Stop Motion

Magazine™

ISSUE #30

This Issue:

EARLY MAN


Stone vs Bronze. A Battle for the Ages.
FROM THE AWARD WINNING TRIBE BEHIND
CHICKEN RUN AND WALLACE & GROMIT
EARLY MAN
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STUDIOCANAL
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: EARLY MAN ISSSUE

Dear Reader.

I am excited to have this issue in your hands and pleased to say that this is a very special one. Having produced this magazine close to 10 years now, I have had the amazing opportunity and pleasure of meeting so many wonderful and inspiring individuals and teams. Add to this those rare opportunities to interview and converse with a large multitude of legendary artists. I was thrilled to get the chance to speak to the legendary Nick Park who had just completed direction on the Aardman film *Early Man*. But I have to confess that I came down with the flu this last winter at the same time I was to meet Nick Park along with animation directors Will Becher and Merlin Crossingham. So that didn't happen. The good news is that I had the blessed opportunity to be able to speak with him and the animation directors over the phone while on their U.S. Tour. Not knowing what to expect in these short conversations over the phone. I was pleasantly surprised to hear that kind soft voice that is purely Nick Park when he answered "Hello". Talking to this legend of clay animation is like meeting a rockstar of stop motion. The interview was amazing and Nick gave some real in depth looks at what it means to make a film at the caliber of Aardman's latest film *Early Man*. Also both animation directors Will Becher and Merlin Crossingham gave an awesome interview over the phone about their methods and this gives us some knowledge about their workflow.

Within this time period we were approaching the OSCARS and this year a short film made by Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter called *NEGATIVE SPACE* was nominated for a Best Animation Short Award. We all met down by the water in Marina Del Rey at a cozy restaurant while they had lunch and I had a virgin bloody mary, yum... Our conversation was uniquely intellectual and their energy was very calm and peaceful and we talked for a good 30 minutes about the depth of their film. There vibe truly grabs hold of you and their artistic vision is magical. These two have a clear design in their heads and it always amazes me when I meet two creative partners who inspire each other and work so well together, even in the moment of a conversation. I look forward to seeing more of their work in the future.

The last article in this issue is with my friend Gino Roy. I first worked with Gino back on the Disney Interactive production *BLANK: A Vinylmation Love Story* where he was acting Art Director and with our small crew brought a world to life. He later went on to direct *A Crane Love Story* which takes place within the Vinylmation world. Gino is one of those artists that is just naturally blessed with talent. He can take a style and simulate it's feel and vibe while bringing it a look that's refined and with purpose. Gino gave me a call over a year ago to help him build a project that he was working on for Tyler the Creator and VICELAND. I ended up building silicone puppets from Gino's head sculpts and drawings based on characters that Tyler had sketched and envisioned. One added piece I was to make was a sports car that was a hybrid design. I ended up 3D printing that large beast of a design and the end result allowed for a clay sculpted look of the car. The short that Gino directed for Tyler came out great and I have to acknowledge Mike Ambs for his beautiful set and problem solving along with Tyson James for his great animation work on this project. It came out amazing. I has really happy to finally get an interview with Gino about the project and I hope you like it. He's a person who you should definitely keep an eye out for in the future.

Enjoy the Magazine and Keep Animating!

John Ikuma
Executive Editor
Stop Motion Magazine

BJB TC-1630 REVIEW

(Urethane Material for making Molds and Impressions)

The hot new trend in the prop making / puppet making production environments is the versatile and wear resistant Urethane mold making materials. The top dog in this arena is BJB TC-1630. This material produced by BJB Enterprises is hands down the industry standard when talk of modern silicone mold injecting is discussed. This is all due to the quick cure time of the TC-1630 and the incredible strength and retention of the accurate detail left by the mold making process. TC-1630 comes in a two part kit where you mix equal parts of A and B. Take note however that these two materials should be premixed on their own due to the material settling in the container before combining the A and B parts. Having 3 separate Jiffy Mixers and a powerful drill is highly suggested. The chemicals are also very powerful and you should have good ventilation and use an organic based filtered respirator (3M makes one).

The process in making the molds is amazingly fast. Within 2.5 hours you can have a mold completely poured. This doesn't account for the time required to prep your piece, but still that is amazing given a plaster mold can take between 3 to 24 hours in the pouring process and even longer depending on the scale. There's no post baking of cured molds with the TC-1630. You just pour the mold halves and then clean them. There's really nothing left other than casting at this point. The amount of detail that the mold retains is extraordinary. Having made hundreds of plaster molds I can assure you that you won't get the same level of detail with plaster molds that you will with TC-1630. Especially at the small scale level required for puppet making. The molds also stand up to continuous use. On a recent project I pulled over 100 silicone castings from 4 molds without loss of detail. The molds are so strong that silicone injection casting is a very real and obtainable technique.

The versatility of the material also allows for Foam Latex Casting. This is crazy! This means that the foam latex puppet castings can have even more detail than before. The major thing to watch out for when applying a urethane mold making technique is the bubbles that can form from steam build up. Steam channels should be considered along with mold rotation throughout it's baking process. I would also suggest low temperature curing as well so as not to "pop" the mold. The also have low shrinkage and this is vital when trying to reproduce parts. You can also cast TC-1630 in silicone molds which opens a whole lot of other options when considering a puppet and prop making material.

