

Stop Motion

Magazine™
Issue 24

IN THIS ISSUE:
TUMBLE LEAF

ALSO
LOS AERONAUTS
&
STARBURNS INDUSTRIES - THE LOST INTERVIEW





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Stop Motion Magazine™

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CONTENTS:

Pg 6 - New Stop Motion Pro Software

Pg 7 - TUMBLE LEAF

Pg 8 - Kelli Pixler Interview (Tumble Leaf)

Pg 11 - Drew Hodges Interview (Tumble Leaf)

Pg 15 - Los Aeronauts

Pg 20 - Starburns Industries - The Lost Interview

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Letter from the Editor

It seems like such a long time since the first Issue of SMM was released in 2009. That was over 5 years ago! It's also been a really amazing journey along the way. I've personally been able to talk to many of my heroes along with learning a great deal about the animation industry from long time stop motion professionals whom believe in the art form. Recently I announced that we will no longer be producing print issues of SMM. This decision was made out of necessity to maintain my personal sanity while working in the animation/VFX industry here in Los Angeles. At the time of the announcement I was working none stop 16 to 24 hour days on a major advertising campaign for Toys R Us. It was brutal and taxing mentally to say the least. I was also rewarding and amazing. Another reason I made that announcement was the anticipation for starting season 2 of Tumble Leaf as Lead VFX Artist at Bix Pix Studios. Honestly working on season 1 was a dream come true and being called back to work on season 2 is an amazing honor and I know I'll cherish every moment.

So let me rephrase my statement about the future releases of SMM. Future Issues of SMM will be produced on a non-scheduled bases... This means there will be issues in the future and Stop Motion Magazine will exist in a print form but will be sporadic and will hold no official release dates. Due to mainly being a one man show in producing the magazine I have to face the reality of there is only so many hours in the day to dedicated to work, family, and hobbies. Since SMM doesn't make a real profit from advertisers or print on demand, it makes it very difficult to maintain and hire individuals. I'm lucky enough to have had the help of a couple individuals whom contributed to the making of Issues 23, 24, and the upcoming issue 25. One such person is O'neal Pagnani whom I hired for a short period to help me deal with layout while I was busy on the Toys R Us gig. O'neal has a bad reputation in the industry and I'm the type of individual to not pass judgement unless I have witnessed transgressions first hand. In my opinion everyone deserves a second chance and I truly think his passion, humility, and kindness proved that his growth throughout the hard times he has faced in the past has made him a better person. I thank him for his hard work and dedication to SMM and hope his journey to salvaging his reputation is a speedy and rewarding one. You Rock O'neal and thanks!

In this Issue you will find a great interview with the creators of Tumble Leaf, Drew Hodges, and Kelli Pixler. I've been waiting forever to get this issue released and since Tumble Leaf has been picked up for a second Season and since they've been winning awards left and right from Cannes, Annie Awards, and Emmy's, it's probably best to get this issue out so that the world can see why Tumble Leaf is such an amazing show and why Bix Pix Entertainment is probably one of the best studios to work for in the animation industry. They're also going to be the main focus of my energy for awhile so I want to make sure you guys know why. There's also the Lost Interview with Starburns Industries which is between myself, Joe Russo, and James Fino that was conducted years ago. This interview was originally supposed to be a bunch of interviews which would have been with all the higher ups at Starburns including Dino Stamatopoulos, and Dan Harmon. Unfortunately however their work schedule and my work schedule never meshed well and the result was the cancelation of the Starburns Issues. Hopefully in the future one can be produced.

In closing I would like to thank all of the readers of SMM and tell you it has been an honor to produce a magazine which is read in almost every country in the world and has a large loyal following. We just passed 9000 subscribers on our YouTube Channel and are edging past to 3000 magazine issue subscribers. In the future we may switch to a paid subscription basis to keep SMM running, but for now enjoy the free pdf version or Print on Demand versions and Keep Animating.

-John Ikuma
(Executive Editor of Stop Motion Magazine)

Stop Motion Software Re-Invented



Stop Motion Pro has gone back to basics, simplifying the animation capture process giving animators instant access to powerful tools with Stop Motion Pro Eclipse, for Windows (native Mac version in development).

“We noticed animators were confused when it came to learning how to animate - why should software get in the way of character and story? It should enhance it!” Says Ross Garner, director at Stop Motion Pro.

Setting out to create the most intuitive animation software meant testing and collating feedback with professionals in the industry. “We worked at all levels, students, home users and professional animators, if you know any animators, you will understand they are very specific about what they want,” says Ross.

One click access to tools such as onion-skinning, changing fps and copy / paste frames was essential. Dozens of features are now represented using icons which mean more can be fit onto the screen without clutter. Tool tips in multiple languages (English, French, German and Chinese) give information on functions. Advanced production management features are a gem, with easy episode, shot and take recording. Animators wanting to work with lipsync will love the software. It’s possible to assign mouth

shapes and instructions using a keyboard alone. Rig removal tools mean animators can test removing rigs on set, ensuring shadows and other issues will not cause problems for post production. Directors will be able to see and approve the shot on set. Multiple track audio functions mean sound files can be layered, allowing the creation of the sound track while the animator works. Professionals will love the ability to add multiple versions of one track - perfect for extending pauses in dialogue when you need to squeeze in a few extra frames for your characters performance.

“These considerations add up to innovative, smooth interface that users will love,” says Ross.

Stop Motion Pro Eclipse is available on Windows (and Macs running Windows). We are actively developing a native Mac version, the first Alpha of this software was demonstrated at Annecy Animation Festival in 2014.

Eclipse, with control of Canon and Nikon DSLR’s, starts at \$18* per month, or \$185* outright.

