still recognizable version of the classic starship architecture produced the right results, Taini says.

Most of Taini's team worked remotely, with a group in Los Angeles and matte painters, concept artists, 3D artists and others working from all over the world.

Voicing the Future

Hibon says many factors play a role in creating the final characters. There are the initial designs on the page and the script, but the actors played a big role in interpreting them for this show.

For example, Gray brought a lot of energy to his role and helped give Dal a lot of enthusi-

asm and hope. "He fancies himself a bit of a maverick," Hibon says of Dal. "At the end of the day, a lot of his great plans fall very often very short, but his heart is big and ... his belief in himself is contagious."

Similarly, Alazraqui's young voice for the oversized body of Rok-Tahk brought out nuances that were reflected in the animation. "The character is so large that we had to turn down a lot of her animation and the movement," Hibon says. They worked out what Hibon describes as "very, very small micro animation" to capture the character's mix of fragility and innocence.

Introducing Roddenberry's ideas to a younger audience was really exciting, Hibon says, as *Prodigy* takes for the first time a young and inexperienced crew of characters on a journey of growth and exploration through the *Star Trek* lens.

"They have questions," he says. "They're trying to do things for the right reasons, but everything is challenging. Those challenges help the characters learn who they are, but also test them to use their minds and think through problems with logic. I think there's something that is right about it, as a message for a younger audience," Hibon concludes. ♦

***Star Trek: Prodigy* premieres on Paramount+ on October 28.**



Conspiracy Central

Welcome to the strange and hilarious world of Shion Takeuchi's *Inside Job*.

By Michael Mallory

The United States as depicted in Netflix's new 2D-animated series *Inside Job* is rife with good news and bad news. The bad news is that, within the show's context, Deep State really exists and it's even worse than you thought: A chaotic shadow government ruled by mysterious overlords controls the president (which it attempts to replace with an A.I. robot until that goes rogue) and struggles to keep everything from lizard-people to cloned Kennedys under wraps.

The good news? If you're already a sociopathic conspiracy theorist ... congratulations! You're not as crazy as everyone else thinks!

Inside Job, which premieres this month, is the first series out of the gate from the production deal between Netflix and story artist/writer Shion Takeuchi, and also the content platform's first adult animated series created in-house. The show's

animation is produced out of Los Angeles at Netflix Animation Studios. Industry veteran Mike Moon, who is the head of the company's recently-established adult animation division, tells us, "It's no secret that there is an enormous audience for adult animation worldwide. A few years back we decided to build an internal studio to produce some of our adult titles. Shion was the first creator that we brought in-house and we are so excited to share her amazing creation with the world." Takeuchi is

co-executive producing the show with Alex Hirsch, the acclaimed creator of *Gravity Falls*.

Much of the humor of *Inside Job* is rooted in the notion that preventing the end of the world on a daily basis has to be done on the time clock, with coffee breaks. "It's an absurdist workplace comedy," notes Takeuchi, who was previously best known for her work on animated shows such as *Gravity Falls* and *Disenchantment*. She says that her interest in conspiracies and the paranormal began when she was in

college and discovered a late-night radio show called *Coast to Coast AM*, which promoted outré theories about what was *really* going on in the world. "That's where I first heard the term 'shadow government,' painted as a group of secret elites in the true seat of power, playing four-dimensional chess," she says. "But if there really was a shadow government,





Surreal Situations: Creator/showrunner Shion Takeuchi describes her new show as an “absurdist work comedy.”



it would be composed of people just like you and me: chaotic, selfish, vulnerable, emotional and messy. The truth is, humans could never manage a shadow government ... it would be total effing chaos!”



‘It has definitely been a trip to see the rise of conspiracy and the zeitgeist that happened during the actual making of the show.’

— **Creator, EP & showrunner Shion Takeuchi**

Strangely Recognizable Weirdos

Speaking of total effing chaos, the job of keeping the world’s head from exploding within the show falls to an ambitious yet idealistic woman named Reagan Ridley (voiced by Lizzy Caplan), whose manifesto-scribbling father Rand (Christian Slater) used to run the clandestine operation known as Cognito, Inc. until he became too paranoid for even Deep State. “Helping” her are ultra-militaristic Glenn Dolphman, who is indeed a human/dolphin hybrid (John DiMaggio); Gigi Thompson (Tisha Campbell), the gossipy queen of Media Manipulation; chem wizard Dr. Andre Lee (Bobby Lee), who never met a drug he didn’t like; and a foul-mouthed mushroom creature from Hollow Earth named Magic Myc (Brett Gelman).

In other words, an office staff a lot of viewers will recognize, at least metaphorically.

Complicating matters further is the fact that Reagan is forced to share her supervisory duties with a know-nothing, overaged frat boy named Brett Hand (Clark Duke), who is put in the co-top-spot because he’s a lot more likeable than Reagan. The entire uneasily-truceful team reports to Cognito’s gazillionaire CEO J.R. Scheimpough (Andrew Daly), or at least pretends to.

Takeuchi, who is in the showrunner chair for the first time, admits to having at least a slight personal connection to the show’s lead character. “I’d like to think I’m more nuanced and well-rounded,” she states, “but I will say that during the production, someone would accidentally call me ‘Reagan’ on a weekly basis, so the jury is still out on that.”

She admits, though, that the concept of being in charge carries parallels. “When I developed *Inside Job*, I was a staff writer. I basically

had no idea that I was developing the storyline of what my actual life would become as a first-time showrunner. I had to live the premise of the show as I was making it, in a strangely meta, snake-eating-its-own-tail kind of way.” The experience, according to Takeuchi, caused her to accept that “the phrase ‘the deep state’ refers to the physical appearance of my eye bags now.”

Takeuchi also gets into the spirit of the show in describing how they managed to get movie star Christian Slater on board to play the unemployed, vengeful, crazy coot father of Reagan. “We had to put a bag over his head and kidnap him into a white van,” she jokes (at least it sounds like a joke). “He never formally agreed to ‘be in animation.’ He lives in a simulation now where he thinks we’ve allowed him to continue to ‘live freely’ as an ‘actor in Hollywood’ and ‘loving father,’ but he’s just hooked up to some feeding tubes and a ketamine pump.” Still, she loves working with the actor — and purely for the record, Takeuchi denies that his character’s name, “Rand,” nor others you might have heard on the nightly news like “Reagan” and “Brett,” have any real-world significance. “I just followed my gut with what would be a really annoying name to have foisted on you by a parent you didn’t politically agree with.”

Similarly, she states that *Inside Job* is not a direct response to the last few years’ worth of headlines. “Conspiracy theories and the idea of secret societies and supernatural secrets go back for a long time, much earlier than the current moment,” Takeuchi says. “It’s human nature to imagine the explanation behind a mystery or to infer motives, or struggle to find hidden meaning and intention behind the

random nature of the world, and the impulse to believe there’s a bigger plan when there is no plan. *Inside Job*’s surrealism and absurdity inoculate it from having much to do with politics as we know them.” But, she adds, “It has definitely been a trip to see the rise of conspiracy and the zeitgeist that happened during the actual making of the show.”

Comedy Is the Best Therapy

In fact, Takeuchi admits to using surrealism and absurdity as an escape from some of the darker corners of reality. “Comedy is a lot like therapy for me,” she says. “It’s how I process difficult emotions. There’s a lot about the current climate that we live in that’s frankly an uninterrupted onslaught of horror. There’s never been more outrage or paranoia or cynicism. But I still want to laugh and have hope and positivity and joy in the world, and I think you can have both.”

With 10 episodes of *Inside Job* set to launch this month, Takeuchi is also working on other projects for Netflix. “I’ve been wanting to do a daytime courtroom TV series called *Molly Court* where a judge and jury try cases on MDMA [commonly known as Ecstasy or Molly], but for some reason no one will take my calls.” Time will tell if that’s a joke. Meanwhile, Mike Moon has high hopes for *Inside Job*, “Shion and Alex [Hirsch] have created such a rich world filled with iconic characters that I think the series will be loved by animation and comedy fans everywhere.”

Takeuchi sums up the show more succinctly: “Idiot in power is a timeless concept.” ♦

***Inside Job* premieres on Netflix on October 23.**



Spinning a Loving Web

The creative team behind the *Lucas the Spider* series tell us everything we wanted to know about the adorable arachnid.

Back in November of 2017, animator Joshua Slice's charming *Lucas the Spider* videos grabbed the attention of YouTube watchers all over the world. Now, four years later, the beloved eight-legged wonder is back in his own animated series on Cartoon Network's hot new preschool block Cartoonito. The CG-animated show, which is produced by the brilliant team at Toronto's Fresh TV and distributed worldwide by London-based CAKE, expands the universe of the cute little spider and is bound to be one of the fall's big preschool hits.

"Back when I was making *Lucas the Spider* clips on YouTube, Fresh TV approached me with a vision for a character that went beyond YouTube," Slice tells *Animation Magazine*. "I thought it was a great opportunity to give the character a chance to grow beyond what I was capable of doing on my own."

Veteran animation visionary, Fresh TV president Tom McGillis (*Total Drama*, *6teen*) says he and his partners Jennifer Pertsch, George Elliott and Brian Irving all discovered the viral phenom at the same time. "We were mesmerized by the beauty and the heart of the YouTube shorts," he notes. "We quickly got on the phone with Joshua, hoping that he would trust us with his creation. We listened hard to his vision of the shorts and promised him



"The idea of creating a cute spider came to mind after seeing real-life photos of jumping spiders. Once I posted the first clip and it went viral, it was pretty clear that I needed to make more!"

— *Lucas the Spider* creator Joshua Slice

that we would keep the magic alive if we were lucky enough take on the series. I can honestly say that when Joshua chose Fresh TV for the project we have never been so honored as a group. After this we invited Matt Wexler, WexWorks Media, to partner with us on this amazing production, and we bought CAKE on board as international distributor."

Lots of Love for Lucas

Slice, who is an animator who has worked on features such as *Ferdinand*, *Frozen II*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, *Raya and the Last Dragon* and Pixar's 2022 feature *Turning Red*, began the whole enterprise as a personal hobby. "I never intended for it to catch on like it did, I just wanted to give myself a fun creative challenge," he admits. "The idea of creating a cute spider came to mind after seeing real-life photos of jumping spiders. Once I posted the first clip and it went viral, it was pretty clear that I needed to make more!"

"Lucas is a lifelike CGI spider living in a real house — yes, that was Joshua's actual house in the shorts!" reveals McGillis. "The result is an almost *National Geographic* style that gave the shorts an intimate and completely original feel. But beyond the look, it was the voice of Lucas that melted my heart. Lucas Slice is Joshua's nephew, and there was such an easy, comfortable feeling about Lucas' performance that really spoke to the love that this uncle and nephew share." Slice says his contributions to the new series come mostly in ensuring that the character stays on model and that he communicates all the thoughts and reasons behind the creative choices he had made. "That way, as the series grows, it can stay true to the original design as much as possible," he points out.

"George Elliott stayed in constant contact with Joshua as we created the new cast of friends inhabiting his world," explains McGillis. "These creatures needed to have that same

realistic feel to them while connecting with a very young audience. I think it's fair to say that Joshua is one of the most talented character animators out there, so the bar was set pretty high. Joshua's guidance on rigging, texturing and acting were invaluable."

Back when the shorts appeared exclusively on YouTube, Slice found it a challenge to deliver a new episode every three weeks. "That was the goal I set for myself so subscribers could know what to expect," he explains. "When Fresh TV began development for the TV series, the challenge became, how do we expand these 30 second moments into seven-minute stories while also maintaining the original look and feel?"

The team at Fresh TV were also clear on retaining the magic of the shorts. "We brought Dave Ingham on board as our story editor not only because of his extensive experience in preschool (*Shaun the Sheep*, *Charlie and Lola*) but also his instant connection to the loving and intuitive character of Lucas," says McGillis. "Dave understood that this needed to be a show about love first and foremost."

Another challenge was shooting all of the live-action plates in a rented house, and then integrating those plates into a CGI production pipeline that featured cinematic lighting and feature-quality animation. McGillis adds, "Another challenge (I'll stop at three!) was recording very young actors during a pandemic. During one lockdown, one of our kids, Christian Campbell, had to record from his closet. He did incredible work. Across the board, the professionalism of these young performers was humbling!"

Toronto-based animation house Elliott Animation expanded to accommodate the new production. "We brought in some of the most talented CGI animators from across Canada and then almost immediately went virtual when the pandemic hit," says McGillis. "We have a total of 190 cast and crew work-

ing on the series. The animation is done in Maya and we use Arnold to render. It takes about 62 weeks to produce an episode from start to finish! It's a complicated show!" When asked about the reasons for the show's success on YouTube, Slice responds, "I think it shattered the expectation that spiders are something to be feared and discarded. Most

and humbling thought that a kid can grow up watching the show and then develop nostalgic memories the way I did with characters like *Thomas the Tank Engine*, *Tiny Toons* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*!"

"The reason I love working on this show is the way it challenges me and my team to shake off our cynicism and remind ourselves

why we all got into this business," adds McGillis. "Lucas and his friends are a joy to work with."

Both Slice and McGillis are quick to sing the praises of the new preschool block Cartoonito in which Lucas will be spinning his lovely web. "I'm a bit of a minimalist myself and so I love the appeal and simplicity of the block characters that represent the platform," says Slice. "I find myself walking through the house repeating the words 'Oh! Oh! Oh! Cartoonito' every now and again! As for the rest of the industry, I believe animation is more of a tool than it is a genre. There's a lot of untapped potential in telling different types of stories in animation. For example, imagine a horror movie as well made as *The Shining* done in the style of a modern Disney-Pixar

The Arachnid Has Arrived! Based on the hugely popular YouTube phenom, *Lucas the Spider* centers on a kind, CG-animated arthropod and his friends.



"I am cured of my lifelong fear of spiders! I think it's Lucas' empathy that touches everyone who watches the shorts."