TC-1630 is amazing and I would suggest for anyone interested in producing high-end puppets to consider this material. The advantages that it provides are enormous. The only downsides are the added cost compared to inexpensive plaster and the need for extra ventilation in your workspace, or wear a cartridge respirator to ensure you limit exposure to any fumes present in the material. At around $89 us, I would suggest seriously planning out you mold making process. Also, you do not want to use water based clays or introduce moisture into the mold making process. Urethane hates water when in liquid form. And if I could give you anymore tips I would say use a brush on wax release for mold making and be sure to use a Klean Klay type clay like Van Aken Protolina.

Find out more at bjbenterprises.com

An Interview with this years Oscar Nominated filmmakers for Best Animated Short Film, directing duo Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter.

Lately extraordinary animated films seem to be popping up everywhere. The festival competition is heightened more than ever. When an exceptionally good film comes out it should definitely be recognized for its contribution to animation film culture. This year the highly talked about and audience favorite short film Negative Space, made by Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter, was deservedly nominated for an OSCAR.

This alone speaks volumes to its touching story and beauty, which will influence many artists within the community for generations. The film takes place through the eyes of the narrator as he shares the story of his relationship with his father who is often gone on business trips. The narrator talks about packing his father's luggage and the process that is required to make everything fit into its proper place. When watching this film it is not too far fetched to see the parallel of the narrative and the use of space in luggage being a metaphor for relationships. Do we leave the space between the ones we love filled with missed opportunities to spend time with them or do we adjust and make sure every bit of space and time is filled with life and enjoyment? Man...that's a very deep message that the poet who wrote the original poem, Ron Koertge, was placing into his work or I've merely over-analyzed a simple story. The only way to really find out is to ask the filmmaker what their take is on this beautiful piece of art that they made, and find out more about the process that was involved in its construction.

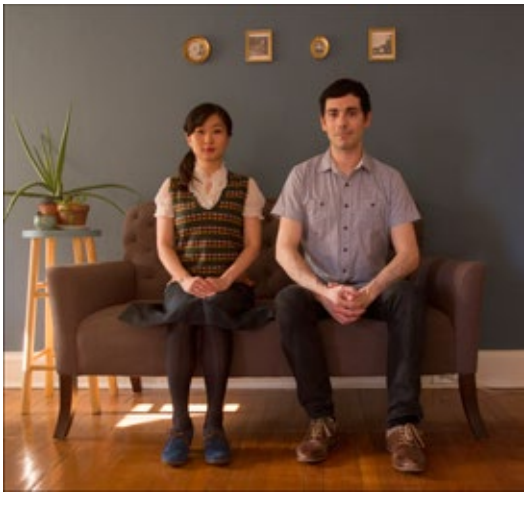
SMM: How was the poem discovered and why was it chosen for the production?

Max: That's actually funny because we got to meet the poet who wrote the poem yesterday. The poem was actually discovered on Facebook of all places. It's Ron Koertge's poem "Negative Space" from his book "Sex World" by Red Hen Press. Someone had posted it on Facebook and it was one of those weeks or months where it was all just political screaming, and this poem kind of cut through the noise and really spoke to us immediately. We felt that the poem was rich, it had a real strong humorous quality but it also had real depth to it. It spoke to family relationships so it was something that was universal. And then Ru had a personal connection to the subject matter.

Ru: My father was a pilot and he used to have a packing list next to his desk and so my memories of him packing all these clothes to go to Europe or U.S. for two to three weeks at a time. So when I read the poem it was kind of like my childhood coming back to me immediately.

SMM: Where did the filming take place?

Ru: We spent three months at Ciclic Animation, which is in Vendome France. That's where we made sets, puppets, and props. We shot interior scenes and then we went to Paris for one month to shoot exterior scenes. This is at Manuel Cam (Studio) and then we came back to Ciclic Animation for three months for post production. So we had four different locations in nine months in France and that's where we did the production and we finished.



SMM: There's a very textural feel to the film and the puppet heads look like they are made from sculpted paper clay and everything is meticulously hand crafted. Why did you choose this aesthetic and look?

Ru: We wanted to get the handmade feeling because it is about relationship, it is about something warm and we wanted to get the texture as much as possible for the clothing and object scenes and make them so alive. So we chose several materials. Well first of all fabric, cotton, linen and then we kind of started from there and explored different materials and landed to kind of like a paper mache kind of clay. Like a pulp, but the thing is first I made some paper mache type of puppets and then of course it's going to break during production because it's fragile. Though we put some layers of poly earth in, it's still too weak, so we asked a puppet maker to cast the head and made it into resin. So it still has the texture but it's plastic.

SMM: Can you talk a little bit about the tunnel scene and how it was shot?