*USD

Any questions can be directed to Stop Motion Pro at: admin@stopmotionpro.com Visit their website: www.stopmotionpro.com



TUMBLE LEAF

Bouncing on a Bog Bubble and Exploring the Magical World of Tumble Leaf - Written by John Ikuma

Tumble Leaf is not your ordinary kids show. For one thing it's a stop motion kids show which seems to be a rarity in today's television production. Fig the Fox and his band of forest animals travel the Tumble Leaf Island in an never ending adventure of discover and wonder. Each episode is filled with magic that tugs deep at your imagination and heart strings. Amazon.com and Bix Pix Studios teamed up to make this wonderful show and since the success of the first season it has been announced that there will be a second season. So how better to celebrate this news than with a look into how the show was created by talking to Kelli Bixler who is the owner of Bix Pix Studios and Drew Hodges who is the main creator and Director of the series.

First you should know a little back story before we dive into the interviews. Tumble Leaf originally started out as a short called

Miro. Miro was a blue little boy whom has evolved through the creative process to become today's Fig the Fox. Kelli and Drew teamed up and pitched the show to just about everyone that would listen. It was a struggle from what I understand, but the perseverance paid off and now that are producing one of the most entertaining and fun children's shows on television.

Now because the show is available through Amazon Prime it does have its disadvantages and advantages. For one thing Amazon has a large audience through Amazon Prime which allows them to have a great distribution model directly to the viewer. This helps in providing realtime data showing who's liking what. The disadvantage to this is that many people may not have access to Amazon content due to not having a Prime account or because the advertising and promotion of the

show only exists inside the Prime and Amazon websites.

Regardless, the show is cute and pretty amazing. The scope and depth of the world of Tumble Leaf is huge. Without me giving too much away I can tell you the basics. Fig whom is a little blue fox and his best friend Stick whom is a little caterpillar that rides along on Figs arm find new items each episode in the Findy Place which is a room inside a shipwreck with a treasure chest in it. They set out throughout the day to discover what that item does. Kind of like an applied science and discovery way learning. They meet all sorts of cool looking animal characters whom share in the adventures. It's definitely entertaining and worth checking out the season 1 free episode. I think you'll enjoy the magic and oh yeah the kids will like it too...



Interview With Kelli Bixler Executive Producer - Tumble Leaf

SMM: Can you tell us how Bix Pix Studios got started?

Kelli: After working years in live action, I was introduced to stop-motion animation on a Playschool job, where a 2D animator was sculpting clay figures at lunch for his own stop-motion short, they were fabulous and I was hooked! I thought my live action ideas/scripts could be produced in stop-motion and that might get more interest...it's was so different-unique!

SMM: Can you share with us how Miro developed into the character Fig the Fox for the Tumble Leaf Series?

Kelli: Drew Hodges first created Miro, a blue boy with an odd shaped head, and after pitching to a few folks, he/we listened to the feedback and reworked the character.

SMM: Why does stop motion animation appeal to you?

Kelli: Maybe it's because I had a dollhouse and painstakingly laid hardwood floors and put up wallpaper, or maybe it's because studying the history of film, I thought this medium is truly magical, I love the movement, the detail, or maybe it's just taking something that's dead (no movement) and making it alive, vibrant...it breathes. Done right, it's down

right graceful! And I love working with stop-motion artists, they are fabulous human beings.

SMM: What were the major challenges you faced in developing the Tumble Leaf Series?

Kelli: Could we really do it? I mean, for a television budget, in the timeframe Amazon needed it, and with the production value that we were hell bent on delivering???

SMM: Is pitching a show hard in this modern day industry of online instant access media?

Kelli: Pitching has always been a crapshoot, there are a lot of great ideas out there that don't find a home for a bajillion reasons. I'm convinced this business is still done based on relationships, and the players change drastically in this town, but if you stick around long enough eventually something's gonna stick.



SMM: Why is your studio such a friendly and fun work environment even during hard deadlines?

Kelli: Is it? Oh I hope so, because I like to think I'm friendly and fun...A work place you're responsible for is just an extension of who you are and how you work - it's a reflection of the source.

SMM: You have a list of rules for the studio... Can you share them with us?

Kelli: Basically it's what we all learned in kindergarten, or the golden rule... "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

SMM: You've been in the industry for a while and have faced many challenges. Can you share with us how you've grown as a person and how the industry has changed you?

Kelli: PATIENCE. The industry has forced me to learn patience.

SMM: Tumble Leaf is amazingly detailed and gorgeous. Where did this sense of texture and detail come from and how did you reach such a brilliantly colorful and vibrant final look for the show?

Kelli: Drew Hodges. Don't get me wrong I have very high standards and my own sense of quality



production, but Drew is on his way to mastering stop-motion and its seemingly boundless possibilities.

SMM: What's different about Tumble Leaf compared to the other children shows out there?

Kelli: It's genuine, real...it's imperfection makes it perfect, like humanity.

SMM: Why are Cookies served to the crew on Tuesdays at your studio?

Kelli: I'd love to do it Tuesday and Thursdays but I'm on a budget.... Cookies are good, especially warm and gooey with milk. Bix Pix peeps work really hard and it's just a little way for me to say thank you, and bond with all of them on a level that brings us all together.



SMM: Do you have a favorite episode of Tumble Leaf and can you tell us about it?