— Exec producer Tom McGillis

of the time when we see a spider in our house, the impulse is to squish. *Lucas the Spider* challenges that and encourages empathy."

McGillis agrees: "I am cured of my lifelong fear of spiders! Also, I think it's Lucas' empathy that touches everyone who watches the shorts. We are all learning to cultivate empathy right now and Lucas leads the way."

Making Eight-Legged Magic

Slice says he is very pleased with Lucas' new incarnation. "I love how the series was expanded in a way that can be seen and enjoyed by kids around the world. It's an exciting

movie. I think the first studio to do that right is going to open a lot of doors for animation!"

"Josh is right," chimes in McGillis. "Cartoonito is going to shake up preschool! This is truly the golden age of animation. With platforms doing big spends and taking risks, kids and adults are seeing magnificent work that will be cherished for generations. With so much animated content from diverse talent being developed and produced, it's an honor to participate in this moment." ♦

***Lucas the Spider* airs on Cartoon Network's Cartoonito block on Fridays at 7 a.m.**



Hansel and Gretel's Wild Ride

Netflix's *A Tale Dark & Grimm* invites viewers to an unpredictable take on classic fairy tales.

By Ramin Zahed

Fans of hilarious takes on twisted European fairy tales will be able to enjoy the new animated series *A Tale Dark & Grimm* on Netflix this month. The highly entertaining 10 x 26-minute show, which is based on Adam Gidwitz's best-selling books, follows the adventures of Hansel and Gretel as they meet witches, warlocks, dragons and yes, even the devil.

Industry veteran Simon Otto (*Trollhunters: Tales of Arcadia*), who was head of character animation on DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* trilogy, serves as supervising director and executive producer on the series. "I was approached by Chris Henderson at Astro-Nomical, who asked me to give him my thoughts on Adam Gidwitz's novel in 2019," he recalls. "I loved it, so I immediately started listening to his audio series *Grimm*, *Grimmer*, *Grimmest* and my whole family got drawn into it. We became instant fans. Chris Henderson and the team at Novo Media, led by David Henrie, very quickly brought a really cracking team together along with Adam Gidwitz, Peter de Sève, Richie Chavez and many more, and we started developing a really great pitch for it."

Boat Rocker's exec VP of kids & family Bob Higgins was blown away by the entertaining pitch. "David, Simon and Chris pitched out the book and

their vision for this epic hero's journey of Hansel and Gretel and their desire to walk a very fine line of 'scare not scar!' I was hooked. Boat Rocker came on board to manage the production and brought in our amazing team at Jam Filled to support the A-plus artists in L.A. and we set it up at Netflix."

A Sprinkle of Old World Magic

Otto says Gidwitz's books reminded him of the fairy tales he used to read as a kid back in Switzerland. "I remember feeling that there was something very dark, unsettling and often sad about how stories were told in those olden days," he



Eccentric Types: Scott Adsit, Tom Hollander, Jonathan Banks, Adam Lambert, Eric Bauza and Erica Rhodes are some of the show's stellar voice actors.



"I'm really proud that we figured out a way to make it work narratively and find clever visual ways of creating this show within the constraints we were given."

— Exec producer/supervising director **Simon Otto**



"I love that I can watch the final episodes and still laugh, feel nervous for our heroes and get choked up, even though I've seen these moments from the time they were scripted and through every stage of production."

— Exec producer Bob Higgins

notes. "But you felt that pull because they spoke to very deeply rooted inner fears and desires that you don't know how to deal with as a child. The way Adam calls out absurdities and warns the reader about the violence that's about to unfold via the narration and through humor makes his books very accessible and fun to experience. It was a really creative challenge to find ways to express that in the language of animation."

Adds Higgins, "I love how Adam Gidwitz took existing stories and characters that 'we all know' and mashed them together and twisted them into something completely original. The iconic elements are there (like Mrs. Baker's cottage or the Seven Swallows) but the overall narrative is new and complex and funny and epic. And our writing team, headed up by Doug Langdale, took Adam's text and rearranged it into 10 perfectly paced half-hours that feel like you're on a Brothers Grimm thrill ride!"

The show's animation was produced at Jam Filled in Toronto under the guidance of Higgins and Audrey Velichka. "I was working out of my home in L.A., so we needed a really experienced episodic director in the time zone of where the production took place," says Otto. "Jamie Whitney really ran the show creatively and was the person that really brought this all to life with his team at Jam Filled. There are a great number of unsung heroes who managed to pull this off during a worldwide lockdown. The pandemic shut everything down right after we had our last writers' room meeting. I remember sending Adam Gidwitz off to the airport the Thursday before my kid's school was closed!"

As Higgins points out, "Everything outside of the pilot script was written, designed, boarded, recorded, etc. from home with artists and actors

all over the world. When you see it all together, it's quite miraculous to think that nobody working on the series spent any time in the same room together throughout the production (unless you count a Zoom room as a real place)!"

According to Otto, the show's CG asset creation and animation were primarily done in Maya with some additional tools for specific tasks. He adds, "There's quite a bit of 2D animation and compositing done on the show, and that was done in Harmony."

One of the big tasks was replacing the human narrator of the books with the show's ravens, who only played a small role originally. "We wanted them to be unreliable storytellers, making mistakes and correcting each other," Otto explains. "We believed that would be a lot of fun and also gave us freedom to tackle the vast backdrop in a variety of ways. There is always an element of 2D in the background, but we vary how close to the camera it is, depending on the moment. It's essentially a road movie and almost every episode takes place in a new environment."

The idea was to present this world in various degrees of theatricality which could be cranked up and cranked down depending on the level of dramatic believability required. "We're essentially living out this story on an imaginary theater stage inside the raven's memory and fantasy," notes Otto. "Therefore, backgrounds drop off like a cardboard wall or a 2D moon gets lowered into frame like you would in a play. All this served another really key element, which is that we needed a way to switch styles at critical moments — such as a beheading or a warlock removing a human soul — in order to not cross the line of what would be too disturbing!"

The fact that Gidwitz was along for the ride from day one was a huge asset. "He is obviously

a real expert in the field, and he gave all of us a lot of really valuable insight," says Otto. "Also, our head writer, Doug Langdale (*The Adventures of Puss in Boots*, *The Book of Life*, *Maya and the Three*) had studied the Grimm fairy tales quite extensively himself, which, beyond his vast experience as a lead writer, made him an even more natural fit for taking on this double adaptation job."

On a visual level, the team was inspired by the works of legendary animation pioneer Lotte Reiniger, Disney classics like *Sleeping Beauty* and Magic Light's *Revolting Rhymes* shorts.

"Richie Chavez, our production designer, during development brought a lot of references from classic Central European art of the Grimm era into the process and then synthesized it all into a coherent look. Jam Filled's art department, led by Tom Pajdlhauser, took what we had developed and ran with it."

Otto says overall, getting the tone right was one of the main challenges of the production. "We needed to dramatize and visualize certain aspects, like the narrator for example," he says. "We wanted to do this in a way that takes advantage of the medium, while still giving the viewers the thrills that are so successful in the books. So, the ingredients were different, but we still wanted to give the audience the key flavors of Adam Gidwitz's world."

Bingeing Happily Ever After

Now that young viewers will unwrap their big animated gift this month, the creative team is hoping that they'll enjoy the fun ride. "I want them to be exhausted after bingeing this four-plus-hour journey all in one night!" says Higgins with a smile. "This is a series, but it plays like a feature story, and it's full of comedy, horror, intrigue, sacrifice and heart. I really hope audiences can't stop watching until the end. I showed the first couple of episodes to my own 20-something kids and my six- and eight-year-old nephews. They all collectively loved it and clamored to know what happened next (but we were still in heavy post on the remaining episodes, so they need to wait until October 8 to find out). I hope that same audience experience is replicated in Netflix homes around the world!"

"Most of all, we want the audience to laugh, hope and cry along with our characters," says Otto. "It's a show that is meant to bring families together and share an experience. And maybe along the way, be reminded that it's okay to be a flawed family, to not be perfect, but to be there for each other. We all have to take pause in our lives and try to understand each other's actions. That's what the show is about." ♦

A Tale Dark & Grimm premieres on Netflix on October 8.



Everybody Loves Alma

Sesame Street veteran Sonia Manzano guides us through the charming Nuyorican world of *Alma's Way*.

Anyone who grew up watching *Sesame Street* has beautiful memories of actress Sonia Manzano's dynamic presence as the character Maria on the show from 1971 to 2015. The 15-time Emmy-winning writer/actress/singer-songwriter, who also wrote for *Sesame Street* and the animated series *Little Bill*, will return to the PBS and the children's entertainment world this month as the creator of the series *Alma's Way*.

The beautifully animated show, which is produced by Fred Rogers Productions, follows the adventures of six-year-old Alma Rivera, a confident Puerto Rican girl who helps kids recognize their own power to come up with solutions to their problems.

Manzano tells *Animation Magazine* that she started thinking about the idea for the show back in 2015 when she was still on *Sesame Street*. "Linda Simensky [head of content at PBS Kids] asked me to create an animated show based on my own Puerto Rican background and to have Alma

be a Nuyorican girl who is raised in the south Bronx neighborhood, just as I was," she recalls. "Animation was a new format for me to work in because I had only worked on the live-action parts of *Sesame Street*. I learned that it's a

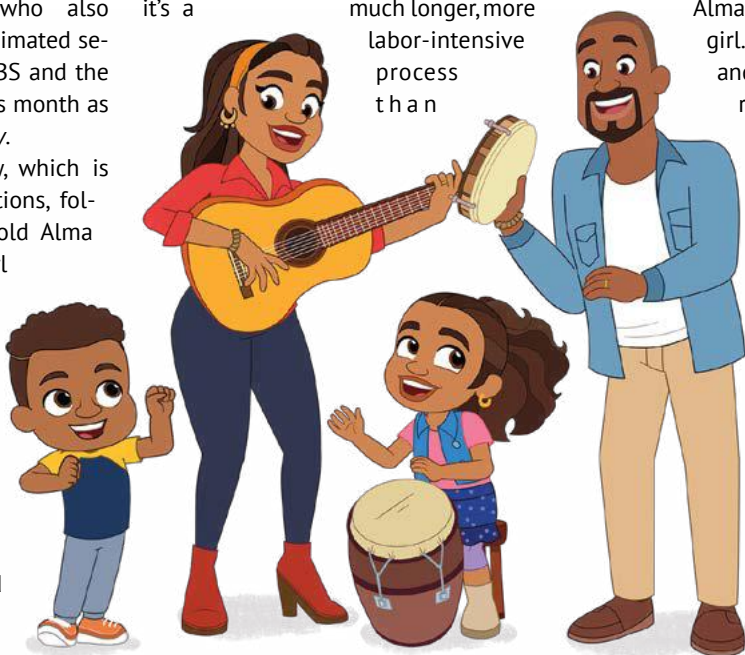
much longer, more labor-intensive process than

what I used to. But I found it all fascinating."

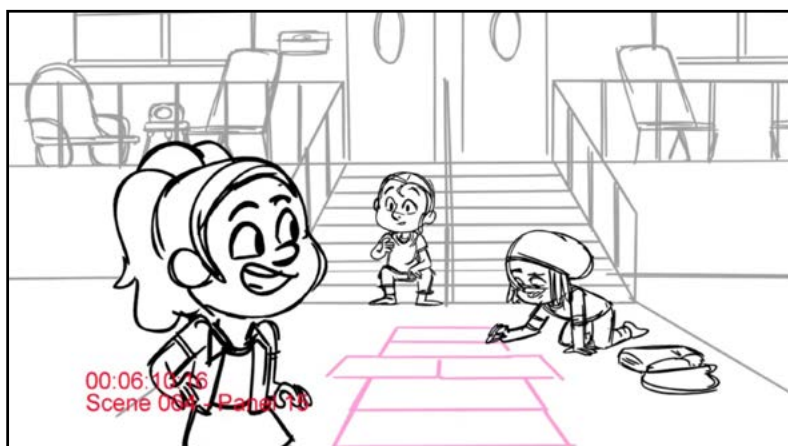
A Talented Trailblazer

Manzano, who broke ground as one of the first Latina actresses on national TV, says Alma reminds her of herself as a young girl. "She is just like I was, but better and nicer!" says the actress. "She's curious, inquisitive and likes to think things out. She finds refuge in her mind, and that's what I wanted kids to take away from our show."

As the show creator, Manzano says she loves the fact that animators are able to tell a different story than what's written on the page. "They can embellish things and make something really come to life," she notes. "For example, when a toy falls down the stairs, it doesn't just simply land, it bounces around a few times until it finds the right spot. When one of our characters, Junior, loses his tooth, the



A Wise Soul: *Alma's Way* centers on an empathic young girl who is good at thinking things out and finding solutions to life's dilemmas!



'Alma is just like I was, but she's better and nicer. She's curious, inquisitive and likes to think things out.'

— **Sonia Manzano, series creator and exec producer**

animators show him with his face pressed against the sofa cushion. That visual brings out the story in a special way."

One of the aspects of the show that really stands out is how lovingly the creators have interwoven storylines and characters that truly represent the Bronx's multicultural community. "Back when I was growing up in the Bronx, it was really a Puerto Rican ghetto, but now the neighborhood is a lot more diverse. You have bodega owners who are from the Middle East, so we have a family from Bangladesh on our show who own the grocery store. We have African-American characters from the North and the South. We wanted to represent everyone through their music, their food, their culture. Alma's family are shown eating mofongo and they dance the bomba. The Bangladeshi family will play music from their home country, etc."

The show's executive producer Ellen Doherty, who is also the CCO of Fred Rogers Productions, says she's pleased to see representation and diversity growing in the world of TV animation. "We still have room to grow and

and how he walks with braces."

"The show was designed to help kids learn to think for themselves and take into consideration the perspectives of those around them," adds Doherty. "As Alma thinks things through, she models self-advocacy, empathy and social awareness. She's a smart kid with a big heart — we hope young viewers will think she's way, way, way fun to watch!"