Max: The tunnel scene is one of the only shots in the movie that has compositing. We spent a long time trying to figure out if it was possible to do everything by hand with one shot. Eventually we landed on having the car shot on a green screen with two spotlights on tracks. So they created a feeling of lights passing over the character, and, then we digitally composited the tunnel background receding in the distance.

SMM: How big was that tunnel?

Max: The tunnel was created as textures and then we mapped it onto CG for the background element.

SMM: What about the shot right before that with all the miniatures?

Max: That's about two and a half meters long and we spent some time trying to find out how to make it feel even smaller. We raised the camera, shot sort of with a god's eye view and really made all of the cars as small as possible to emphasize that it's all miniatures. Part of forcing perspective was there was a look that we were going for but there was also a practical solution. We didn't have huge sets or a huge studio to shoot in. So we had to emphasize our depth with cheats.

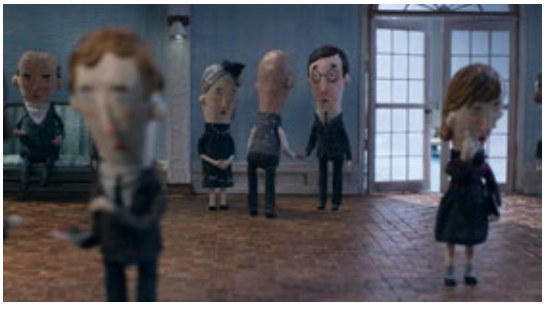
SMM: There was a really good play on scale in the short. How does this define the characters' needs, wants, and imagination from the directors view?

Max: At its core we asked the question "what kind of space does a parent take in a child's life? And how does that space change over time?". So using scale we wanted to show how the father was a big force and a big part of the child's life early on and how that changed over time. So scale and playing with perspective and shifts like that was a way of invoking an emotional space.

Ru: I think when we were developing or when we were in production, that was our director's intention to portray that and that also influenced the type of animation we wanted. We had a little coolness between the father and son so that the ending made sense. It wasn't this great loving, touching, like they would do everything together, it wasn't like that. So that was the intention. But during the production, and even after, I started to think about it further. I think originally it was meant to be a little bit empty, sad, a little bit regretting. But now I feel like they had a connection, and that's not sad at all. They had something to be able to put the finger on, like "we had a connection over packing". My feeling had changed after the film in a way and I also thought, like, no matter how many things you have in life, when you die you can't take anything with you, so that's also this empty space. No matter how your father is, whether it's a good or bad relationship, it takes up a lot of your space and who you are; and, when that person is dead, that is a lot of empty space. So I felt like after the film I started to think in many, many ways about relationship and space and what it means, but now I feel like it's not completely sad and it does have a charming feeling that they have something together.

SMM: What type of tie-downs did you use for the puppets?

Max: We used M3 screws but because the puppets are so top heavy, they have these giant bulbous heads and tiny little feet, we had rigs for every single shot. That was sort of a pain in post production, but it was one of the design choices that we absolutely wouldn't compromise on. The heads got lighter over time because the second puppet maker that we worked with started to mix fiberglass into the resin.



SMM: How big were the puppets?

Ru: It's 24cm's. So about 8 inches.

Max: The smallest puppet was about 6 to 5.5 inches.

SMM: What kind of equipment did you use?

Max: We shot with Canon 5D's, Mark3's, had some old Nikon manual lenses. We had a few Zeiss lenses, a few Dedo lights, an Arri, and that's about it. We had a motion control set up with a Dito Gear Omni Slider. We shot everything into Dragonframe 3 and now that we've played with Dragonframe 4 we wished we had shot with that, but it was rock solid. It was a great setup for us.

SMM: There's a lot of walk cycles in the short film. Yet the movements are excellent in the individualistic performances for each characters and how they were feeling. Can you elaborate on this?

Max: So Suvan (Lead Animator), I almost feel as if I can't speak for him. He's meticulous, he plans everything out and he thinks very deeply about what he's doing or going to do before he does it. He asks a lot of questions to the director. He wants to know what the character's motivation is. He does tests. He blocks all the work and does pop tests, plans everything out in an x-sheet. But in the end, I think he has a natural sense of timing and pacing. That one sequence towards the end when the main character is walking towards the casket. It was important to us that it is a long walk because we wanted you the audience to begin to think about what the character is thinking in that moment and give some time to the spectator to kind of go through the thought process of the main character.

SMM: Did either of you take on specific rolls during this production?

Ru: When we were developing storyboard animatic, sketches, those are all done together. We go back and forth. It's almost like a conversation usually. To the point where I don't know who came up with what and more. Because sometimes he'll come up with an idea, I'll do a drawing, he'll do another drawing, and it's like a collaborative idea at the end. I'm more in charge of the design phase and the set-building, and the animation we share. I tend to take on more of a discussion about the character animation. Max takes on more of the cinematography, post production, editing. In general, I'm a little bit front heavy and he's back heavy.

SMM: Why did you choose to go to Europe to do the production?

Max: Part of that is that we've done films ourselves in the United States. They've usually been done in between paid work. We were interested with this project to go to a place where we could find funding to do what we wanted to do. France in particular has a long history of and appreciation for short films as an art form and specifically short animation. So we actively sought out opportunities with french producers and we were able to make it happen.