Kelli: I have several for many different goofy reasons. KITE because it's the first, I remember Drew saying to me, "I got something that's pretty cute." He was right, that kite suit still makes my heart skip a beat. TUBE, because it involved my Mom's kitchen table at 2am in the morning, (long story) so I always think of my Mom and Dad and my pseudo grandmother, Bozzie, (she called movies, "picture shows") when I see that episode. ICE BLOCK because of the James Bond-esque music. MASK, where Fig says my favorite line, "maybe we can turn snappy into happy." ROCK, when Maple's inner ballerina comes out. CARDBOARD BOX, when Fig uses his pretend voice as the Turtle Prince, and when Hedge sings horribly. I could go on and on...

SMM: Can you tell us about your experience at Annecy and winning such an important award in the Animation Industry?

Kelli: We were thrilled to be invited to Annecy, it's such an honor. I have never been, and it was heavenly. The festival came at the end of shooting and working for 13 months, 14 hour days, 6 days a week, so we went to enjoy the beautiful lake and countryside, to watch great content, eat cheese and



drink wine... we did all the above and walked away with the jury award for best TV show, it was a complete surprise, an utter delight, and a perfect ending to Tumble Leaf Season One.

SMM: Can you tell us about how Tumble Leaf got its start?

Drew: In 2006, after finishing a big project I was looking for something new to do. I thought a kid's show would be a good way to explore a lot of ideas I had rolling around my head. It started as a very abstract world made of gears and mobiles and a little blue boy named Miro. But that was just the start, the first thread and I really had no idea what the project would eventually evolve into.



Interview With Drew Hodges Director/Creator - Tumble Leaf

SMM: Miro seemed like a great concept, why did it change so much?

Drew: I put everything I had into Miro but as time passed and no one picked it up I would put more and more into it. My fabrication and design skills grew and I'd incorporate outside feedback and new ideas. Ultimately it was 7 years of gradual little changes and some big changes that eventually moved the show so far away from where it started.

SMM: how did you get started in animation?

Drew: The same way a lot of kids do: messing around with a friend's video camera - we figured out how to make stuff move. I always wanted to make movies and stop motion was a cool way to get some big ideas out there on no budget. When I saw 'Nightmare Before Christmas' I knew that I wanted to make movies like that. I never really cared much about animation itself but the kinds of little movies I kept making started to resemble animation more and more and so I eventually just started making fully animated projects.

SMM: You were very hands on as a director during the Tumble Leaf production. What was it like to play Director, Animator, Producer and Creative force for the series and not get much sleep?

Drew: It just felt normal to me. I have a pretty short attention span so I like to stay as busy as possible so things are constantly new and challenging. I had such a great crew that I was always excited to see



what they were up to and try to challenge them as much as I could.

SMM: Do you have any favorite moments during production of Tumble Leaf you could share with us?

Drew: There were favorite moments from all the different phases of production. But there were some really late night script rewrite sessions that felt closest to being equal parts insanity and pure creative flow. Those moments where we rode the edge were always the most memorable and exciting.

SMM: Do you have a favorite episode of Tumble Leaf?

Drew: I like "Drumsticks." I think everything was working in that one. It was one of the toughest to make but also one of the most purely "Tumble Leaf" episodes we did. There was a cool location, beautifully light with a mysterious new character, fun music and great animation.



SMM: During production the crew came up with all sorts of wild stories about the origin of the Island of Tumble Leaf... Without giving too much away... Whats the deal with all the ancient buildings?

Drew: The non-J.J. Abrams answer is: The ruins and strange artifacts are there for the audience – so they can participate in the story by imagining what the ruins are for themselves. I think its fun trying to imagine what the backstory of the ruins and past Tumble Leaf civilizations might have been. Plus old stuff just looks better than new stuff. It's a great way for a lot of different crew members to be able to add their own ideas into the world through the details of how every little object is made.

But the real answer is Tumble Leaf only exists in Zucchini the Chicken's mind. Look closely the clues are all there...

SMM: This show is meant for a young audience, but in my conversations with parents it seems to have caught their attention as well and is very entertaining to both young and old. Why do you think that is?

Drew: We were always the first audience so we tried to entertain ourselves and put in elements we were inspired by. We also tried to put in a high level of detail and thought into the stories, world and stop-motion animation which helps appeal to a wider audience.



SMM: What inspires you?

Drew: Really great production design, art and worlds other people have built or imagined can be very motivational.

SMM: What's next for you?

Drew: Finishing up a short film I've been working on and off on for the past 13 years...hopefully.





SMM: Were there any major challenges for you during the production that you could share with us?

Drew: We had a pretty tight schedule so even simple things had added pressure. Some things just take a certain amount of time to complete, time we didn't have. So we were forced to make up new ways of doing things faster.

Adding science concepts into stories in a unique way that a young pre-schooler could still understand was also a great challenge.



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Los Aeronauts / The Aeronauts

Aeronauts is a film that we all dream of making. It's beauty and depth are stunning. Visually speaking it is a masterpiece and the film isn't even finished yet. When we here at SMM first laid eyes on the couple of images floating around the internet we were instantly drawn in. The film Aeronauts by Leon Fernandez Hernandez is breath taking and it is apparent even in the behind the scenes images gracing these pages. We were very blessed to speak this brilliant director and we can only excitably anticipate the completion of the film in the coming days. Please enjoy this interview.

SMM: Can you tell us about your film?

LFH: Its name is "Los aeronautas" (The aeronauts). It is mainly stop-motion animated, combined with some digital compositing. It is produced by the mexican film institute, which each year calls for shortfilm projects in order to make a contest. Usually they give three prizes; the winners get the support to entirely produce their work. We won that support in 2013, so we are at the stage of production right now. We are not sure if The aeronauts will have its premiere this year or the next one; it depends on the

available number of festivals left on 2015.