The show's animation is produced by a team of over 60 people at Canada's Pipeline Studios in Hamilton as well as remote artists based in Medellín, Colombia and Santiago, Chile. The studio uses Toon Boom Harmony, Maya, Nuke and Photoshop, all managed through Banzai, Pipeline Studios' internally developed asset management system.

Doherty says she is very pleased with what the artists and animators at Pipeline have been able to deliver for the show. "A lot of animation in the non-verbal sequences, where you see how the parents are communicating or sitting with their children are really crucial in a show like this, but Pipeline has been amazing. The rig for Alma's face, for example,

that's why we wanted to focus on this Puerto Rican family and show the diversity of New York City throughout the series," she notes. "A lot of the show is based on Sonia's experiences growing up in the Bronx. We also have a diverse team of writers and advisors working on the show. Alma's good friend Rafia is from Bangladesh, Alma's cousin Eddie has cerebral palsy — and these are people who are based on people from Sonya's own life. We wanted to give a lot of attention to how we portray Eddie

can have 100 points on it, which allows for such a wide range of expressions. It's phenomenal to see that which really brings down the number of notes we need to give, because everything starts at such a great place."

Capturing the Beat of the Bronx

The producers also strove for authenticity in the designs of the neighborhood. "What I saw in a lot of the other animated shows were a lot of wonky angles and chunky buildings, as if they were made out of playsets," says Doherty. "We wanted to be different from that. Fortunately, I discovered the work of our designer Ileana Soon at the CTN eXpo one year. She's originally from Indonesia, but she lives in L.A. I loved her vibrant, colorful palette, and thought that she really reflected the colors of a New York neighborhood. The colors also reflected Alma's bright, saturated Caribbean roots. So, we were very happy to have her come up with the concepts for the show."

Of course, a show about a modern Puerto Rican family needs to have great music, too! The original theme song for *Alma's Way* was written and produced by Puerto Rican superstar Lin-Manuel Miranda (*Vivo*, *Hamilton*) and Bill Sherman (*Nature Cat*, *In the Heights*), and is performed by Flaco Navaja and Summer Rose Castillo, who voices Alma. The show's music is composed by Asher Lenz, Stephen Skratt and Fabiola M. Mendez. "Music is one of the most fabulous parts of our show," says Manzano. "Lin wrote wonderful lyrics and combined rap and salsa and bomba, and Bill Sherman was able to meld different kinds of musical styles for our theme song. Fabiola put a special Latin flavor in all of the musical cues, too."

Both Doherty and Manzano hope kids will be entertained by Alma's fun adventures. But they also hope it moves the culture forward in terms of authentic representations in animation. As Manzano points out, "I used to love watching *Looney Tunes* on TV. That's how I first learned about classical music! I also loved Disney's *Fantasia*, *Dumbo* and *Cinderella*. Those were brilliant animated movies, but you know what? There were no people of color in them. When I was a kid, we didn't see people who looked like me in animation or live-action shows. I hope everybody can celebrate the diverse cultures that we are representing in our show in a humorous way. I also hope kids also learn to trust themselves — and to laugh, as well. Because we also insisted on the show to be funny!" ♦

***Alma's Way* premieres on PBS Kids nationwide on October 4.**



Blue Fridays

The Smurfs continue to sing their happy songs on Nickelodeon this fall.

Friday nights may never be the same this fall as Pierre “Peyo” Culliford’s beloved little blue characters are making a CG-animated comeback on Nickelodeon. The new show *The Smurfs*, which also makes its debut internationally this fall, follows the new adventures of Papa Smurf, Smurfette, Brainy, Hefty, Clumsy and the other eclectic residents of Smurf Village.

The show’s writers Peter Saisselin and Amy Serafin, who worked together on the *Alvin!!!* and the *Chipmunks* series, were kind enough to answer a few of our burning questions about this new incarnation of the characters. “The visual universe of our show is truly amazing,” says Saisselin. “You won’t see a TV show with this level of 3D animation. It’s really movie quality. But beyond that, we love the characters — everything from their cleverness and kindness to their funny little flaws. Nobody is perfect, and we think it’s important for kids to see that that is okay.”

Years ago, Saisselin had worked with Jan Van Rijsselberge, a series creator who was hired by rights holders Peyo Productions as creative advisor. “Jan put us in touch, we wrote up a proposal on how to treat the new series, and the producers, Peyo Productions and Dupuis Audiovisuel, chose our submission. And then the adventure began!”

21st Century Villagers

To prepare this classic property for today’s audiences, the writers had to revise elements of the old Hanna-Barbera series that perhaps would not appeal to today’s viewers who have shorter attention spans. “If you look at the 1980s series, the pace is pretty slow,” notes Serafin. “We just don’t think it cuts it for today’s audiences. So we had to make sure the gags were fast, the jokes on target and the



Amy Serafin



Peter Saisselin

stories had twists and turns to keep contemporary audiences engaged. What’s surprising is how well the humor in the books holds up. They are still really funny. We wanted to keep that quirky, slightly off-kilter tone.”

Saisselin says there are many reasons the classic property continues to charm younger fans. “This mushroom village, or ‘commune’ of little creatures living in the woods, overseen by this slightly grumpy father figure is so unique,” he says. “They are so cute and funny — responsible, independent individuals at the same time they are chaotic, irresponsible kids. The Smurf universe is a place where mayhem is a constant,

and yet it always ends up being okay. We suspect that a lot of people, kids and adults, secretly wish there were Smurfs living in their backyards.

The two writers are both quick to praise the high visual standards of the new show. “The animation is all CG and very close in appearance to Sony’s 2017 movie, *Smurfs: The Lost Village*,” says Serafin. “That was what the producers and the director were aiming for. There are also a lot of ‘cartoon’ elements in the new series; squash and stretch and that sort of thing.”

“We hope audiences will see a safe, joyous place where kids can marvel at these little blue people who get in all sorts of trouble but who always help each other,” note the writers. “Fights don’t last long. In the end, community and the ties that bind it are the most important thing. We also hope that kids of all ages (and maybe even some adults) will get a few good laughs out of the stories!” ♦

***The Smurfs* airs Fridays at 7:30 p.m. on Nickelodeon.**



Small Wonders: First introduced by Belgian artist Peyo in 1958, the Smurfs continue their adventures on Nickelodeon in a brand new CG-animated series.

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A Grumpy Teacher with a Big Heart!

Riki Group's charming show *Beardy Bodo* helps teach children the joys of reading and world travel.

Parents searching for new ways to improve their kids' reading skills need to look no further than *Beardy Bodo*, the charming new animated show from the creative team at Riki Group. The lead character, who is a grouchy man with an enormous beard, doesn't know how to read very well himself, but he invites kids to solve simple puzzles and fun reading activities to improve their skills. As the show's tagline promises, *Beardy Bodo* "knows nothing, but he'll teach anything and everything!"

The origin of the show, according to director Vladimir Sakhnovskiy, goes back to the summer of 2014. He recalls, "I was visiting my sister and her husband in Germany and we wanted to create an educational series for children on YouTube. So, I came up with several concepts. The idea with the grumpy teacher seemed to be the most interesting. My sister genuinely laughed at my animatic and gave the character the German name 'Bodo' and then added the adjective 'Beardy.' That's how our character was born!"

Riki Group's head of development Maria Tereshchenko, who is also the show's creative producer, says about five years ago the development department at the studio was looking for strong preschool and educational shows. "That's how Bodo was introduced to us," she recalls. "At first, it was a character and a concept outlined in general terms. Then, through the process of development the character's appearance was refined and, of course, a lot of effort was invested in creating the scripts for the show, which was a real challenge. We wanted to make short episodes that would combine educational content with absurdity (which is not easy), and at the same time fully embody the vivid character that Vladimir had created."



"The fact that *Bodo Travel* premiered in Russia in 2020 when many borders were closed is especially ironic. The series offered the opportunity to travel from home, reminisce about pleasant moments from journeys, and to make plans for what you would like to see in person when traveling becomes possible again."

— Producer **Desislava Medkova**

Young Inspiration

Tereshchenko says her own son served as a source of inspiration for the show.

"When he was younger, he regularly and confidently advocated various ridiculous ideas, and never got upset when he found out he was wrong! He easily and charmingly changed his mind promoting something else with the same fervor. Our *Beardy Bodo Travel* season was inspired by our own traveling experiences. Our whole team is really enthusiastic about traveling. So, a lot of the stories, conflicts and places featured on the show are based on our personal experiences – perhaps a little bit reworked in creative ways"

Sakhnovskiy adds, "Back then, you could make an educational animated series inexpensively from scratch, and it could get tens of millions of views. It seemed like a good business model. I came up with the idea of a series that I could do on my own, with no third-party investments needed. And then the *Bodo* project won the contest launched by Riki Group, so I didn't have to do it from scratch and all by myself!"

In the first season, *Beardy Bodo A-B-C*, the creative team opted for a certain simplicity.

"We didn't want anything superfluous either on the screen or in the characters' movements," says Tereshchenko. "An ABC book usually only

has a picture of a subject and a caption. This explains the white backgrounds and the very conventional, often abstract depiction of the environment, the objects that do not fall into the focus of our narrative. At the same time, we wanted to achieve a balance between the artistry of modern books for children and the intelligibility of the images, which is clearly necessary for such an educational project."

As the show's producer Desislava Medkova points out, *Beardy Bodo* features limited animation based on the expressive poses of the characters, especially the main one. "I would like to note that this style of animation has a side effect!" she says. "It gives incredible pleasure to those who are involved in the marketing of the project, including myself, as it is an inexhaustible source of various promotional materials. Thanks to the chosen style of animation, freeze frames are incredibly impressive, and there is a huge number of excellent expressive poses of characters available for the creation of banners, posters (and we make a new banner for each new episode), for the development of the brand book and licensed products. The lead director and the lead animator supervise the creation of the layouts very carefully to make sure that Bodo's poses are as eye-catching as possible!"



Going Places: *Beardy Bodo* offers young viewers a chance to learn about different countries and cultures.



"We think we have found and managed to bring to life a very charming and outstanding personality, which is impossible not to fall in love with!"

— **Creative producer/head of development Maria Tereshchenko**

The creative team relies on 2D cut-out animation, in conjunction with frame-by-frame animation to produce the series. "One of the attractive features of our series is the transformation of the characters," says the producer. "This includes both Beardy Bodo, whose beard has transformed to numerous things in the past few years, and his helper friends, the Morphs, which can turn into absolutely anything!"

A Truly Global Affair

According to Medkova, more than a hundred people have worked on the show to date. "We work with many of our writers online, which allows us to bring in people from all over the world," she explains. "The easternmost point of our project's geography is Vladivostok and the westernmost point is Peru. Yes, some of the work is done in the offices in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but we don't limit ourselves to these two cities when it comes to choosing authors."

"We are very flexible when it comes to co-operation," she adds. "Once we even invited a team of animators engaged in both clay and 3D animation, as well as the famous animation director Sasha Svirsky [*My Galactic Twin Galaction*] to create a unique episode featuring Bodo travelling through cartoons made in different animation techniques. In total, more than 50

people worked on that specific episode."

Beardy Bodo's creators believe that a variety of factors worked together to make it such a success. "We have a wonderful team, and everyone does amazing work — the artists, cartoonists, directors, composers, sound designers; they all do their best," says Tereshchenko. "I think a viewer cannot help but appreciate it. We also think we have found and managed to bring to life a very charming and outstanding personality, which is impossible not to fall in love with!"

She also believes that the series serves as a great opportunity to encourage children's thirst for knowledge and make reading and learning a fun, positive experience. "It seems to me that as a team we somehow managed not to lose those cognitive instincts in the process while diving deeply into the topics we chose to explore. So, I hope we are able to engage kids and maybe even their parents in this fascinating learning game."

Medkova gives a lot of credit to Riki Group's partners, including the Russian Geographic Society, which allocated a grant for the *Bodo Travel* season's development, and the Russian Federation's Ministry of Culture, which has supported the show for three years. In 2020 the show was highly valued by IVI, Russia's largest online video streaming platform. IVI became a partner

in the show's production, ensuring a successful launch and further promotion of the series. There are more than 10 million views of the 40 *Beardy Bodo* episodes on IVI to date.

Of course, what makes the venture even more meaningful is the memorable response from young audiences. "I remember when my friend's three-year-old son retold episodes about the Sahara and the great pyramid at Giza," says Tereshchenko. "He explained everything about the Sahara very confidently. When asked if the pyramids had refrigerators, he replied, 'Some do, but not all of them.' It was very amusing. I was even creatively jealous — his retelling was better than the episode itself!"

Medkova says she is very touched when people who don't work in the animation industry recognize the show's characters, the Morphs. She recalls the very first time, "I was going on vacation, and was waiting in line to board a plane, when two kids with their family recognized the Morph characters on my t-shirt. The young girl started to shout happily, 'Riki, Riki, the Morphs!' When I confessed that I was the show's producer, all the members of the family told me how much they loved *Beardy Bodo*. The boy told me that he watched *Bodo Travel*, and the mother said that they had watched the *A-B-C* season many times. But what impressed me most of all was that the father entered the conversation and said that most of all he adored the *Bodo* songs! We had set out to make a series that parents could watch with their children. At that moment, I realized that we had really achieved our goal!" ♦

To learn more, visit en.riki.team.



Jedi through the Lens of Anime

Star Wars: Visions bridges the gap between anime and the sci-fi franchise inspired by samurai traditions.

The new *Star Wars: Visions* anthology series, which premiered on Disney+ last month, has been described as one of the most exciting things to have happened to George Lucas' beloved franchise in a while. The nine visually stunning shorts (which can be screened together in a two-and-a-half-hour sitting), were produced by seven of Japan's top animation studios — Kamikaze Douga, Geno Studio (Twin Engine), Studio Colorido (Twin Engine), Trigger, Kinema Citrus, Science Saru and Production I.G — and serve as charming, bite-sized appetizers to other worlds ready for exploration.