SMM: Anything that you've gained from this production that you walk away with proudly, other than the film itself?

Max: I'm going to sum it up in a very simple way. So we met with Ron Koertge yesterday who is the writer of the poem and Ru asked him how he felt after he finished writing that poem, and the word he used was gratitude. That he felt gratitude that the words came to him and that he was able to write something of value. That's just the general feeling I have, gratitude for all the people that we worked with, gratitude for what we learned. This was very much an education. Everybody that we worked with actually taught us about their process and let us into their process. What we took away from the process besides the film is invaluable.

Ru: One of the special things about the production of Negative Space was that we lived together while we were working. I think that also made it very special that we discussed a lot about our own family situation or issues, because the topic is about relationships and we spent a lot of time and got to know each other. We went through bad times and good times all together so I felt like we gained a family at the end and we feel very close to them. Eight of us will be together for the Oscar week. We got a big house in West Hollywood so I'm happy to join with them again. I think that's what I took away, or what we took away from the experience.


EARLY MAN
NICK PARK
Interview

There are far too many positive things I can say about Nick Park and Aardman's film sense and production qualities to put in this article. But I'll try to touch upon some of the best aspects of their latest film Early Man. For one thing having had the chance to interview Nick Park and discuss the film in depth I could tell that he is a genuine kind and gentle soul with a passion for storytelling and a vision all his own. The film is definitely a world populated by the unique designs that only Nick Park could envision along with a story that is both fun and whimsical.

Early Man takes us into the prehistoric world populated by clay cavemen and women. Their innocence and life are fairly normal for the time period, with activities such as hunting rabbits, talking about hunting rabbits, and not catching those rabbits. We follow Dug who is the main character through his struggle to save his valley home from the destructive forces of the Bronze Men, whose only goal is to mine and collect the precise metal from the valley basin. Dug must win back his freedom and the valley for his people by playing a game of football in the Bronze Men's arena. Will Dug and his people win? Well, you have to watch the movie to find out. But what you can find out is how the idea and concept was developed by Nick and his team at Aardman. I was very blessed to have the opportunity to talk to Nick and get his insight into the process. So sit back, relax, and enjoy this interview with one of the most iconic stop motion filmmakers of our time.

SMM: You've created this beautiful world of Early Man. Can you talk to us about how making a film like the first Wallace and Grommit compares to making this current film Early Man?

Nick Park: Yes, oh gosh yeah. Wallace & Grommit...that happened so long ago. I was a student when I was doing Grand Day Out, so it was a much different kind of scale. You know I was making the puppets myself, building the sets myself, doing most of the animation, probably 99% of the animation myself.

I ended up doing the lighting and the camera and everything, as well. A lot of it, anyway. So, creating it, you know, it's a world of terraced houses and cheese, a small town where Wallace lives. A very different universe. This was stepping out in a different time. I guess back then, doing Wallace & Grommit as a student, and then when I even moved to Aardman, it was all very economic and how to get the best effect through economy.

There weren't very big skies, if it was an exterior shot you'd be thinking about how there would be a set built in the foreground, but we'd use that theatrical thing of forced perspective, you know, to make the background fall off and have an actual perspective in the shot. It was all shot sort of economically. There were some camera moves to start with, but very basic. With this there's been a lot of water under the bridge from then and now, although parts of me longs for that simplicity. You know three characters, one speaking character. With Early Man obviously it was a step in another direction entirely and that was what was exciting and inviting about it. To create these brand new landscapes and world between the stone age, the valley, a green lush valley, the bronze world, the prehistoric bad lands with volcanos. I was very inspired by the work of Ray Harryhausen and One Million Years BC. Even watching the trailer for One Million BC gave us this little basis for the opening. In a way this one has two worlds, the stone age which was very round friendly and nice, and the bronze world which was more spikey, contrasty, and hostile, which had a strong bronze element to it. It was a bit of a challenge. We couldn't do everything. We didn't even have studio space to house some of the sets. So we built landscapes as big as we could but then we'd go to green screen and put digital skies in or maybe volcanoes. In the stadium we would create the crowd digitally as well, but not all. Some close-ups were stop frame.

We tried to keep all the principle animation stop motion and the puppets. Even on the field where they play football we built the pitch, the field itself, but it was so big that the scale we chose, each puppet was about a foot high, that because it was so big the animator couldn't even reach onto the sets to reach all the characters so we would have to go into digital characters for the background. Anything that was really big or thousands of, like the crowd, we'd go digital.

SMM: In your development you had a live unit. Was there a lot of acting on your part to convey the movement to the animators?

Nick Park: Exactly, that was my main tool really. It was the best way of showing what's in my head and relaying that to the animators. Almost every shot in the film, actually, I had to act through. I was often miming to the voice of Eddie Redmaine or Tom Hiddleston or Maisey sometimes, as well. I got together with my animation directors or the animators. We'd often act stuff through together. It was a way of me, not to copy it religiously or accurately, because then it would become very like live-action, but to sort of point out this is the comedy timing, this is the kind of look that I'm after. Some things are quite difficult to do ourselves physically, like if there is something really violent that happens, or somebody falling, like when Dug falls down through the bleachers, that would have been hard to do.