The aeronauts tells the story of Soo'goh, a handicapped creature that tries escape from the cruel desertic environment in which he and his tribe are confined. They all dream on a green vast land, only reachable with the help of their god, that frees them in exchange of offerings.





SMM: How did you get into making stop motion films?

LFH: In fact it was kind of an accident. I am a sculptor since I was 14 and I never thought about animation. When I was 25 my mother saw an ad in the newspaper regarding a 1-month animation class in a local art school. She thought it would interest me and paid the entrance fee without even telling me about it. She just “informed me” the day I supposed to attend. I didn’t mind the “short notice”, in fact I was happy to assist, plus it was free of charge.



I went to that class and the two teachers I had were animators Juan José Medina and Rita Basulto. They were known already as talented animators, plus they are also artists, so we became good friends and they started to invite me to work in their projects as an “in-betweenner”, or sculptor and so. After

a couple of years they encourage me to start my own film and gave me support with equipment and advice, so I started with a small 2D project which I finished on 2006.

However, as a sculptor, I liked more stop-motion, and began searching funds to produce my first stop-motion short film. I tried the contests organized by

the Mexican Film Institute (IMCINE), and after a couple of strikes I won one of the prizes, which were the financial support to produce my short. So I did and in 2011, I finished MUTATIO, a 10min stop motion animation. Since

then I participated in some projects as an animator, art director and puppet maker, and now I am at the production stage of “THE AERONAUTS”, another stop-motion short film, also produced by IMCINE.



SMM: The Aeronauts visual look is very impressive and unique. Can you explain how the production design shaped the look of your film?

LFH: Well, the story behind this short film needed a harsh, dry desert, so we studied different types of sand-rock landscapes and cloudy skies. We made a lot of tests and finally we got there.

SMM: What have the struggles been in making this film?

LFH: To be honest, this was a very ambitious project because of the number of characters, sets and requirements; and we knew the funds available in the IMCINE contest, which were a little low to this kind of project. However we took the shot since we are able to make our own puppets and sets, in fact we founded our puppet making company last year (HUMANIMALIA STUDIO). That's how we managed to save some money and stick to the fund limit we had. Anyway, we were fighting against time since day one, because we want to finish before some big festivals entry deadlines.

SMM: Who inspires you as a director/ animator/ artist?

LFH: I think that most stop-motion animators admire Harryhausen and Svankmajer, so do I. As a director I also have a tremendous respect for Henry Selick.

SMM: Can you explain how you got started in making this film?

LFH: I started this project working on the short film's plot with my screenwriter friend Salvador Delgadillo. That took us some time and we barely finished the project folder in order to entry the IMCINE contest on 2013. We didn't get the prize that year and we understood that we needed to fix a lot of our project. We did so and by the next contest we got the financial support. I started right away building puppets and sets, and we started animation in October 2014.

SMM: What are your puppets made out of?

LFH: They are all based in dragon skin silicone and ball and socket armatures. They also have geared skulls so we can move eyebrows, jaws, make them smile etc. One of the characters have wings, they are made of paper and tin foil.

SMM: What kind of software and systems are you using?

LFH: I am using Dragonframe as animation software, which is great.

SMM: When can we expect to see your film in festivals.

LFH: We are certain we will finish this film this year.

SMM: What part of Mexico are you working in?

LFH: I am working in Guadalajara, which is the most important city in our country after Mexico City. This city has a big art community and some of the best stop motion animators in Mexico. You can check some great short films like “Jaulas/



Cages”, “Lluvia en los ojos / Rain in the eyes”, they were made by local animators and won a lot of prizes in international festivals.

SMM: How big is your studio and the facilities you are using?

LFH: I am working in a great studio (OUTIK ANIMATION STUDIO). Here I found all the equipment I need, a nice set, advice and solution to each problem I had. You can check some of their work here [OUTIK ANIMATION](#) on Vimeo



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Starburns Industries-The Lost Interview

The following interview was conducted with right after the end of production on the last season of Mary Shelley's Frankinhole. It was a joy to have had worked with the crew on that production and having spent many months there I grew to feeling at home with the studio. This interview with Joe Russo and James Fino two out of the four studio owners at the studio was to be released many years ago. There was actually supposed to be a full Starburns issue with Dino Stanotopoulos and Dan Harman, but due to their heavy work schedule it never came to be. Luckily I found this interview within the library of stop motion magazines catalog of interviews. I hope you enjoy the insight that Joe and James provide.

SMM: Where did the name Starburns Industries come from?

Joe Russo: It's an interesting thing. If we go back a couple of years when our offices were in Hollywood, when we shared a

back wall with Shadow Machine. James and I own a VFX/2D animation company called 2/3D Films and we were walking the neighborhood and ran into a friend. She said "Oh hey I'm working next door on this show called Morel Orel. I think you know the creator Dino Stanotopolous". I was like "Yes I do know him from the old days of Mr. Show". She said "You should come by and do a little studio tour".

So I popped in there and ran around the set and talked to a bunch of people who are now friendly with Starburns Industries. I ran into Dino and I said "Hey Dino how you doing? It's been a long time". He said "Great I F%^&-ing hate this place. Lets get out of here", and I said "What do you mean by that?" He said "I don't like the people here, I don't like the management". The crew was awesome but the management treats him like crap. I said "That's unfortunate. You should do something about that. Start your own business. Are you tied

into this company?" and he said "No". So we went out and had lunch, James, Dino and I; and started talking about putting together a different facility. Somewhere where people could enjoy where they're working and they are treated properly and compensated for the work they're doing instead of being held under lock and key like it seemed like was going on at that other company.

To get to the point of where the name comes from.