Some are influenced by the works of Japanese master Akira Kurosawa. One is set some time before *The Phantom Menace*, another looks at what became of the Jedi Knights after *The Rise of Skywalker* — and almost all of them involve glorious lightsaber fights. Even bounty hunter Boba Fett shows up in Taku Kimura's "Tatooine Rhapsody" outing.

As the anthology's exec producer James Waugh tells us, "When the opportunity with Disney+ came up, we had the chance to reassess the kind of stories we could tell and we could take different kinds of risks. [Lucasfilm president] Kathleen Kennedy essentially told us, 'Everyone loves anime, so go chase this idea down and see what you can come up with.'"



'The idea was, this is their vision riffing off all the elements of the *Star Wars* galaxy that inspired them — hopefully to make a really incredible anthology series, unlike anything we've seen before in the *Star Wars* galaxy.'

— Exec producer James Waugh

The Best of Both Worlds

Waugh adds, "We really wanted to give these creators a wide creative berth to explore all the imaginative potential of the *Star Wars* galaxy through the unique lens of anime. We realized we wanted these to be as authentic as possible to the studios and creators who are making them, made through their unique process, in a medium they're such experts at. So, the idea was: this is their vision riffing off all the elements of the *Star Wars* galaxy that inspired them — hopefully to make a really incredible anthology series, unlike anything we've seen before in the *Star Wars* galaxy."

Development work for the project began in 2019, but the actual production began right before the pandemic began in early 2020. "We actually got greenlit the first week of COVID," says Waugh. "We were all excited about flying to Tokyo, but we had to put those plans on hold!"

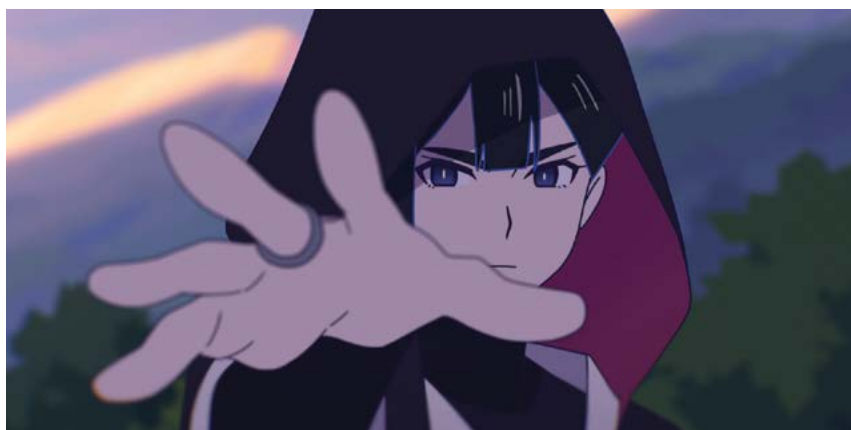
Producer Kanako Shirasaki adds, "We reached out to the studios in Japan, but we couldn't actually physically travel to the country because of the travel restrictions at the

time. So we had to do all the meetings and conversations via Zoom."

Shirasaki, who also produced the Netflix/CGCG/Qubic anime co-pro *Eden*, says the variety and diversity of styles and content they received from the studios were quite impressive. She says, "We asked the studios to propose a pitch, and some studios committed to one and some to multiple ideas. We had a great pool of ideas and we chose the best. We were very fortunate that the stories that the various creators wanted to tell were so diverse."

Waugh, who is the VP of franchise content and strategy at Lucasfilm and also exec produced *The LEGO Star Wars Holiday Special* and new special *LEGO Star Wars Terrifying Tales*, says there weren't many creative challenges involved. "When we selected these studios, we knew that they all did different things with anime. They all had specific styles and visions and stories they wanted to tell. We helped curate the best stories in the anthology. I would say the challenge was to make sure the stories they were telling were authentic *Star Wars* stories."

Of Droids and Samurai: *Star Wars: Visions* unleashed the creativity of seven top-notch anime studios. The English-language voice cast includes the likes of Alison Brie, Henry Golding, Kyle Chandler, Greg Chun, Kimiko Glenn, Jordan Fisher, David Harbour, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Neil Patrick Harris and James Hong.



He adds, “We wanted them to lean in to the hearts and souls of these characters and find out what they were really saying with each short and help them realize that. We were there to offer specific *Star Wars* advice which you only know by working at Lucasfilm. Otherwise, we didn’t have a ton of creative challenges because they were all so receptive.”

When asked to pick their favorite characters and episodes, both Waugh and Shirasaki mention the new droid character T0-B1. Shirasaki notes, “Personally, I love the unique characters the animators have brought to each of the droids. I think they are very funny. Each one of them is different from the others, but they’re all memorable.”

“T0-B1 is so earnest and kind,” adds Waugh. “He has all the right characteristics of being a hero and reflects the values of *Star Wars*. To witness his moment of transition in the short is quite touching.”

Episode Credits: At a Glance

Title	Director [Studio]
The Duel	Takanobu Mizuno [Kamikaze Douga]
Tatooine Rhapsody	Taku Kimura [Twin Engine's Studio Colorido]
The Twins	Hiroyuki Imaishi [Studio Trigger]
The Village Bride	Hitoshi Haga [Kinema Citrus]
The Ninth Jedi	Kenji Kamiyama [Production I.G.]
T0-B1	Abel Góngora [Science Saru]
The Elder	Masahiko Otsuka [Studio Trigger]
Lop & Ocho	Yuki Igarashi [Twin Engine's Geno Studio]
Akakiri	Eunyoung Choi [Science Saru]

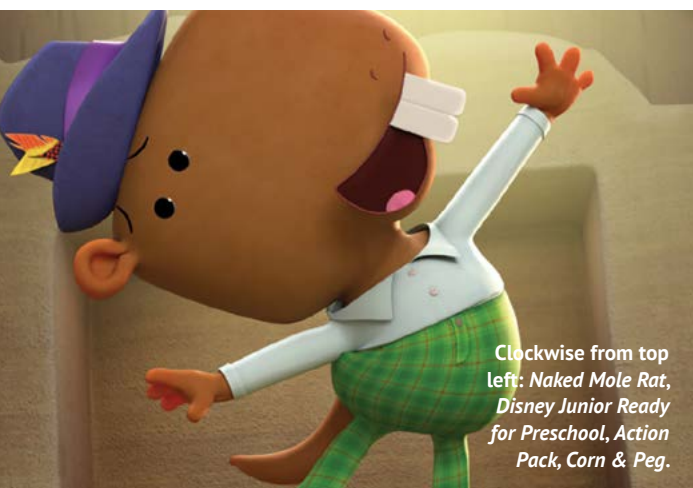
Multi-Generational Mix

The producers both hope the imaginative series will help inspire more enthusiasm from fans of anime as well as *Star Wars* die-hard fanatics. “Our anthology is a wonderful introduction to audiences who are not familiar with the amazing work and wide variety of styles that are being produced by these talented artists at these studios in Japan,” says Waugh. “We hope they’ll walk away with renewed appreciation for these brilliant anime artists. I also think a lot of anime fans that aren’t engaged in *Star Wars* will also appreciate the richness of this world, see it in a new light and will be inspired to dig deeper.”

Shirasaki adds, “I hope our shorts will inspire conversations between teenagers who love anime and their parent’s generation who are *Star Wars* fans. The collection might bridge the gap between fans of both genres!”

Of course, we had to ask the producers whether we would be seeing more collaborations between Lucasfilm and some of our favorite Japanese studios, but they remained tight-lipped! “We don’t have plans right now. We would love to see how fans react to the first season first!” says Shirasaki. ♦

***Star Wars: Visions* is currently streaming on Disney+.**



Clockwise from top left: *Naked Mole Rat*, *Disney Junior Ready for Preschool*, *Action Pack*, *Corn & Peg*.



Fantastic at 15!

OddBot founder Chris Hamilton discusses the history and bright new chapter of his creative animation shop.
By Ramin Zahed

Over the past 15 years, Los Angeles-based OddBot Inc. has been one of the best-kept secrets of the animation community. Founded by animation veteran Chris Hamilton in 2006, the boutique studio has been delivering top-notch animation for shows such as *Muppet Babies*, *Phineas and Ferb*, *Club Penguin* and *Star Darlings*. We caught up with Hamilton to find out about some of the hot original shows that the studio has in the pipeline and learn more about the beginnings of the studio as it celebrates its sweet 15th birthday.

"In the beginning, I didn't set out to fulfill some life-long dream of running my own animation house. I found myself in a place of crazy circumstances that ultimately led to me taking a walk down this path. I haven't shared the story of our studio's origins with many people," he says.



"I love watching footage and spotting everyone's thumbprints all over the shows we produce. This collaborative spirit is also shared with our partner studios, our vendors and clients. Bottom line: We're making cartoons and our goal is to have a blast doing it!"

— **Chris Hamilton,**
OddBot Studio founder, president & creative director

Hamilton says he bounced from a few independently owned animation studios in L.A. between 2001 and 2005, getting his start as a Flash clean-up artist and ultimately landing as a creative director for a small indie studio. "There we produced a Flash-animated series along with many digital 2D preschool shorts," he notes. "At this studio, I built the animation pipeline, staffed the crew, trained new artists and oversaw all creative, production logistics

and client relations. I also built a friendship, trust and a wonderful working relationship with our network executives."

Keeping the Dream Alive

However, halfway through the production of one of the network series, the owner of the studio told Hamilton that he couldn't afford to finish the project and had to let everyone go. "I didn't know what to do, so that night I

discussed the bad news with my wife, and she proposed a risky idea," he recalls. "She suggested we take equity out of our house and pay to finish the show. So, we loaned the company money to finish production on the series. I drew up a contract that stipulated we would be paid back in full. Eventually, the series was successful and the network wanted more episodes."

Eventually, Hamilton ended up having to make a big decision. "I could try to sell everything I acquired and attempt to make a fraction of our money back or incorporate a company and continue to employ my friends and produce cartoons," he tells us. "I chose to create OddBot – and 15 years later, here we are."

What was clear to Hamilton from the start was that he wanted his studio to be a place where artists and production staff feel at home. "We wanted to have a creative safe space where everyone is encouraged to speak up, collaborate and share their thoughts and ideas," he explains. "We want people to do their best work and be super proud of it. We invest in people and work to build leaders that will help improve efficiencies within the company and give opportunities for growth they might not get elsewhere. Production is hard and stressful at times, so cultivating joy and fun is a priority for us."

As a young boy, Hamilton was obsessed with Disney and Don Bluth films of the '80s and '90s. He recalls, "The moment that sent me down this path was when I saw *The Secret of N.I.M.H.* for the first time. Specifically, the scene where Mrs. Brisby meets the Great Owl. Not only was the old owl masterfully animated – his limp, the cracking stiffness in his bones – but man, was he scary! As a kid I remember thinking how cool it was to be creeped out by a cartoon, an illusion; just a series of drawn images flipping in front of you and tricking you into believing that old owl is alive and might eat that poor mouse. But then, it is alive, right? I wanted to do that; use this wonderful medium to bring characters to life and tell stories that an audience can emotionally connect with."

Currently the studio is humming with a hot slate of animated projects. Among the shows Hamilton can actually talk about are the third season of *Disney's Muppet Babies* along with *Disney Junior's Ready for Preschool* musical shorts, and Mo Willems' CG-animated musical special *Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed: The Underground Rock Experience* for Stampede Ventures and HBO Max.

"I'm also very excited about a new preschool



superhero series we're producing (and I'm showrunning) for Netflix called *Action Pack*," he points out. "It's about four super heroic kids, Treena, Watts, Wren, and Clay, as they use their incredible powers to take on the biggest threats in their town of Hope Springs and bring out the good – even in the villains. It has humor, lots of heart, llamas and, of course, action!"

Creating original animated content is also a big part of OddBot's business these days. "We have an original show in development with a network right now," says Hamilton. "Our original IPs are created in-house or are from outside writers, artists and producers. A few are book-based. For example, we're working with New York Times bestselling author A.J. Hartley to develop his YA novel *Steeplejack* into an animated limited series."

Also on tap is a preschool series based on Barney Saltzberg's beautiful art book, *Beautiful Oops!* which is about turning mistakes or "blunders into wonders." "We also co-develop originals in partnership with other studios or production houses," says Hamilton. "At the moment we're co-developing a preschool series with Anima Studios in Mexico. OddBot's investment in original IPs will only continue to grow in the years to come."

When asked about the studio's challenges, Hamilton responds honestly. "Right now, our biggest challenges are shared with the rest of the industry," he notes. "What does a post-pandemic studio look like? Like many other studios, we've been so successful producing shows from home, but there's also no substitute for working side by side with your peers. We all miss collaborating in person, but our lives have changed and we have new routines. For me, I get to see my wife and kids throughout the day, and it would be hard to go back to the days before COVID. So many people feel

the same way. So how do we have both in person (eventually) and at home?"

He says he and his team are trying to figure all those things out, like everyone else in the world. "Whatever we decide we want to make sure our employees are happy, supported and don't feel pressure to change their lifestyles again," he says. "My goal is to always preserve OddBot's culture so our current employees, plus new ones who may never meet each other in person, will feel welcomed and part of our family."

Smiles for Miles

Looking back at the past 15 years, Hamilton says some of his favorite memories are simply just about getting to walk around the studio and seeing all the friendly faces. "I miss that, as we all do," he admits. "I miss our crew parties like 'Fiesta Fridays' – Mexican food, margaritas and games. Our Halloween costume parties were so fun! Then, there was the day after Halloween when one of our directors would cover the office in Christmas decorations. So, at the studio, Christmas started November 1st! Some people were annoyed at first, but then it became a day you looked forward to every year. One great memory that sticks out was our Christmas cocktail party in 2019 when we all got fancy and dressed up to party in a hotel ballroom. That was the last time we all gathered for a big party before COVID. I'm looking forward to the day we can do that again!"