SMM: That was hilarious!

Nick Park: Thank you, yeah we just had to make that up.

SMM: In the past you probably had to do a lot of sculpting and drawing for your designs, but in this phase as the director and executive producer do you still do a design phase for yourself and then hand it off to artists that draw and sculpt?

Nick Park: Yes, I'm still very hands-on in that way, even though I'm directing, and designing over all these people, massive teams of 40 to 45 animators. Because I come up with ideas myself I tend to be with the writer contributing ideas all the time and kind of guiding the whole thing. But I'm coming up with drawings all the time to show the writer what the characters might look like, or we may come to a part in the story where it needs some kind of funny idea, a slap stick idea, so I sketch it and show Mark and he's incorporating it into the story. On the design itself I like to stay hands-on with the character design. I tend to draw the characters all the time. We get those mocked up as models and then I tweak the models until they are right. The same with the set department - they want to know what I'm thinking so I may do some doodles and sketches. It all starts with sketches and doodles.

SMM: How did the idea of Early Man come about? How did you come up with the initial idea?

Nick Park: It kind of, again, really, a lot of these ideas come from a drawing or a sketch. I remember sketching a caveman. I've always been attracted to the idea of a tribe of cavemen and women in animation terms. I feel it particularly suites the medium, stop frame. The earthiness of it the real visceral nature of it, the clay and the hair. I was drawing a guy with a club hitting a rock and that got me thinking about sport and whether a caveman can play sport. Then the story idea sort of quickly started to develop from there. I thought to myself I've never seen a prehistoric sports movie before. So that sort of inspired me to do a new idea. How did the cavemen invent football, what if they had to win a game in order to be able to win something valuable back.

SMM: The film is very tried and true to the traditional stop motion animation techniques. You kept a lot of the boiling and chatter in the film that most productions try to eliminate. You also made a film that is kind and gentle in comparison to most animated films out there today. Can you talk a little about these two aspects of Early Man?

Nick Park: Yeah there are a few things there really, but it was very much like you say, wanting to get back, even though we probably used technology more extensively than ever because of the nature of the story taking us to these amazing landscapes. At the same time I always wanted to get back to the clay. The clay is so important and a sort of humor comes from the clay. I love the fur and the fabrics. That's been a very important thing because it has a sort of charm of its own. It makes you mindful of King Kong or early animation. Animators often shy from things like fur and hair because it will move around, as you say,boil. I was often saying, yes, that's good, lets go with it as long as the character comes through.

Yeah, the story is quite gentle, and big and dramatic at times. We had all sorts. You know, you go through so many story meetings. We make the whole thing with storyboards first, a giant animatic, or a story reel, putting our own voices on or temporary music... trying to find the shape of the story and then we show it to the studio, we show it to the team and get loads of notes back. Maybe the story has come off kilter here or maybe it becomes too much about the wrong person, you know it goes out of balance, so we have to redo scenes. We probably had to storyboard everything about twenty times really.

SMM: In the scriptwriting phase how many drafts did you have to go through?

Nick Park: I don't know how many drafts. There were quite a few. You know Mark and I would sit in a room in front of a board pinning cards up on a wall to get all our ideas together. We pin those cards up on the wall and try to find the story. As soon as we are reasonably kind of happy we might read a treatment, let people read it or pitch the idea to people, get notes back, come back and reshuffle everything. Try things a different way and then we start writing drafts. We probably wrote 10 to 20 drafts. Somewhere between that.

SMM: What's your favorite aspect of filmmaking in general?

Nick Park: My favorite really is the thinking up of ideas. I just love the initial brainstorming or thinking of ideas. I love being part of the writing process as well and designing characters is one of my favorite things to do. I love that element on paper, and as drawings, and then when we start making the models as well. I still like to be a bit hands on, to tweak things and change them to make them look right, like how can it look funnier.

SMM: Do you miss animating and taking on the role of an animator?

Nick Park: I do miss animating. It's just the price you pay when making a bigger project of a feature film. We had 35 to 40 animators working on this thing, shooting simultaneously different scenes at the same time, and just getting around the studio floor would have been too much. So that's why I had a team below me: two animation directors, I would brief them really, and they would go feed stuff to the floor. We would all get on the same page. Making films is a great thrill to think up an idea and bring it to the big screen in a cinematic way. So I feel very lucky to be able to do that, but at the same time part of me misses animating. These things are such long haul projects, you've got to have a lot of staying power, holding on to jokes throughout. So when I'm in the middle of a project, I start to long for the day when it was two characters where one of them spoke and the other one was a dog. It becomes very attractive to make shorter films. It's been worth it. I love being able to make large feature films, and, I feel very hands on with it, but maybe less directly.