We were bating around different ideas for names and I just thought it would be really funny to have an industrial twist on the fictitious factory setup. Dino plays this character on this show "Community" named "Starburns" and I thought that's an interesting name in itself, but than to make it into some working factory environment "Starburns Industries" came around. We all thought it was so absurd that we had to name the company that.

SMM: How long has the studio been open?

Joe Russo: We are a year and a half old now. We weren't even supposed to open until this past February in 2011.

James Fino: we were gearing up to do Frankenhole with Dino.

Joe Russo: Summer of 2010 we were sitting with Dan Harman and Dino Stanotopolous, basically talking and having preliminary meetings about how to get the business plan setup.

James Fino: Dan was interested because he had done channel 101 and we kind of liked the model he had already setup. About bringing in young up and coming artists and helping them.

Joe Russo: But Channel 101 was a non-profit and he wanted to create a for profit model. So Dan was interested on that level and said "What would it take to get a 22 minute animated special from scratch made?" So suddenly we went from this idea to getting the ball rolling. We didn't even have a bank account yet.

James Fino: And the building that we had for the company at the time was more geared for VFX. So we knew we'd have to have a more physical space. With that came the parking spaces that were needed. So we went and did

field trips out and searching for what our building would be.

Joe Russo: With our amazing broker Laura Leeogdan with CBRE. She's a go getter. We said we needed 50 parking spaces and a building next to it. Because we could find all these beautiful facilities, giant buildings with no parking.

James Fino: That's vital, because animators are going to be here and then their friends come and we are going to have weeklies



that we are going to need everyone to easily get in, work, and then get out.

Joe Russo: And secondly she said if we found a building outside of L.A. County there was a different tax bracket for production. Which is great, we save a lot of money being just this side of L.A. County in Burbank.

So then we find this building here in Burbank. She showed us a dozen places, but she said there was this one that would be per-

fect for us. She said "It's a little funky. I know it's not your style. It kind of has this Castle thing going on." So we came and took a look at it and yeah it definitely has a castle look.

James Fino: Literally "Castle", and we are in a neighborhood of castles. There are a lot of buildings out here that have that castle shape theme.

Joe Russo: And we knew that we were going to be doing a show about the Frankenstein Family

so it just kind of made sense for at least that production.

James Fino: The first thing we did was blackout the ceiling completely. There was just one huge open space so we had to start hanging dividers up just to start prepping for the stages. From the get go we were going to have to work with other com-

panies to help build the puppets to help build the stages and just get them in here as quickly as possible. In fact the stages were showing up halfway done and we had a team of painters here finishing off the stages as they came in. That was exciting but it was really burning the candle at both ends trying to make sure everything was going seamlessly.

Joe Russo: There were 60 some odd puppets made and 40 sets built for the Community Christmas Special.



James Fino: Yeah we had 10 stages that we had setup. We put together a team of animators for the very first time. Some people had worked with each other, some people were brand new, but it was really getting everybody up to speed.

Joe Russo: There were no computers, no cameras, no lights, and no infrastructure in the building. It was cabled up in 1978. We had to put in the internet and have the whole thing wired. We didn't have a phone until the beginning of this year.

James Fino: It was from scratch, every little bit of it. We knew we only had 6 weeks of animation. We had to turn everything in by thanksgiving (November). Then we only had a week and a half of digital for VFX and it was going to air December 9th.

Joe Russo: And we turned in our last shot December 8th (2010).

James Fino: It was literally right up to delivery. Everyone was

sweating bullets. But from the very beginning the Network was like "Are you sure you guys can do it?"

Joe Russo: "Absolutely!" as we were shitting our pants.

James Fino: We knew were going to deliver it somehow. We were going to get it all done. And for everybody that came to work on it, it was a chance to work on a Stop Motion Christmas Special that lured everyone because we all grew up on that stuff.

Joe Russo: There was a guy that put in a 12 hour day and found that he had shot the whole scene wrong. He had preplanned his walk cycle and found out that his characters were in the wrong place three quarters of a way through the shot at 12 hours. He said "That's alright I'll start over" and he basically started at 1am and finished at 6 am the next morning and it was that kind of dedication that got that show done.

When all things are said and done, we did this thing, and turned it in, and got the show some great exposure. It basically helped setup the company. We used some of the money to get into the building and buy equipment and get ourselves setup.

James Fino: Community is a show that has some really die-hard fans, and Community (the show) loved it and helped spread all the images through the social networking. Just that look was something that everyone really likes.

Joe Russo: One of our animators Drew Hodges got an Emmy for it.

James Fino: He got it for some amazing pterodactyl scenes he did, Christmas Pterodactyls. The whole thing was just beautiful. We were half dead when it was over, but when we were watching it with our crew during the screening party we had, it was just amazing to see that we had completed it.

Joe Russo: When we came back to the stages after the show had delivered and calmed down, two days prior there was 80 people running around the building and than suddenly it was dead, no one there, stuff everywhere. It was like a big empty box again, and it was so weird to go from complete full bore production to nothing. So we dragged a broom across the floor and got ready for the next production which was “Frankenhole”.



James Fino: We managed to knock out a commercial in-between which was for Little Caesars Pizza. It was a world created out of dollar bills. Then we prepped for Frankenhole.

Joe Russo: Frankenhole started up in February. It was a lot of fun getting that one going too.

James Fino: We got a lot of the original team back for that, and some new people to get up to speed with the look of it, but they did it and it was amazing.

Joe Russo: We had a production designer whom had never worked on the show before; he had worked on Coraline and Fantastic Mr. Fox. He came on

and took his stab at this German Expressionist view of the Frankenstein World, and made this beautiful style for the show. Last session looked good, but it was a lot of tights and two shots, and things like that. This session we got to explore the world a little bit better.