Hamilton says he feels very lucky and grateful that the animation industry was able to grow in the midst of the pandemic. "Animation studios had to quickly adapt to working from home and were so effective that they're busier than ever," he shares. "I'm just amazed at how much content is being created across the world this way. My hope is the need for animation continues to grow with new and established SVOD networks occupying the space. I'm all for more opportunities to keep people working."

The future looks quite bright for OddBot. Hamilton says the studio plans to expand its production and original IP slate to focus on content beyond preschool audiences. "This studio is about family – both entertaining families and working closely as one," says the optimistic animation veteran. "So we're excited about the projects we have cooking and are always looking for new collaborators to join us as we continue our journey bringing characters to life and telling great stories!" ♦

To find out more about the studio, visit www.oddbot.net.

A Global Hub for Creativity

Mikros Animation president Andrea Miloro offers us a look at the studio's slate.

Fans of global animation recognize Mikros Animation as the fast-growing studio behind some of the more interesting features of the past decade, including *Mune: Guardian of the Moon*, *The Little Prince*, *Sahara*, *Captain Underpants: The First Epic Movie*, *Sherlock Gnomes* and the more recent *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run*. This past summer, Mikros Animation brought Spin Master's little canine heroes to animated life in *PAW Patrol: The Movie*.



Andrea Miloro



isodic content airing and streaming in over 180 countries. There are more than 2,500 people working at Mikros Animation across all our studios, with a large majority being based in Bangalore.

The studio's impressive upcoming slate includes: *The Tiger's Apprentice* (a feature animation for Paramount Animation); *Ozi* (a feature animation, co-produced with GCI Films), and *The Coop Troop* (a CG animated TV series in co-production with Sixteen South,

Tencent Kids China and participation of France Televisions). Other episodic projects including *Rugrats*, *Alvin!!!* and *the Chipmunks*, many other projects for Disney. Three other features are also in the works, but details are under wraps.



The Coop Troop



The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge on the Run

Based in Paris, Montreal, Bangalore L.A. London, the studio offers front-end services through to final picture for feature, long-form episodic and traditional episodic animation. "Thanks to our global capabilities, we adapt our scale to always serve every project in the best possible way," says studio president Andrea Miloro, who joined Mikros Animation after stints as president of Fox Animation and head of production at Sony Pictures Animation. "In less than 10 years, Mikros Animation has contributed to ten released feature animations through its studios in Paris, Montreal and London, partnering with independent productions as well as world-renowned studios."

In June, Mikros Animation joined forces with the two other animation entities of the Technicolor group – Technicolor Animation Productions and Technicolor Animation Bangalore. The newly-formed group produced more than 250 hours of programming, broadcast by notable platforms including Netflix, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, TF1, France TV, Gulli, M6, Gloob and Super RTL, with ep-

A Passion for Storytelling

"We believe great animation is about making connections with real people to ignite imagination and to make images unforgettable," says Miloro. "We help filmmakers define and develop their vision from script up to screen to make every project a unique one. We embrace our clients' creative ideas in our culture of collaboration, making our studios the home of the projects we are entrusted with."

"Thanks to our team who is fueled with great passion for animation and who have storytelling at heart, we are able to bring unforgettable and stylized stories to life, in every format for every screen."

She adds, "*PAW Patrol: The Movie* is a great example of our know-how to bring a franchise to life, in CG, on every screen. Our team deeply value IPs and we treat them as unique ones. Our team strives to taking them to the next level with a deep respect of the personality of the characters and of the creatives' vision."

Miloro and her team are excited to work with

Paramount Animation on *The Tiger's Apprentice*, the upcoming adaptation of Laurence Yep's best-selling novel. "We are thrilled to have the opportunity to collaborate with the film directors Carlos Baena and Raman Hui," she notes. "The screenplay is done by David Magee and Harry Cripps. The casting on this film is amazing with Sandra Oh, Michelle Yeoh and Henry Golding amongst other fantastic actors. The film is scheduled to be released in February 2023."

The studio president says she would love the global animation community to know that Mikros Animation is a creative and talent-driven studio. "We believe that great stories are created between the balance of creative spark, phenomenal artists and pas-

sion for storytelling," she points out. "We put storytelling and excellence in character acting at the heart of each of the projects that our team works on. Thanks to our very multi-cultural and experienced staff, we provide a thriving working environment to both our clients and talent, with a boutique feel at an international scale."

She adds, "Because there is a global increased demand for content, animation has played a big role and has a very bright future. The pandemic has not stopped studios from producing great animation content and it has not stopped that great content from hitting the screens, whether through the traditional theatrical release or via streaming platforms. The animation industry produces a large array of creative approaches and it gives voice to a whole new generation of creatives. Mikros Animation is set to grow to be the premiere animation studio where artistry is king and all creative talent is supported in a culture bubble that allows magic to happen."

For more info, visit mikrosanimation.com.



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NICKELODEON MOVIES



ON THE RELEASE OF

PAW PATROL: THE MOVIE

Mikros Animation is so proud to have partnered on this exciting adventure with Cal Brunker and Bob Barlen — bringing *Paw Patrol* to the big screen.

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Fresh Market Fare

MIPCOM 2021 News Bytes

The annual content market will be returning to the Palais des Festivals in Cannes this month (Oct. 11-14). If you can't make it there in person, you can also join digitally to participate online. (Online prices begin at 300 euros and allow participants to enjoy the site's content through Nov. 31.) Here are some of the latest announcements about new animated shows that will be unveiled at the market at press time:



Clay Cuties

Everyone's favorite Bristol-based studio **Aardman Animations** is moving full steam ahead with its new clay-animated preschool show ***The Very Small Creatures***. Aimed at one- to three-year olds, the recently greenlit show follows the adventures of five genderless, toddler-like clay creatures who explore a child's play area when there's nobody around. In each episode, Pink, Blue, Orange, Yellow and Green explore their surroundings and learn about the world around them, each other and themselves. As it has become customary in many animated kids' shows these days, the series emphasizes kindness, empathy and teamwork. Luckily, each episode is also packed with comedic moments. Sky Kids has already commissioned 20

three-minute episodes. The five characters first debuted back in the '80s when they were introduced in Aardman's classic show *Morph*. The new series, which will premiere on Sky Kids in November, marks the series directorial debut of animator/artist Lucy Izzard. "It's a show driven by five very cute clay creatures that act and behave like toddlers, learning about their physical world, themselves and each other," she notes. "My two preschoolers have given me plenty of material to work from! I can't wait to sit down on the sofa and show them the world they've inspired."

They All Live in a Blue Submarine

Canadian animation powerhouse **Guru Studio** will be introducing a wonderful new animated show called ***Big Blue*** at the fall market. The 2D, 52 x 11-minute series, which is set to premiere on CBC Kids in Canada later this year, was created by *Animation Magazine's* Rising Star Gyimah Gariba. Here is the official synopsis: "Whenever there's trouble, Captain Lettie and The Calypso Crew are there to help save the Big Blue and protect its quirky residents. On every mission, there's always big adventure, plenty of laughs and even an occasional dance party! This fun-loving crew always sticks together, and with the help of a magical ocean fairy named Bacon Berry, they just might unravel the mysterious secrets of their underwater universe!"

Guru's president and creative director Frank Falcone tells us, "*Big Blue* is a show with an incredibly strong creative vision. It's really funny and delivers on the promise of a diverse modern family dynamic, with all of *SpongeBob's* goofy dysfunctional sensibilities, sitting at the helm of an USS Enterprise-like submarine exploring a vast underwater fantasy universe. That's what we have on-screen: missions, and a lot of comedy!"





hilarious and exciting adventure!" The 2D-animated show will be ready by late 2023, so let's hope the planet survives to see Compostman save us from gas-guzzling cars, greedy multinational corporations and polluting businesses.

Please, Mr. Compostman!

If you're looking for a new children's show with positive environmental themes, you may have to check out ***Me and My Compost***. (Yes, the name made us laugh, too!). The new 2D-animated show is produced by France's **Superprod** and **Vivement Lundi!** and has a 7.8 million euro (about \$9.1 million) budget. The show, which was one of the 50something projects unveiled at Cartoon Forum last month, centers on siblings Charlie and Zach, whose lives are turned upside down when Compostman, a giant environmentally friendly monster, enters their lives!

As producer Aurélie Angebault explains, "As far as Compostman is concerned, nature is in bad shape, and he knows better than anyone, because he can hear her. That's why Charlie, Zach and their friends reduce their daily environmental footprint and discover that small adjustments to their daily routines can transform life. It's also a



Critters in Wide Open Spaces

Who can resist a little hamster who dreams of being a cowboy in the wild, wild west? Several European broadcasters who have already signed up for Dandelooo's charming 2D-animated series ***Billy the Cowboy Hamster***. The preschool show, which was commissioned by France Télévisions, is currently in production at Dandelooo's animation studio Oo-lala in La Cartoucherie, Valance. The 52 x 11-minute show, which is based on a popular book series by Dutch author and illustrator Catharina Valckx and is directed by the talented Swiss illustrator Antoine Rota (*Kaeloo*) and Caz Murrell. The show follows three friends — Billy, Jean-Claude the worm and Suzie the stone marten — as they embark on thrill-seeking adventures.

Emmanuèle Pétry Sirvin, co-founder of Dandelooo, says, "We love the world created by Catharina Valckx based on sincere kindness and true friendship. We are honored and delighted to say that she loves our adaptation and will include the new characters we created into her future books, too!" And yes, that sound you hear are little hamsters around the world falling off their wheels as they stop to cheer the news!



Cold Weather Magic

We know good things are coming our way whenever creative French studio **TeamTO** announces a new show. This year at MIPCOM, the studio behind popular animated fare such as *Mighty Mike*, *Presto! School of Magic* and *City of Ghosts*, is producing three animated holiday specials based on three different children's books. The first 27-minute project is ***The Winter I Met the Fox***, which details the friendship between a lost fox and a pet chicken. In the 3 x 5-minute project ***Penquin's Ice Time***, the aquatic bird is irritated by a variety of polar animals. Finally, in the 24-minute special ***Snowy and the Snowman***, audiences meet a young, adventurous snowgirl who saves a rabbit from a mighty yeti in Snowland.

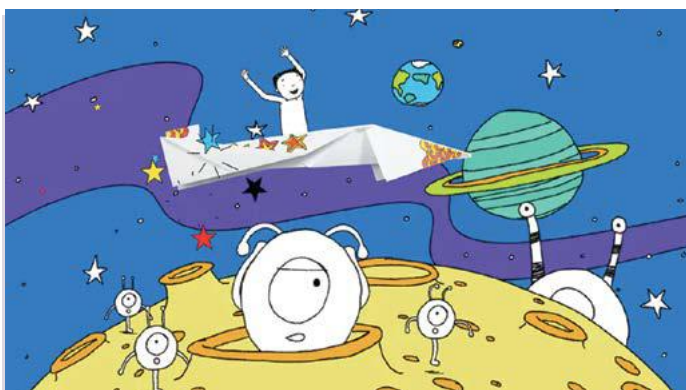
As Mary Bredin, creative development producer at the studio, tells us, "This magical seasonal special is made up of three heart-warming stories, all directed by up-and-coming young directors with great promise in the animation world. They are based on three stunning books that leapt to the screen with ease and will surely become classics that will shine for years to come."



More Funny Chickens and Aliens

Indian animation house **Cosmos-Maya** is bringing two major projects to MIPCOM this year. The first is a new dialogue-free project titled **The Balooobians**. The 57 x 7-minute show, which is described as a sci-fi alien comedy, is penned by Shane Perez (*Space Chickens in Space*) and directed by Dalton Grant (*DuckTales*, *Tumble Leaf*).

Also on tap is the third season of the hit comedy **Eena Meena Deeka**, which was first introduced in 2015. Co-financed with premium kids and family AVOD network **WildBrain Spark**, the show will roll out alongside the first season of the show on its official YouTube channel, which is exclusively managed by WildBrain Spark. The slapstick comedy follows the madcap adventures of an always-hungry fox whose plans are constantly foiled by a trio of clever chickens. Who knew that aliens and chickens would become the hot trend of 2021?



More Mixed Media Mayhem

Fans of **TG Entertainment's** hilarious mixed media show **The Brilliant World of Tom Gates** can look forward to a second season of the creative show based on Liz Pichon's popular books. The 40 x 11-minute series, which is distributed by **WildBrain**, lends Tom's humor and school life with crafting ideas for kids, including interactive games, gags and catchy songs. The second season finds our hero embarking on new adventures at home and at school along with best friend Derek, his dog Rooster and grumpy sister Delia, the 'fossils' (a.k.a. Tom's grandparents) and schoolmate Marcus Meldrew. Audiences also get to meet new characters including Mrs. Nap, the fabulously eccentric music teacher; Linda the singing Llama from FarmerLlama Land; and The Wrinklies, Tom's mother's parents!

As Caroline Tyre, VP global sales and rights Strategy at WildBrain, tells us, "From the hugely positive broadcaster response to the remarkable praise from audiences, *The Brilliant World of Tom Gates* has been really well received across the board. We couldn't be more thrilled there's a second season of Tom's on-screen adventures on their way!"



Gods and Monsters

When an ordinary girl picks up a mysterious gem in the Forbidden City, she accidentally opens a portal and wanders into a parallel realm where monsters, gods and spirits peacefully live together. That's the fun premise of **Monsters in the Forbidden City**, the 78 x 10-minute new series created by **Tencent Video**, **Original Force** and **Kid-land**. Based on a multi-million selling fantasy novel, this funny, action-packed show incorporates traditional Chinese culture in an exciting and modern way, making it accessible for an international audience.