WILL BECHER & MERLIN CROSSINGHAM

EARLY MAN ANIMATION DIRECTORS INTERVIEW

Being an animator is not an easy job, and being an animation director is equally a taxing situation even for seasoned professionals. One of the amazing things that always stuns me is how open and friendly animation directors are in communicating about their craft. Maybe it's because they constantly need to convey their ideas without obstruction so the animator being directed doesn't lose their marching orders in translation. Or maybe it's because they are just good people with a shared passion. Whatever it is I can say that talking to Early Man animation directors Will Becher and Merlin Crossingham was a pleasure and a real treat. Being able to pick the brains of some of the industry's most talented people is not only an honor but an opportunity that no one should pass up. I was extremely lucky to be able to interview both Will and Merlin over the phone while I nursed a 101 Degree fever when battling the flu. They were so gracious and kind I really could not thank them enough for giving me the time to chat about my favorite subject, which is, of course, Stop Motion Animation!

SMM: Why was the chatter, boiling, and imperfections left in the film?

Will: Part of the briefs at the beginning of the film was that Nick wanted to get these characters looking organic and having a handmade feel to all of them. But also he's really keen to getting this rust raggedy fur. So all the cave characters have real hair and real fur which we hadn't ever done before with plasticine. And it was part of our initial testing when we got the first puppets, and, the first time we started moving them around, Nick was really keen that we didn't try to hard to hide the fact that it was a stop motion film. I think partly maybe because on Chicken Run everything started to look quite clean and slick and not everyone was aware that it was stop motion. So it was sort of going back to the roots of this handmade thing and really we had to work quite hard with some of the animators because it doesn't come naturally to them, to just let things spoil about. And we had to keep an eye on it because it could get a bit distracting sometimes; but, generally it was all motivated by what they were doing with these tiny puppets.

Merlin: What we also found was if something was boiling you only really noticed it when it stopped. So if something started boiling because the animator had to handle that part of the puppet, if they had to stop handling for whatever reason during the shot, we sort of encouraged them just to keep on aggravating the boiling....just so it wouldn't stop. When it stops and starts it just kind of catches your eye, but if it's constantly there and feels natural, then you just go with it.

SMM: How did you dictate direction to the animators?

Will: We really went through the process that we've been through ourselves as animators in that we get a very detailed brief from Nick of the sequence. Merlin and I would take on different sequences of the film and then really go through every shot. Shot by shot with the animators listening to the audio and trying to explain to them exactly what the shot was for and why it was there. Then we'd act it out with our live action unit. It's a very detailed process, obviously, because stop motion takes so long and we have very little room for error.

Merlin: Also we didn't ever really talk to the animators about animation because that's what they do. It's their job. We were always talking to them as if they were actors really. Well because they are the actors. So we're talking about the emotional rhythm or the comedy beats or whatever the important point of the shot was in terms of the story, telling the character or giving the character the performance it needs on screen. Like Will said, it's just in case and making sure when you depart and the animator goes to do the animation, that as many of the questions are answered as possible because, as you know, there is no going back with stop motion. It's a one hit wonder.

Will: And so organic as well. Sometimes we'd get shots back that weren't quite what we expected, which is part of the fun, challenge, and also what makes it so unique as a film process.

Merlin: And it's a fine line between going "that's not what I expected but it's great and it works", or "that's not what I expected, we're going to go again."

Will: Yeah, there's sort of a level of trust you have to build up as a team.

Merlin: There were about 40 animators, so it was quite a lot of people to get their heads around.

SMM: Can you explain a little bit about the Live Action Unit and what their role was?

Will: Yeah, we have used the live unit on most of our feature films, and really it's the best way of getting across from the director how a scene or shot might be performed. So it's looking at the timing, the motivation for a scene and a shot. We would go in there with Nick and we'd do maybe ten different takes of the same line of dialogue or action just to try and find and solve how this shot should be in this live action unit before the animator then would spend a week or two creating.

Merlin: It's kind of used as a rehearsal tool partly, but most importantly it's a tool to communicate, like Will says, what's the unique point of performance for what that shot is. The animators don't copy the live action. They use it as a reference. Because animation timing and human beings' timing are often radically different. So the animators use their understanding the world's rules that we've created for this movie and apply those kinds of amplification or exaggeration of timing that's suitable to the character or situation. But the live action video provides us with an insight to what makes the performance human and that's what the audience responds too. That's where we illicit the emotional response from the audience. And you do things when you act that you're just not aware of if you were to sit and just plot it out and over think it and so often you're looking for the unexpected.

Will: And we'd create new ideas sometimes in there and find things that worked really well or was really funny that then we could add to that film. The other neat thing that we had was the model making of a huge sort of a caveman outfit, and a wig as well, to get into character. So we had a Dug wig, we had a massive spear, whatever we could get our hands on to get into the scene.

SMM: So is there a whole film of live action from you guys?

Will: Yeah!

Merlin: You probably could cut one together.

Will: We have got a whole sequence that we cut together just to show how we'd done it, some behind the scenes to show the process, and, it's hilarious.

SMM: What was the most difficult shot that you had to direct in the sequences?