James Fino: We got to explode the scope of the Frankenhole, were as in session one the bar that they all hang out at was a forced perspective miniature, where as this session we built a full scale bar for the puppets and a green screen cove (with the exterior of the bar). We went all out to make sure the quality was knocked out of the park as much as we could.

Joe Russo: We got a lot of help from the guys over at Dragon Frame.

James Fino: Yeah, Jamie and Dyami. They helped us setup all the software and stations up. They were on the phone with us walking us through it.

SMM: How did you get started in Animation and Film?

James Fino: Actually in a round a bout way. I grew up with a real big love of special effects. All I did in El Paso Texas, which is basically the Tatooien of Texas, there's nothing out there, it's just vast...

Joe Russo: No Star wars References...

James Fino: All I did was read



all the Starlog Magazines and the Visual Effects Magazines and that's the direction I wanted to go. When I came out here the first job I got was in sitcom television. Which I thought was just to pay the bills, but I actually loved it. It was really cool to see a production go from a Monday table read all the way to a Friday live performance in front of audiences. It was something I had never considered. So I got a start with the guys from “Mad about You”, doing a pilot with them, and then I went on to “Home Improvement”, and worked with that team for a couple of sessions. The show was number one at its height. I was very fortunate and came in while the show was on top of the world, Tim Allen (Star of the show) was too, and he had a number one movie, Santa Claus.



During my hiatus a friend of mine who was working at Fox knew I was looking for a gig to cover those months. She said "he we're starting up on a pilot, send me your resume because you're from Texas and the show has a lot of heat on it, it's called King of the Hill." The show was from Mike Judge who created Beavis and Butthead, and also Rick Daniels who was a Co-Executive Producer on the Simpsons. So I sent it in and instantly got a meeting the next day and went to Century City and met with Joe Bushey and Mark McKimsey who had come over from working on the Simpsons, and also met Greg Daniels who was awesome.

They said "Yeah, this is great", and then I got a call the next day from Joe Bushey, He said "This is really acquired, I'm sorry, but the person who is leaving decided to not leave after all. So we don't have an opening". I thought "Oh that's ok, I'll go back to Home Improvement" and literally the day before I was supposed to go back to Home Improvement I got a call and they said "She changed her mind!" So I took the job and left Home Improvement, but this was an animation show about Texas and these guys were just amazing. I stayed with them for 5 sessions and that was my animation school.

I was working with the Fox Producers and writers, and interfacing with all my counterparts at Film Roman and I learned animation that way. Towards the

end of that I met Joe (Russo). I got hired away from King of the Hill to go work on the first round of dot coms, there was a company called Media Trip and they hired me away to go work on a series that Kelsey Grammer was going to do one of the first Webisodes. So I worked on that and some friends of mine were working with Joe at his studio. What I loved about Joe was his studio was producing animation of every kind of style I could imagine. I remember think at that point that I wanted to work at a place where I have an opportunity to produce different types of styles and not get locked into one style. So that's where I met up with Joe.



Joe Russo: Man I've had the most blessed and lucky career. I'd like to gear someone who stepped in a bigger pile of shit and made something out of it. I was living in Santa Cruz, going to UC Santa Cruz, but not enrolled. Just going there because it was next door to my family's house. I couldn't afford college and was basically getting myself into trouble sneaking onto cam-

pus and taking classes because I wanted to see what it was like to be a Frat-Rat even though Santa Cruz didn't have a frat. About the same time the school was kicking me off the campus and catching onto my shenanigans I got a call from a friend who said "Hey lets move to L.A. and be rock stars". So I borrowed a motorcycle and rode down here and spent the first night here in LA. I slept in McCarther Park because I didn't know any better.

I escaped death and found an apartment soon there after with a bunch of friends. It was basically a bee-hive of anyone who could afford to hangout with us for a week or two. In the first month I was here I ran into a girl I knew from Northern California. She was subbing in as an office manager at this little animation company because her sister was on maternity leave. We ended up dating and she got me a job as a PA at this little animation company.

The main thing they were producing besides some titles and trailers for movies was this little unknown cartoon that was on the Tracy Almun show called "The Simpsons". At that time no one knew what it was and I was just a lonely P.A. doing cleanup work and labeling pages for Wes Archer and David Silverman who are the animation directors on the show. Because they were doing hand drawn animation and they had a minute a week to produce, there was just the two of them and me. I got thrown into it.



I had to learn how to read mag track which is when you breakdown the soundtrack into syllables and write them down frame by frame on an exposure sheet. I learned how to cleanup the art, ink and paint because sometimes the frames would come back wrong from the only person in town that did that. Anyway I ended up getting onto this crazy little show and over the course of which I was still trying to be a rock star. I was playing gigs and staying out all night drinking and partying. I was missing a lot of work because of it and waking up under my desk. I had totally taken for granted the fact that I was working on a show that, here we are 20 years later and it's still on. People have raised their children who are now working on the show and things like that. I ended up getting myself into a bit of a pickle that fired me.

he didn't want me to work with that company more because my heart wasn't into it, and she was right. It came down that as I was leaving I wanted to say goodbye to my boss. We ended up wrestling because I believe

were his words were "In the old country in order to save face you wrestle". So I ended up wrestling with him, and the producer walked by the door and thought I was beating him up and called the cops. The police showed up and threw me into the back of a squad car. The whole time Guado was laughing. At some point I was praying that they would just reveal the joke to the cops and I wouldn't end up downtown.