Animals Watching Themselves

Jetpack Distribution has acquired worldwide rights to cartoon spoof animal documentary **Critters TV**, from Dublin-based **Turnip & Duck**. The 26 x 11-minute, 2D Flash/live-action hybrid series for kids four to eight was funded by Screen Ireland, RTÉjr and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland with the support of incentives for the Irish Film Industry provided by the Government of Ireland. The sketch-style series gives audiences an animal's-eye view on nature docs as different animal families gather round the TV, offering humorous observations and amazing facts about the natural world. The show features six animal families: the foxes, badgers, squirrels, ticks, hedgehogs and owls. Each day, as they tune into their fa-

vorite live-action TV shows (Critters TV), audiences get to watch them in their natural habitats, learning real facts about animals in the real world, while being entertained by the animated critters! We'd rather watch these animal stars than live-action reality show bores any day!

Shiny Happy Friends

Gallus Entertainment's charming animated preschool series **Glowbies** follows the adventures of four shiny friends – Jelly, Randy, Alby and Poppy – as they think happy thoughts and generate a special glow to keep their lighthouse and seaside town of Brighthouse Bay Sage bright! Created by animation veteran Donnie Anderson (*Luna Petunia*, *Guess with Jess*) and developed and acquired by **CBG Gem** and distribut-



ed by **CBC & Radio-Canada Distribution** worldwide, three seasons of the 12.5-minute show are available for audiences worldwide. A special shout-out to the folks who wrote and performed the catchy *Glowbies* theme song: You won't be able to get it out of your head no matter how hard you try! ♦



World Animation & VFX Summit Announces 2021 Hall of Fame Honorees

Animation Magazine has unveiled its list of this year's distinguished **Animation Hall of Fame Game-Changer** award recipients. The honorees will receive their awards at **The World Animation & VFX Summit** Opening Night Party on Sunday, November 7 at The Garland hotel in N. Hollywood, California. This year's distinguished award recipients are, in alphabetical order:



Gaumont Animation

With offices in Paris, Los Angeles, Berlin and London, Gaumont Animation is one of the top animation studios around the world. The studio, which was first founded in 1997 as Alphanim, was acquired by entertainment giant Gaumont Film Company in 2008. The company's animated catalog comprises over 800 half-hours, broadcast in over 130 countries. Currently, the studio's acclaimed new preschool shows *Do, Re & Mi* and *Stillwater* air on Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV+, respectively. Upcoming projects include *Samurai Rabbit: The Usagi Chronicles*, the much-

anticipated adaptation of Stan Sakai's comic-book series *Usagi Yojimbo*, and a musical adaptation of Paul McCartney's novel *High in the Clouds*. Among Gaumont's many animation highlights are *Bionic Max*, *Franklin and the Turtle Lake Treasure*, *Santa's Apprentice*, *Mona the Vampire*, *Redwall*, *Belle and Sebastian*, *Furiki Wheels*, *F Is for Family* and *Robotboy*. The award will be accepted by Gaumont U.S. president **Nicolas Atlan** and exec VP of creative content **Terry Kalagian**.



Tom Kenny

Iconic voice actor Tom Kenny has provided the unmistakable voice for *SpongeBob SquarePants* since the series premiere in 1999. Kenny also voices the character throughout the *SpongeBob* feature films and related series *Kamp Koral: SpongeBob's Under Years* and *The Patrick Star Show*. The prolific voice actor also starred as Dog in *CatDog* and Hefner in *Rocko's Modern Life* and *Rocko's Modern Life: Static Cling*. Kenny won the 2018 Emmy Award for Outstanding Performer in an Animated Program and has been the recipient of two Annie Awards for his voice work on *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Adventure Time* (as Ice King). His many voice credits also include Lumpus the Moose on *Camp Lazlo* and Eduardo on *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*. He has also been a regular cast member on the animated series *Super Robot Monkey Team Hyperforce Go!*, *My Gym Partner's a Monkey*, *Handy Manny*, *Futurama*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Johnny Bravo* and *The Powerpuff Girls*. He also lends his vocal talents to television series including *WordGirl*, *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Henry Hugglemonster* and *Brickelberry*. In film, Kenny's voice can also be heard as Wheelie in *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* and *Revenge of the Fallen*, and as Rabbit in *Winnie the Pooh*.



Phil Lord and Chris Miller

For the past two decades, Phil Lord and Chris Miller have created, directed and produced some of TV and cinema's most influential animated and live-action comedies. The filmmaking duo are best known for directing and writing the animated films *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and *The LEGO Movie* and producing *The LEGO Movie 2*, as well as directing the live-action comedy film *21 Jump Street* and its sequel. Lord and Miller won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature as producers of the blockbuster hit *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*,

which was co-written by Lord. This year, Lord and Miller exec produced Sony Pictures Animation's highly acclaimed feature *The Mitchells vs. The Machines*, which premiered on Netflix in April. *Unikitty!*, *Son of Zon*, *Bless the Harts*, *America: The Motion Picture* and *Hoops* are some of the other projects they've produced over the years. Lord and Miller also created MTV's popular animated series *Clone High* and exec produced the features *Storks* and *Smallfoot*. Upcoming projects include *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse 2* and the *Clone High* revival.



Chris Meledandri

Chris Meledandri is an Oscar- and BAFTA-nominated producer and founder and CEO of Illumination Entertainment, which is best known for producing the blockbuster *Despicable Me* franchise. During his tenure at Fox, he led the studio's acquisition of Blue Sky and supervised

and exec produced animated features such as *Ice Age*, *Robots*, *Ice Age: The Meltdown* and *Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!* He also produced the Oscar-nominated shorts *Gone Nutty* and *No Time for Nuts*. After founding Illumination in 2008, he produced the global hits *Despicable Me* (2010), *The Lorax* (2012), *Despicable Me 2* (2013), *Minions* (2015), *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016), *Sing* (2017), *Despicable Me 3* (2017), *The Grinch* (2018) and *The Secret Life of Pets 2* (2019). He also produced the spinoff prequel *Minions* in 2015. Meledandri was the recipient of the PGA Visionary Award in 2014 and the VES Lifetime Achievement Award in 2019. His upcoming slate includes *Sing 2*, which will be released by Universal this December, *Minions: The Rise of Gru* (2022) and the untitled *Mario* movie (2022) as well as *Shrek 5* and *Despicable Me 4*.



Chris Nee

Peabody, Humanitas, NAACP and Emmy Award winner Chris Nee is the creator and executive producer of Disney's acclaimed series *Doc McStuffins*. She also developed and exec produced Disney Channel's animated series *Vampirina*. In 2018, Nee began her multiyear overall deal at Netflix. Her first five project announcements at Netflix include *Ridley Jones*; *Dino Daycare*; *Ada Twist, Scientist*, which she is producing with Higher Ground Productions, with Barack and Michelle Obama as exec producers; and *Spirit Rangers*, which is created and executive produced by Native American writer Karissa Valencia. Nee's production company, Laughing Wild, is focused on uplifting up-and-coming talent with diverse points of view with projects such as the recently announced *Antiracist Baby* from Dr. Ibram X. Kendi.

Nee began her career in children's programming working on the international editions of *Sesame Street*. She also wrote for many children's shows including *Blue's Clues*, *Maya & Miguel*, *Higglytown Heroes*, *Wonder Pets!*, *The Backyardigans*, *Casper's Scare School* and *Thomas & Friends*.



Jennifer Yuh Nelson

Jennifer Yuh Nelson is the supervising director of Netflix's multiple-Emy-winning animated anthology series *Love, Death + Robots* (Volumes 2 & 3). She is the first woman to solo direct a major animated feature with DreamWorks' *Kung Fu Panda 2*, for which she received an Oscar nomination. She also directed *Kung Fu Panda 3* and the live-action feature *The Darkest Minds*. She began her career in design and storyboarding, working on acclaimed projects such as *Todd McFarlane's Spawn* and DreamWorks features such as *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *Madagascar* and *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*.



Bruce W. Smith

Bruce W. Smith is creator and executive producer of Disney+'s *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder*, the long-anticipated revival of his groundbreaking animated series *The Proud Family*. Most recently, Smith served as one of three directors of the Academy Award-winning short *Hair Love*. During his tenure at Walt Disney Animation Studios, Smith supervised animation on many animated features including *The Princess and the Frog*, specifically for villain Dr. Facilier; *Winnie the Pooh* (Piglet, Kanga and Roo), *Tarzan* (Kerchak) and *The Emperor's New Groove* (Pacha). His gift for unique character design led him into visual development for projects such as *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*. He was also lead animator on the short film *Tangled Ever After*. Smith co-founded Jambalaya Studios, an animation

company whose goal is to generate both racially and ethnically diverse projects for all mediums. His other credits include *Space Jam*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, *A Goofy Movie*, *Bébé's Kids* and *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales for Every Child*.

Join the Fun!

If you're in Los Angeles in November, make sure you join us for four days of inspiring keynotes, parties, panels and opportunities to meet with some of the biggest movers and shakers in the animation and VFX industry. This year's event will take place outside on The Garland hotel's beautiful grounds. Check our website to find out the most up-to-date list of award recipients, keynotes and panelists

Among the highlights of the 2021 Summit:

Opening Day Keynote: Jorge R. Gutiérrez. The beloved and acclaimed creator of *El Tigre: The Adventures of Manny Rivera*, *The Book of Life* and Netflix's upcoming limited series *Maya and the Three* discusses his career and inspirations and offers helpful advice on how to stay creative and true to your original visions.

Catching Up with the Studio Heads. Some of Hollywood's biggest animation studio heads discuss their upcoming slates, the state of the industry, their priorities and the challenges of keeping up with the changing tastes of audiences worldwide in this highly informative panel. Confirmed panelists include Kristine Belson (Sony Pictures Animation), Melissa Cobb (Netflix Kids & Family), Margie Cohn (DreamWorks Animation), Ramsey Naito (Nickelodeon) and Mireille Soria (Paramount Animation).

Award Season Movie Roundtable. We'll talk to some of the year's biggest animated features including Sony Pictures Animation's *The Mitchells vs. the Machines* and *Vivo*, Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon* and *Encanto*, Pixar's *Luca*, DreamWorks' *The Boss Baby: Family Business* and *Spirit Untamed* and Illumination's *Sing 2*.

The 2021 Short List. Discover some of the year's biggest animated shorts and their creators as we discuss their inspirations, challenges and technologies. Titles include Aardman's *Robin Robin*, Disney's *Us Again* and *Far from the Tree*, Pixar's *Twenty Something* and *Nona*, Bill Plympton's *Demi's Panic* and many others.

How to Pitch to the Streamers. Some of the leading development execs in the field offer advice on how to prepare your potential animated projects for the big streaming players.

Safety Policy: In order to ensure the safety of our staff and guests, we require either proof of approved vaccine administered at least two weeks prior to the Summit, or a negative COVID test within 72 hours of attending the Summit. We also require a valid ID. We will be doing temperature checks upon arrival and masks are required to be worn at all times in accordance with L.A. County requirements. ♦

For more info, visit www.animationmagazine.net/summit.

Animation Is Film: Back in Action

After taking 2020 off, L.A.'s own feature animation festival returns with a rich lineup of international gems and recent studio favorites.



Belle



The Deer King



Poupelle of Chimney Town



The Summit of the Gods



Design: Alberto Vázquez

October 22-24 2021

The Mitchells vs. the Machines



For months, we've all been waiting for animation events and festivals to return to their original live formats. It looks like we'll finally get to see some of the world's best animated movies on the big screen thanks to the valiant efforts of the team at the Animation Is Film festival. Poised to light up the screen once again at the TCL Chinese 6 Theatres in Hollywood for three days (Friday, Oct. 22 to Sunday, Oct. 24), the event promises to satisfy even the pickiest of animation connoisseurs this year!

Festival director Matt Kaszanek says he is euphoric to be back after a year's hiatus due to the pandemic. "It was a needed year off, given the pandemic and everything else that was happening in the world," he notes. "The 2020 lineup was amazing and so there is this 'ghost festival' that never happened. But we are thrilled to be back in



'We are holding all receptions outdoors and doing everything we can to assure a safe environment, so we do hope people will feel comfortable and will come be a part of it.'

— AIF director Matt Kaszanek

2021 with a live, in-person festival and I am happy to say that the lineup is *insane*! We are super excited to be able to see all our friends and enjoy these films together."

Animation Is Film founder Eric Beckman, who is also the founder and president of indie animation distributing powerhouse GKIDS, notes, "The beauty of Animation Is Film is that it is all highlights! Although, you will have to make some tough choices: We have the new Mamoru Hosoda film *Belle*, fresh off its Cannes premiere; *Where Is Anne Frank?*, the first Ari Forman film in nearly a decade;

the Sundance hit *Flee*; the North American premieres of *The Summit of the Gods* and the new *My Hero Academia* feature; and Masashi Ando's directorial debut *The Deer King*. There are amazing new features from Europe, Japan, China, Europe, South America; a program of women-directed shorts presented in partnership with WIA and Annecy. We are also presenting a whole lineup of studio films like *Luca* and *The Mitchells vs. the Machines* that had to skip theaters due to COVID."

Beckman says the best way to enjoy this year's edition is to "show up on Friday with a bottle of Visine and thermos of coffee, and leave Sunday night exhausted but happy!"

When asked about what makes the 2021 edition different from previous years, beyond the global pandemic, he responds, "I think we are seeing an acceleration of a trend that has been going on for a while and has been long overdue, which is an awakening of mainstream audiences to a more varied, vibrant, diverse and richer world of animation — leading circularly to more of these types of films being made. This means international animation, 2D and hybrids, films for adults and so on."

Beckman, who founded the festival in 2017, believes anime has in some ways led the charge, not just in terms of the exploding audience size but in the artistic, cultural and lifestyle influence it exerts. He notes, "But more broadly, audiences are open to and even demanding more and more different forms and the studios have taken note, and certainly the streamers have as well. So, we are also seeing more varied animation filmmaking coming from Hollywood."