Will: The thing that I'm still constantly learning is that there is no such thing as an easy shot. So there's nothing in the film, you know, we'd look to the week ahead of what we're going to do, and, it's always

those small closeup shots that you'd think would be a real easy shot to get through. But they are always more complex. I think one of the most complicated things I did was the message bird scene, and there was one shot in particular where we had the message bird on the table grabbing Nooth's nose and twisting it. We only had one puppet of the message bird and it wasn't built to the same scale as any of the other puppets. It was much bigger. So in order to create that shot we spent a long time, had two different animators working in two different units on two different scales, shooting that shot at the same time. So we did it all. One of them had the message bird holding a sort of representation of what was Nooth's nose and the other one had Nooth with what was the representation of what was the message birds hand. It was just incredible. The timing between them and the fact that they were shooting the same shot blind really was amazing.

Merlin: I'd say the same as Will, but, it's the simple-looking shots that deceive you and catch you out. The big shots and when it's a big set piece number, you know there's going to be testing time, you're going to work the shot, you're going to rehearse it, block it, test the camera moves, and you problem solve it as you go. The crew kind of steps up for those big shots. Where they're a lot of work, and not kind of really difficult, they're just a mountain that you have to climb. It's the close-up character performance shots which have to convey something which can't be spoken, they are the hardest shots to do. Because it might be you know the tiniest movement of the fraction of an eye that gives the whole shot away and just getting to that point with the animator where they understand what is required from the performance. For me those are the most challenging shots.

Will: Just like Merlin said, the tiniest movements, each animator animator would do it differently. The tiniest movement of the character's brow with the clay, you know that makes a difference between whether it reads or not as a feeling.

SMM: What kind of oil did you use to smooth out the clay?

Merlin: Spit!

SMM: I heard that is common, but some people use eucaliptus or some other kind of oil to smooth clay out.

Merlin: You can use stuff like lighter fluid to melt it away.

Will: None of the animators used anything apart from their hands to press the clay around, just their finger to smooth over it. The only other thing we used is baby wipes for cleaning the clay when it gets dirty.

Merlin: Like Will said we didn't actually try and smooth it out too much. We like the kind of slightly lumpy, bumpy feel of a very hand sculpted approach. While shapes needed to happen, like break lines and those sort of obvious qualities from the model. Keeping sort of the texture alive and hand crafted was really awesome.

SMM: Speaking to that, you guys did silicone puppets with the fingerprints from the sculpts still left in them.

Will: It's a continuation to what we did with the heads. If the arms and legs, that on a whole, were silicone components, they would feel like they weren't part of the same being. It's very tempting when you are making a sort of master mold to smooth everything out, but actually keeping the texture of the thumb prints in there was really important. Recent advances, like in the last couple of years in silicone technology has allowed us to do this, where before you probably couldn't of got as detailed a sculpt recreated, with the thumb prints and the textures like that, and keep it looking like modeling clay. Previously silicone has always looked a bit rubbery or plasticky. It's only been recently that we have actually been able to do this and it's worth saying that in some scenes the arms and the legs were actually done in modeling clay. So they were swappable even in the same shot. You could start with a silicone arm and if you needed to do something extreme that a silicone arm wouldn't achieve, you could swap it out for modeling clay with action.

SMM: What was the shooting technique for the animation? Did you bounce between ones and twos or did you stay on ones the whole time?

Will: Classically it's all on twos but whenever there is a camera move we'll shoot it on ones or we have this weird thing where we shoot on one and a half's, which sort of keeps the feeling of twos but works with the camera. Nick's natural style is very big and bold and poppy, and, really, ones don't suit it. It doesn't quite fit in their world. So most of the time it's on twos.

SMM: Any special techniques you had to pull out of the past to use on this production?

Will: I could kind of talk about the lighting and stuff. Dave Alex really got into his element and spent a long time playing with jam jars attached to a motor and was turning around in front of the lights to create a sort of flickering candle-lit caves, and that kind of thing. So we did really try to keep everything we can in camera, from a lighting and an animation point.

Merlin: I think wherever possible, we'd keep it in camera, but that's not to say that we did this exclusively. I think it's sort of wonderful if it does span historic filmmaking techniques and the latest cutting-edge filmmaking techniques. But you know just in terms of rigging where the character has to jump off the floor, you whip up these kind of amazing kind of rigs that the rigging department concocts for the animators, but sometimes it's just a bit of fishing wire will suffice. So it's really a case of understanding what's needed and having a sort of library of knowledge in the crew where someone could really be sort of over-egging the pudding and someone would go "oh no you can just do this", and everyone's like "WOW! That's so simple? How did you do it?". "Well, we've been doing it for years." It's just great having a bank of knowledge and experience within the team. Aardman is a wonderful resource.

Will: Also adding to that there's the fact that having new people come into this, so we're using a lot of crew that's worked with Nick for many years, but we also got new crew, and, they bring with them fresh ideas as well. Which is great 'cause it really worked out. Everyone that comes to the project brings something to it. The other thing is the Mammoth, probably the most complex puppet that we've ever built which spans four different departments, all working together for six months to build something that was so big it needed scaffolding to be held on the set.

Merlin: It was huge.