So eventually I got sprung and they pulled me into the office, and Guado said "I can't save you anymore. Margo's your boss and if she see's fit to let you go again, that's her call". She took me into her office and told me "I don't want you working here. You don't have what it takes", and just gave me the hard nosed conversation. Which actually I needed more than anything to grab the bull by the horns and take control. I started to realize that there were a lot of people that want to work on that show and in animation at large. There people way more qualified than me that would kill 10 people to get my job. But I had the opportunity to just say yes and take the job and put my best foot forward, so I did.

Session One (The Simpson) started, I started in the background department doing clean-up and within a few months I was doing background layout. By the end of the year I was the background supervisor. The following year I wanted to get into layout so I took the layout test and got promoted to char-



acter layout. Over the course of session two I did the layout for some of the best shows. I remember that Brad Bird Jail House Rock episode that got the show its first Emmy. The Tree house of Horror episode was great. It was the Edger Allen Poe Raven episode that was so much fun to work on.





The singer of the band who took me to the Hospital on his way out the door said to me “I don’t have any way to pay for your hospital fees but you can be in my band”, and then he drove off. After they set my ankle I went back to the party, it was about 3 o’clock in the morning. I basically said that “I was stuck there for the next 6 to 8 months. They told me that they were going to put me in a cast, and I really don’t have anyway to make a living now. Maybe I’ll take you up on this silly job offer of yours”.

He basically said they were going to see if they could get a record deal and were going to do some music videos and try to raise some money and make a record. So we got down to doing some production design and some art direction. One of the videos that we were proposing to do was a stop motion video. Bill was friends with this guy named Fred Stuhr who if you know anything about stop motion animation you know Fred Stuhr is like the God Father of our generation of stop motion animators.

I was fortunate enough to work with Freddie on the Green Jell-O “Three Little Pigs” Music Video only because I was in the band. It wasn’t like he could tell me I couldn’t be on set. We ended up working on this crazy video in the course of a weekend. That and ten other music videos. They were mostly live action. But the band was fairly a Partridge Family version of Gwar.

By the end of session two I was getting antsy, because I still wasn’t following my dream of Rock-n-Roll. I was working on a show that was cool and everything but it still wasn’t the dream I moved to L.A. for. It was right about that time that the show went over to Phil Roman and Klauski was left with some other shows like Rug Rats and Duckman, and stuff like that. So I started working on the other shows that Kauski had to offer and realizing very quickly that I wasn’t a trained animator, I was a fairly skilled copier.

I could do the Simpsons only because I had done it a billion times before, but I couldn’t translate that into other kinds of animation. Not as easily as some of the other people who had gone to school for it. So I got put on special projects, like “Penny” for the Pee Wee Herman show. I did a couple of those then I worked with this guy, Stephen Holland and did some intersti-

tials called “The Perpetually Grinning Man”, which are great. If you look them up on Google they are just awesome. We basically made foam core cut-outs of ourselves and animated ourselves. It was a blast. I got a real hankering for stop motion then working with all those cool mediums and I didn’t have to draw. That was important thing. I just had to move something in increments. I totally understood that part of animation.

It was right about then that I went to a party and there was this notoriously party band called Green Jell-O. We just got wrecked and there was a girl at the party that was being teased by some guys, and I went to try to get the guys away from this girl. We were all on the second floor of this loft. In the ensuing light hearted argument that happened I ended up getting pulled off the balcony and when I hit the ground my ankle shattered.



We just happened to know some cool people, the singer and drummer from Jell-O were also in this band called Tool that was sort of this side project at the time. The guitar player for Tool, Adam Jones and he worked at Stan Winston as a sculptor. He had his fingers in some pretty serious pies with people who knew how to build Marquette's and Ball-in-socket armatures. So when Tool was gearing up to make their first music video Sober, my roommate at the time was the Bass Player in Tool. He was like "Come on down to set and lets make some shit happen". So again I got to work with Freddie on doing the Sober music video, and doing some animation with him. That video did pretty well for the band.

Mean while Jell-O wasn't doing shit. We released the record, and no one bought it. At some point they decided to do another stop motion music video and I got called back in to art direct and do some animation. They got

Freddie to come back and animate other videos. I got to work with him again. But this time it was more of a hands on situation where I got to animate some scenes and get my hand dirty. There were some scene during that "Prison Sex" music video where we were animating meat and the meat was cooking under the lights and the enzymes were coming out of the meat, and as we would wide our hands off onto our pants I got blisters on my thighs from the chemicals on the meat and the glue and shit like that. Than the last night of shooting we had literally finished all physical production for the video before editorial. It was the night of the L.A. earthquakes and all the cameras hit the ground and spooled out, and what was left behind was used in the video. The meat man had a much bigger role in the original video. But that's what ended up on screen.

After that, getting this taste for working in production, I was

really interested in it and I could see doing this kind of animation, I thought it was really cool. But, the label I was on put me on the road with another band. I was to tour around the world. While I was in Europe I saw the "Three Little Pigs" music video, which we thought that that band had come and gone. I thought "what the hell is going on?", so I called management. They said that the band was blowing up and I should come back to LA. Green Jell-O went on the road, toured the world, and did some really cool stuff.

I guess someone had heard the "Three Little Pigs" song in Seattle and then got back to Mtv and ended up Matt Penfield on 120 minutes had it as the number one song for two too three weeks, it was very popular. It was different because suddenly you're not just affiliated with a band that's playing goofy shows; you're in a band that's got some validity. After that experience of being a rock star it was time I wanted to settle down and get a career back on track in animation.



I started my little animation company in 1996 and then every year I just started plugging away and trying to do a little more work. Oddly enough, Green Jell-O was what put me in contact with a show called "Mr. Show" that Dino was a writer and an actor on and here we are 10 years later owning a company together with James and Dan Harman.