Kaszanek assures everyone that safety measures have been put in place so that audiences will be able to enjoy the festival without worrying about their health. "Following the lead of other major festivals, we have protocols in place and every guest will be vaccinated," he maintains. "We are holding all receptions outdoors and doing everything we can to assure a safe environment, so we do hope people will feel comfortable and will come be a part of it. There is a joy in celebrating films together with friends, colleagues and fellow fans, that we have all been missing for the last 18 months. That said, we understand that not everyone is ready to be in a theater yet, so hopefully we will see those folks next year!" ♦

For a complete festival schedule, visit animationisfilm.com.



'I think we are seeing an acceleration of a trend that has been going on for a while, which is an awakening of mainstream audiences to a more varied, vibrant, diverse and richer world of animation.'

— AIF founder/GKIDS CEO Eric Beckman

Festival at a Glance

Friday Oct. 22

- 7:30 p.m. The Summit of the Gods
- 8:15 p.m. Pompo: The Cinephile

Saturday, Oct. 23

- 11 a.m. Nahuel and the Magic Book
- Encanto: Work in Progress
- 1 p.m. Where Is Anne Frank?
- Vivo
- 4 p.m. Poupelle of Chimney Town
- The Mitchells vs. the Machines
- 7 p.m. Belle
- The Crossing
- 9 p.m. Josep

Sunday, Oct. 24

- 11 a.m. I Am What I Am
- Sing 2: Work in Progress
- 1 p.m. My Hero Academia: World Heroes' Mission
- Luca
- 4 p.m. The Deer King
- Best of Annecy: Female Directors
- 6:45 p.m. Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko
- 7 p.m. Flee
- 8:45 p.m. Raya and the Last Dragon



Björn Mayer



Blood, Swords and Neon-Lit Cars

Two new features, *Kate* and *Yakuza Princess*, use the magic of VFX to tell their action-packed samurai stories.

By Trevor Hogg

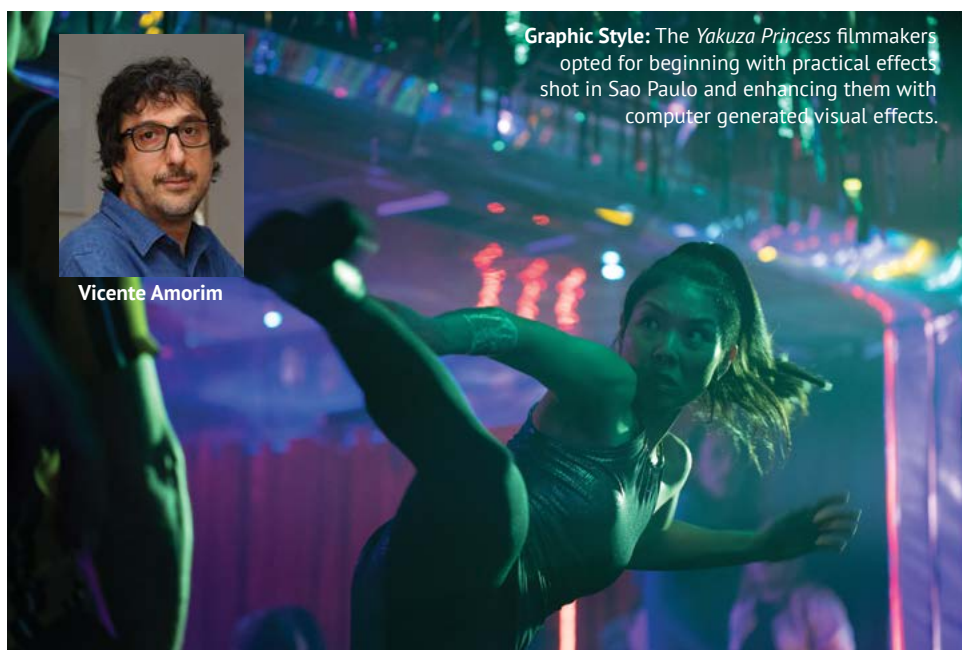
The classic honor code of the samurai and its many implications are explored in two current VFX-driven features, Netflix's *Kate* and Magnet Releasing's *Yakuza Princess*. Directed by Oscar-nominated visual effects supervisor Cedric Nicolas-Troyan (*The Huntsman: Winter's War*), *Kate* tells the story of a gaijin assassin who tries to discover the person responsible for poisoning her, while *Yakuza Princess* is filmmaker Vincente Amorim's saga of a yakuza empire heiress who is hiding in Brazil to survive. Both stories are set in motion by acts of betrayal and rely on the successful marriage of special effects, stunts and visual effects to choreograph and execute dynamic fight sequences involving guns, swords, decapitations and lots of blood.

Since *Kate*'s director was a former VFX supervisor, life was easier on set for the visual effects team, but more challenging in post production. "Cedric knows how it's done and tells you what he wants," explains production VFX supervisor Björn Mayer (*Oblivion*). "You have to find a way to get it. It was challenging because the whole thing was shot at night. I've done my share of night shoots before, but never did it three months in a row. We were shooting in Bangkok, which has the craziest traffic, so getting to places took a while, and



'Each and every blood splatter was created in CG with fluid simulation. For limbs, in some cases, we had practical mock-ups to use for continuity, but when they were severed it was completely CG.'

— Marcelo Siqueira, VFX supervisor, *Yakuza Princess*



Vicente Amorim

there was also the high humidity. Then, we arrived during the freezing winter in Tokyo. You had to pack for all seasons for this show!”

A digital-intensive scene occurs when Kate (portrayed by Mary Elizabeth Winstead) steals a pink neon-lit vehicle resulting in high-speed chase that resembles something out of *TRON*. “The car is called a ‘Kaido Racer’, which is a thing in Japan where people deck out their vehicles with crazy amounts of lights, spoilers and pipes,” explains Mayer. “The only time that we shot with the actual car is when it’s driving away in the beginning.”

A special gimbal rig was constructed for the close-up shots of Winstead driving which was surrounded by LED screens to bake in the lighting. “I was walking up and down the street in Ginza and took 10,000 pictures of storefronts, lights, trash bins, benches and bus stops. We modelled the whole thing and did a lot of reprojections, which meant that only the reflections had to be rendered,” says Mayer.

To convey a sense of high speed, the camera moved quickly, and shakes and vibrations were incorporated into the imagery. “We added rain-drops on the lens to give you a *Star Wars* trench run feeling as we are racing through the street,” says the VFX supervisor. A collision brings this scene to a dramatic conclusion, for which Mayer and his team turned the buck upside down and moved the camera around the actress with a greenscreen behind her.

The project didn’t require many digital doubles or face and limb replacements as Winstead did all of the fights herself. “We were shooting once with Mary and then once with a stunt performer,” notes Mayer. “If she could not do certain moves fast enough or perform some of the falls, that is when we did a 2D

face replacement.”

Overall, about 500 visual effects shots were created by award-winning studio Mr. X, with a majority of the work being muzzle flashes, spurting blood and stab wounds. As Mayer explains, “Because Kate always goes for the head, squibs could not be used [for safety reasons]. If you have visible blood on every hit it becomes like comical gore and it changes the tone of the movie. We picked our crescendo points, and they happen at surprising moments.”

The environment played a big part in determining the color of the blood in the movie. “At night the blood becomes really dark with brownish and pinkish reflections,” says Mayer. “But there is one sequence in a restaurant where the blood is extremely red. The environment is monotone grey and white. Cedric wanted the blood to be like brushstrokes on the shoji screens.”

Splashes of Red

Blood was also a major challenge for *Yakuza Princess*, which was inspired by the graphic novel *Samurai Shirô* by Brazilian comics artist Danilo Beyruth. “As most of the blood is visual effects in the movie, we had to work hard to make it feel like the real deal,” notes filmmaker Vicente Amorim (*The Division*). “It worked very well, but only after lots of back and forth.”

The blood had to be bespoke throughout the movie. “Each scene featuring blood was conceived individually in terms of how blood would behave when it spread or was splashed onto different surfaces,” remarks the film’s VFX supervisor Marcelo Siqueira (*Motorrad*) who has frequently collaborated with Amorim. “We even noted how thick it is. Each and every blood splatter was created in CG with fluid

simulation. For limbs, in some cases, we had practical mock-ups to use for continuity, but when they were severed it was completely CG. This was also the case with the helicopter in the film’s last scene.”

“Vicente and screenwriter L.G. Tubaldini Jr. brought me onto the crew during the initial stages of the script,” recalls Siqueira. “It was very important to understand the director’s needs and how visual effects could help him during his production. We drew out every action scene to be sure that the entire crew could see the same thing, and so all departments could suggest the best possibilities. Visual effects were used during all scenes that featured spurting blood, severed limbs, muzzle flashes and bullet holes. This gave Vicente and the producers more freedom during the shoot and saved a lot of time that practical effects would have eaten up. Our work allowed Vicente to make each scene more dramatic.”

The movie didn’t rely on greenscreen technology to evoke the script’s settings. “We shot in the home of the Japanese community in São Paulo, at the Liberdade neighborhood and at Paranapiacaba, a strange, mysterious town by the edge of a mountain range about 100km from São Paulo,” notes Amorim. “We shot 100 percent of the movie on practical locations and worked the visual effects from there.”

“The most important research, aside from the obvious work with the graphic novel author and then location scouting, was watching every single martial arts and yakuza movie that I could get my hands on,” the director adds. “Nothing beats that kind of inspiration. In the end the mashup is yours, you own it, but it takes a while. We were looking for our own version of what masters like Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano have been doing for years in Japan with a touch of old ‘90s action movies and some pop sauce in a coming-of-age martial-arts saga.”

A pivotal scene in the movie features an extreme closeup of a beheading. “It’s been done before, but usually the camera sort of ‘turns away’ at the last moment, or you cut wide. We never did any of that. It’s the kind of shot that feels strange on set.”

Siqueira says it’s important to know when and how to use visual effects properly. “We tried to be practical and always think of it as a means to an end, and not as a fix-it-all recipe. My biggest challenge was to create images as close to reality as I could, and try to bring to life the ideas in Vicente’s crazy, amazing mind!” ♦

Kate is available to stream on Netflix. *Yakuza Princess* was released in select theaters in September and is now available on Digital.

Tech Reviews

by Todd Sheridan Perry



Greyscalegorilla Plus

Full disclosure: Cinema4D is not my primary 3D package, so I'm using that as my excuse for not knowing much about Greyscalegorilla before: a deep and wide set of plugins and assets to expand the already expansive toolset available in C4D. In fact, the list of available tools is so long that I can't possibly cover the plugins for lighting, animation and creation, or the HDRI Collections, or the vast Material and Texture collections – all of which are accessible in the Greyscalegorilla Plus subscription. So, this month we'll simply take a look at the most recent additions.



Signal is an animation plugin that received a boost to 3.0. The toolset definitely leans into procedurally creating complex animations. The most impressive aspect is triggering and controlling animation with Cinema 4D native fields and noises, layering them into infinite variations. But you also have a looper modifier to create seamless loops (which is unbelievably frustrating when trying by hand). Numerous presets come with Signal 3.0, including a bunch of easing curves, animation presets like flicker, bouncing, vibration, etc., and a slew of scripts for adjusting your animation. These features can be dragged and tagged through Drop Zone (see below).

In the material collection area, 40 hand-crafted paper materials have been added. These include crepe, lined, cardboard, watercolor, craft, fanzine, etc. The materials are designed to be naturally translucent. Features like wrinkles and colors can be customized here. In addition, 80 new terrazzo materials have also been added to the material collection to an already existing group of terrazzo materials. There are bold colors, neutral palettes, dense or loosely packed resin chips and dispersion. All the maps are 4K, so you can get pretty darn close.

Greyscalegorilla includes libraries of Surface Imperfections like grime and dirt. The latest upgrade adds Dry Ink to the mix with 50 different 4K maps. They are pulled from samples of print processes, so brayers, blocks and sponge tech-

niques just feel right. These maps also complement the paper materials above. Plus, these are just maps, so they can be used outside of Cinema 4D in other applications.

Then there is Drop Zone to work with Greyscalegorilla Plus plugins. This is designed specifically to speed up the workflow within Cinema 4D by allowing you to grab presets, HDRIs and Gorillacams (one of the already popular plugs for camera animation), drag them into parameters slots and automatically create links and tags.

The materials and plugins work within Cinema 4D, but they're also cross-compatible with the various render engines within. Your Greyscalegorilla materials will all render with Redshift, Arnold and Octane, so you don't have to worry about getting bogged down in making custom materials per renderer.

I haven't even talked about the training that comes with the Greyscalegorilla Plus subscription. You can get it at \$33.25 per month. Yes, I'm aware that with subscriptions for After Effects and Cinema 4D, and Red Giant and Substance – and you name it – it may feel like you're being asked to get all the streaming movie channels. But given the power of these tools and the time you can save by using them, I believe it's a pretty good investment.

Website: www.greyscalegorilla.com

Price: \$49 per month (Monthly Subscription); \$33.25 per month (Annual Subscription)

E-on's PlantFactory

In CG, plants and trees are always a "thing" in environment creation. They come in an infinite number of variations of forms and colors, and shift subtly (or not so subtly) in the wind. Then, there are always *a lot* of them – trees, bushes, flowers of all kinds and sizes. Nature creates hundreds of square miles of them without a thought. And in our CG worlds, as comparably limited as they may be, we have to provide the same amount of variety.

The latest version of PlantFactory from E-on Software allows for this controlled random chaos through combining the ease of drawing with the power of node-based procedural control.

The UX design is soft and easy to look at, providing a balance of simplicity while giving you the tools you need to get the job done. Upon installation, it gives you the option of adapting the look and interaction to your favorite 3D software (Maya, Max, etc.). You can get going right away by drawing out the trunk of a tree with the

stylus. Moving on to the branches: As you get into the finer details, you can auto-generate the twigs and leaves – because who has the time to hand-craft every little detail?