SMM: What attracted you guys to Stop Motion?

James Fino: For me as a kid it was magic. It was something that I couldn't put into words really. It wasn't 2D; it was 3D stuff that was being composited with live actors. As a kid I knew that wasn't a man in a suit and for me that was magic. An then I associated it with holiday specials as a kid. Those were always again magical. I had always been drawn to miniature worlds, like

model rail roading. I really big into that aspect of world building with miniatures and getting down into that level of the miniatures. So for me it was something that had always attracted me toward stop motion. At that time I had my own super 8 camera that my dad gave me. In the garage I was trying to reproduce the cloud tank effects and all the physical stuff that was popular at that time, claymation and stop motion.

Diving into my fireworks bag and mixing gun powder and blowing things up in the backyard and experimenting in very dangerous ways. I just wanted to get my hands dirty and make stories. Stop Motion was what definitely drove me toward visual effects and in a round about way taught me animation and now here doing stop motion.

Joe Russo: I remember the Art Clokey and Rankin Bass stuff as a kid and thinking that was really cool and getting into understanding that you take a little object and move it a little bit. Then I was in 5th grade a teacher of mine had an assignment for all of us. She had a super 8 down shooter and wanted us all to do a 2d cartoon. It was a simple project and a lot of people did flowers blooming or a ball bouncing. There was this really cute girl in the class that I wanted to talk to but I didn't have the guts to do it. I rigged it so I would end up being her animation partner. I tried to talk the teacher into letting us do some stop motion. I just wanted to move some things around on the page. She said no

and that we had to stay to the curriculum and tell a story. I was really into "Herby the Love Bug" and so was she (the girl). So we had something in common to talk about.

So I came up with this story where Herby would be driving down the street in one direction and the background starts to move. Then we zip panned to a Russian tank that was rolling down the street in the opposite direction. When Herby and the tank meet up, neither of them will budge because Herby doesn't want to get out of the way. So Herby smashed into the tank and it crumbled to the ground and Herby drove over the tank and off screen. Then an SS Helmet comes up from the rubble and a fist comes up and shakes its hand.



I think that's what got me into animation. What got me into stop motion was working with Fred Stuhr on the "Three Little Pigs" and Tool videos. After that point I was just into stop motion. It took a longtime when; when I first started the company up in 96 we did a lot of stop motion. Than at 98-99 it kind of tapered off and no one wanted to pay for it anymore. It was just too expensive. We shot everything on film, did all our color timing on film, did all our editing on giant Steinbeck's. We didn't have editing on off line or even on line. Everything was linear editing at that point. If you wanted to change a frame you had to go to the beginning and reset everything. It was just a huge expensive giant hassle. When non-linear editing came out and digital workflows came out, things started to come back. I also believe that people started getting tired of looking at these 2D cartoons and these really slick 3D cartoons. You can't

compete with the Pixar's and DreamWorks of the world.

James Fino: But then there was this whole midrange of CGI that came out and weren't that great.

Joe Russo: But you can do it in stop motion for that price point and it will look better and people will be like "Oh!" Suspension of disbelief with this little model moving around, being surrounded in a wash of color and light. There is a beauty to it that you just can't get in a CG model.

James Fino: Yeah, I remember being blown away by all the JPL animation and NASA animation as a kid. They were some of the first CG work I had seen. Of course the "Wrath of Kan" genesis animation that looked amazing and all the early stuff. I think we are past the wonder on CG and so now I think it's all about hand made stuff. Like getting back to the artist and what

is being created by people and by a machine. Thanks to the digital revolution we have the software that with onion skinning allows for a lot more to be done.

Joe Russo: We didn't have any of that shit. All we had was pointers and that was the best you could do. Video Lunch Box a little bit, but this Dragon software has changed everything.

James Fino: Definitely that and the digital post also. I remember on "King of the Hill" in the editing booth all the scenes that came in were transferred to laser disc and all the platters. So than the editor had to work off the Laser Disc and he could do a minimum of doing mouth poses with cut and paste and stuff like that. That's nothing like what they can do now. It's really revolutionized. And all animation platforms, things can be done on the now really effectively and on the fly almost.



SMM: What's next for Starburns Industries?

James Fino: A Feature! That's where our goal is.

Joe Russo: We have some series stuff keyed up. Some 2d and some stop motion stuff. We are actively and aggressively getting scripts together. Dino is reaching out to some of his writer friends. Tony Millionaire has hit us up to do one of his properties. We've been talking to Stan Lee, alley Kauffman.

James Fino: There are a lot of people really interested now in stop motion. A lot of it is thanks to Coraline and the Fantastic Mr. Fox, and the stuff that John Fa-

biro had done with Elf. All of that has really come to the fore front.

Joe Russo: I also want to do games. I want to explore the idea of doing some console games that where stop motion is the medium. It makes since to do it because once you shoot that asset you can replay it a billion times instead of cycles.

James Fino: I said features because naturally you think of something really big, but Joe and I are in the new media council for the Producers Guild. For a few years now we have been working in a variety of different platforms. So Whether or not we start with a game and later it becomes a feature or vice versa we actually

want to bring stop motion onto all the different platforms and do it that way. So whether it's an iPad 2 interactive story book or something like that we want to do stuff like that.

Joe Russo: I don't know if anybody caught the mini marathon of Frankenhole where Victor Frankenstein is promoting session one over the Halloween Holiday, but at the end of it there was a reveal that Victor is not whom he seems to be. He takes off his costume and it's Orel, who kinds of teases "Stay Tuned, there might be a Morel Orel Special".

James Fino: Coming Soon!!!