As you draw out your handmade tree, a creation node tree is being created for you, which at this point is pretty linear: Root, Trunk, Branch, Twig, Leaf. But each of those nodes can be controlled and modified with other nodes à la Houdini or Bifrost or Nuke. You can feed data about age, maturity, the season and health through control filters and math nodes to dynamically give your foliage variation and character – and even animate those factors.

We don't always have the time, or indeed the botanical knowledge, to build a forest of plants from scratch, so E-on provides a huge searchable and filterable catalog of plants that you can download and then tweak, using the PlantFactory tools. The PlantCatalog objects are downloadable and exported to other DCC software through a standalone exporter, but you gain the most benefit by using it in conjunction with PlantFactory, where you can generate variants.

If you use E-on's VUE for your environment-building, then you are set. Both the PlantCatalog and PlantFactory assets are designed to work with the internal EcoSystem instancing and wind. But if you happen to be building the worlds in another 3D package, PlantFactory can export to a plethora of file formats including Alembic and Pixar's USD formats, and the pre-built shaders can be either the native E-on engine or Arnold and V-Ray.

Website: info.e-onsoftware.com/plantfactory

Price: [Vue and PlantFactory] Annual \$139 (Creator), \$525 (Professional); Monthly \$19.95 (Creator), \$75 (Professional) ♦

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose credits include *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *The Christmas Chronicles*. You can reach him at todd@teaspoonvfx.com.

Autonomous Animator

By Martin Grebing

The Three Career Paths

So you want a career in animation or visual effects, but don't know where to start? Many believe that there are actually only three real options available, so you'll need to choose wisely.

Work for Others

The most common career path that millions of people around the world take and is more often than not the default for animation — or any industry, for that matter — is to work for someone else. This is otherwise known as “a job.”

To go down this path, you need to submit a resume and demo reel, land an interview, negotiate terms and, hopefully, end up with an offer. From there, you'll be taking your cues from a team leader or other supervisor, producing your best work and getting paid a salary or hourly rate (and hopefully benefits and incentives to boot).

In this scenario, it is the studio's responsibility to keep you busy and to honor their contractual agreement with you pertaining to payments and perks.

You will more than likely not have a choice regarding the type of work or projects you will be handed nor your level of involvement (at least in the beginning), but they will more than likely keep you very busy.

There may be opportunities for advancement or not, but as long as the company stays afloat and as long as you do a great job, you should be able to hang your hat there for a while or at least until your contract expires.

Many people that take this career path have many stops along the way, moving from one company to the next, which can be exciting for some and daunting for others.

Build a Studio

For those with an entrepreneurial spirit and endless optimism, building your own studio may be the best choice. The failure rate of new start-up small businesses is staggering, but with connections, guerilla business training and unfettered determination, starting your



Just like the characters on Disney's *Monsters at Work*, animation industry hopefuls have a wide variety of colorful job choices to pick from.



own animation or visual effects studio can be a dream career for the right person.

The benefits of being your own boss are numerous and epic. So, too, are the responsibilities. Unlike having a job, being a business owner requires you to find the work and bring it to the table. You will assume the role of looking for and hiring animators and effects artists, rather than being the one hired. You will incur all the liability and pressure of maintaining constant cash flow to pay your team and yourself.

You will need to focus on big-picture business goals as opposed to being an animator setting keyframes all day. Your day-to-day will require less creative production prowess and more business acumen. As a business owner, you often do not clock in or out. In other words, if something needs to be done or if an important phone call or email comes in, it will often need to be handled by you immediately, regardless of time of day, night or lack of sleep.

Work for Yourself

A third option, and quite possibly the path least travelled, is that of the facilitator or middle-person. This person doesn't do production and doesn't necessarily own their own studio, at least not in the traditional sense, but rather makes connections for others. Sometimes called an agent or producer, this career choice

requires intimate knowledge of the inner circles of the industry and a solid-gold Rolodex (or the equivalent digital contact list).

You may help connect the right studio to the right project or you may help someone promote and/or land a production deal for their idea. You could even be contacted by a client that would like to have an animated project produced but they have no idea how to get started and you could serve as *the* consultant.

Perks of this job are the potential (if not requirement) for lots of travel, meeting and connecting new people all the time, lots and lots of schmoozing at ritzy locales, rarely spending full-time hours on your job, but with the potential for much more than full-time earnings, and being on the inside of the industry, behind the curtain. For someone who is slick, confident and truly a people person, this could be the career of a lifetime.

With only three options available, you need to think long and hard about what gets you the most excited because if you are not passionate about the possibilities, you're probably heading down the wrong path! ♦



Martin Grebing is the president of Funnybone Animation Studios. He can be reached at funnyboneanimation.com.

A Nona You Can't Help But Love

Director Louis Gonzales talks about remarkable grandmas, wrestling and animation.

One of the wonderful aspects of Pixar's SparkShorts program is how often it allows the creators to reach back to their own life history for inspiration. The program's 10th short, *Nona*, which premiered on Disney+ last month, is another outstanding example of the initiative's uncanny ability to tap into the directors' special talents and experiences. Inspired by some of the people in writer-director Louis Gonzales' life, *Nona* centers on a one-of-a-kind grandmother who is caught between keeping an eye on her mischievous granddaughter and watching her favorite wrestling match on TV!

"When the Spark opportunity came along, they asked me if I had a story that I was burning to tell," recalls Gonzales. "Well, I had a hundred



stories I was burning to tell, but I had these two central characters that I wanted to explore because this grandma character was so fascinating to me, and having this granddaughter in the mix was a fun thing to bring in a little bit of the old world with the new."

After taking several side steps, Gonzales and the short's producer Courtney Casper Kent decided to really zero in on the characters. "They always say, 'write what you know,' so I started looking at my own family for inspiration about how they move, how they talk, how they gesture," Gonzales recalls. "Before I knew it, I had most of my own grandma Pearl in there, my daughter, my nieces. You have to bring yourself into the project, because that's how you're going to find a story that works on various levels."

Gonzales wanted the central grandmother figure in the short to be a supervisor or the manager of her apartment building. "She's very good with her hands and she likes to fix things," he explains. "So, already I have a grandma that I kind of like, because she's not like typical grandmas I see on TV. She's more like the grandmas I know. I also had this granddaughter character who is really quiet and sweet, but as soon as you turn your back, she's a big ball of energy."

The main character reminds Gonzales of his own grandmother. "She had this big personality. I loved her to death. I was really kind of afraid of

'Nona kicked my butt and told me, "Hey, why aren't you doing more?" So, now I have a lot of stories in my head ... It's time to move!'

— Writer-director Louis Gonzales

her when I was young because I was a shy kid. But here's the important part: she loved wrestling! We really bonded when she was like, 'You love wrestling? I love wrestling, too.' And I was like, 'Oh my goodness. I have the coolest grandma!'"

The animation veteran, who has worked on many TV shows and movies as a layout and storyboard artist, including *Monsters, Inc.*, *Brave* and *Incredibles 2*, says as a kid growing up in Southern California's San Fernando Valley he loved four things: comics, cartoons, wrestling and drawing. "That love for drawing never stopped," he says.

Gonzales then set out to do what he loved as a living. He says, "I didn't have the greatest grades, so I didn't make it into these colleges that train for animation. Instead, I met a guy who worked at Disney and he said, 'Hey, I'll help you put a portfo-



lio together.' I did, and I got a job at Warner Bros. Feature Animation. Funny thing was, in that same year, I also got married, bought my first house and had my first child. Two beautiful things happening at once. Right?"

Then, he got a call from Pixar. Gonzales recalls, "They said, 'Hey, you know, we'd love for you to come in and interview.' So, I went up and interviewed. Surprisingly, it worked out great and they

hired me. And I'm there now, working on my career. My career is blossoming, and so is my family. I

moved up here with two sons and added a daughter to the mix as well!"

The passionate artist says *Nona* gave a whole new push to his career. "It gave me something to really love again. I was at a point in my career where I didn't feel like I was moving up. I had chosen not to pursue my own career for my kids, and now my kids were off pursuing their own careers, and I was thinking, 'Hey, can I still do this?' *Nona* proved to me that I could. As a matter of fact, not only did it prove that to me, it also kicked my butt and told me, 'Hey, why aren't you doing more?' So, now I have a lot of stories in my head. I have a lot percolating in my head! It's time to move!" ♦

***Nona* is currently streaming on Disney+.**

This month, we get to share a day with **Michele Schofield**, senior VP of content distribution at Singapore's **One Animation**, home of shows such as *Oddbods*, *Insectibles* and *Abigail's Tales*.

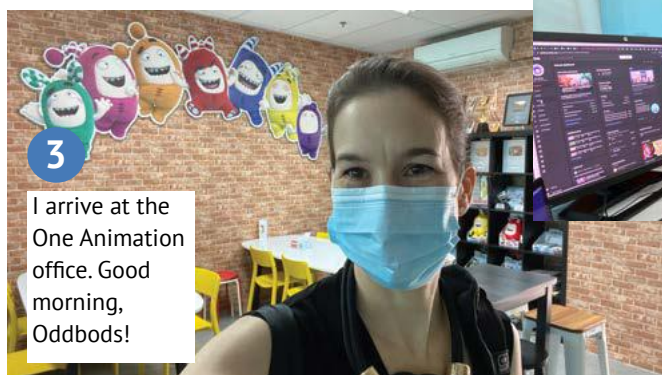


1

Around 7 a.m., it's precious time eating breakfast with my son, who prefers his chewable vitamins.

2

One the days that I go to the office (twice weekly), I drop him off at nursery school!



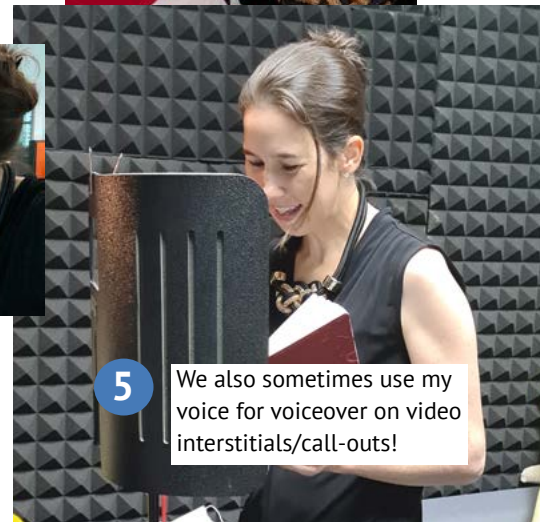
3

I arrive at the One Animation office. Good morning, Oddbods!



4

I oversee our 20 YouTube channels, so I usually check our performance on Monday mornings.



5

We also sometimes use my voice for voiceover on video interstitials/call-outs!



6

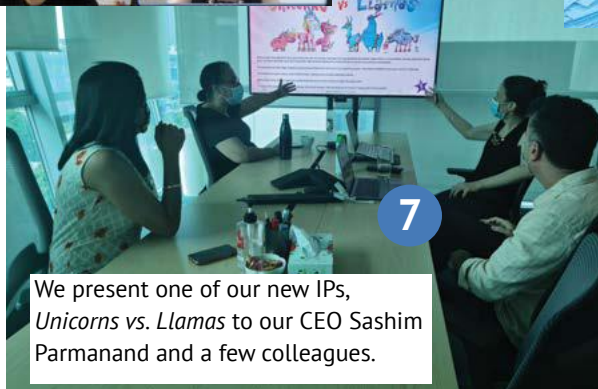
Here is the super-excited One Animation commercial team during our weekly Zoom call.



8

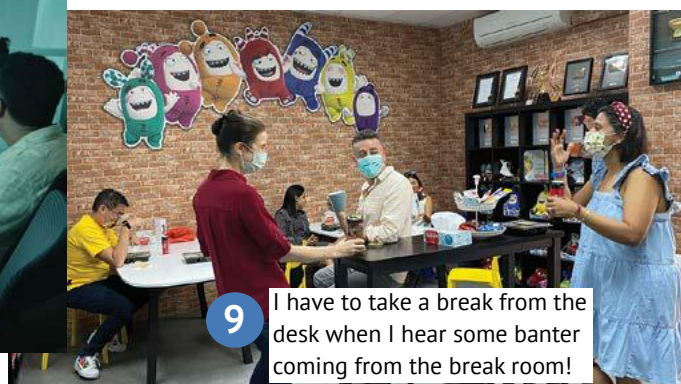
Richard Thomas and our technical director Enrique Caballero discussing production goings-on

(or perhaps just arranging Friday night beers).



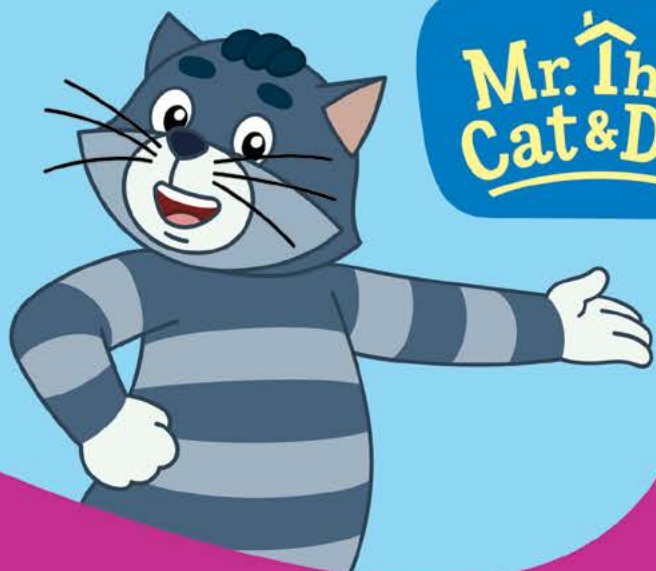
7

We present one of our new IPs, *Unicorns vs. Llamas* to our CEO Sashim Parmanand and a few colleagues.



9

I have to take a break from the desk when I hear some banter coming from the break room!



Mr. The
Cat & Dog



Meow
Magic



the
ADVENTURES
of
PETER
and
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