[laughter]

Will: We only made one Mammoth because it was so complex and then had to re-animate it over and over again to create an army of them.

SMM: That's a lot of compositing.

Will: Yes...

SMM: During the time period of character development did you guys get your hands dirty and animate some of the characters to help develop the movements, or did you hand that to the animators?

Merlin: I didn't. I don't know about you Will, but it was mainly an amazing team of animators who led that.

Will: Very early on I did the first sort of puppet test with Barry, who was the first puppet that got made. This was probably a year before the shot started and that was it. I think I had about a week animating right at the beginning but there was no one else in there at that point. The development animators that we had were incredible creating these new, never before seen Nick Park characters and bringing them to life.

SMM: It was beautiful. With the characters is Nick trying to stay within the world of Wallace and Grommit Universe?

Will: I don't think he is consciously doing that, but, it is very much from his head. He designed all the characters on paper for several years.

Merlin: I think it's just his MO (mode of operation). Most of it comes from his heart and Early Man has come from the same place and I think it's his style, really. And with HogNob there is a sort of connection there between Grommit and Wallace, HogNob and Dug. I think, though, that it evolved through the film.

Will: It wasn't intentional. That's just one of the things that happened and they do work very well together. So the more you see that relationship growing, the more useful it becomes.

SMM: Did you use Front-Light/Back-Light technique or Green Screen when you shot the composited animation?

Merlin: We used chroma-key (green screen) mostly. Blue and green depending on the situation. We have a lot of green grass so we used a lot of blue and then we'd use a lot of green. On occasion we did use luma mattes or silhouette passes but they were rare really.

Will: And actually we only got really into the green screen stuff toward the end of the film when they're in that bigger stadium. Everything else was shot on set.

SMM: Were the background characters CG for the stadium?

Merlin: In parts.

Will: In the stadium we had, whenever it was a really wide shot we had a sort of guide line. We had thirty to forty puppets built for the crowd. So whenever you see the puppets acting that's done by one of our very hard working assistant animators who cut his teeth on this film and animated thirty background characters.

Merlin: And actually the players on the pitch, there just came a point where either we didn't have enough of the hero puppets to fill the players on the pitch or it was just impractical from a time perspective to sort of split the workload. The foreground puppets, probably I'd say that if there was twelve all running around, the front six would probably be stop motion and then we actually had hero digital doubles for all of the tribe and all of the Real Bronzio players as well.

Will: The whole pitch was built for real so we had this huge, massive grass set with the pitch on and wherever the animator could reach, we had stop motion puppets. But all the background and all the sort of digital doubles were done in house as well. We had a team of about eight animators working under Loyd, who's the head of animation and he got them sort of on-model, in terms of performance and keeping them stop motion-y.

SMM: What are your personal feelings on the difference of the charm of stop motion and the sterile look of CGI and incorporating the two together?

Merlin: Well hopefully on this movie, for the most part, you can't tell. I think with CG in, the temptation is to polish and polish and polish and polish, because you can. Some stop motion animators would do the same, given the opportunity. They want it to be as perfect as possible. Going back to what Will said right at the beginning, we work quite hard to maintain that sort of charm and lumpy bumpiness. Not to say that there's bad animation, far from it, the animation is very suitable and not distracting. It's part and parcel of the world. But I think CG could be that too if people wanted it to be. I think it's a stylistic choice that comes down when you are at the beginning of a project. In fact, at Aardman we have done quite a bit of CG that looks very stop motion-y that you wouldn't necessarily know. It's sort of been nicknamed "lock motion". So, yes, we do it, but you probably don't know when we have done it.

Will: Also, I think that the really exciting sort of opportunity for stop motion films to feel a lot bigger because of CG, rather than separating them out. I think what LAIKA and Aardman are starting to do is to weave the CG into the background just to make the world feel more real and more epic, which certainly this film had in its onset.

Merlin: And this film is a stop motion film, but, at the beginning of the film we didn't go "Right! This is stop motion exclusively, we are not doing anything other than stop motion". It's whatever is best for the project, and, so the movie will feel bigger, better, more epic with the help of the digital toolkit that is available. So then, why not? It can only get better and it's about using the tools that you have available and doing the best with them and aiming for them to come together and work in harmony, and, hopefully, your picture looks as good as possible at the end of the day.

SMM: How do you feel about the future of animation and where stop motion fits into that?

Will: Everyone that works at Aardman loves making stop motion films. There's a lot of craft involved and there's a real passion for it there. Actually, there has been a bit of a renaissance. This year alone I think there was three, maybe four, stop motion feature films all shooting simultaneously and we've gone straight into production on Shaun the Sheep 2, which is our next film; and, there's another one lined up after that. So, I feel, really, that it's a great time for stop motion filmmaking.

Merlin: I think that Will is right. There's such a saturation of CG, that just aside from the idea, but, the technique is refreshingly different because stop motion films don't come out that often. Hopefully they stand out. Then again we do stop motion when it fits the idea. Aardman has made CG movies and they were right for those ideas. So, it's a case of using it where it's appropriate.

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Interview with GINO ROY (Director/Artist)

Gino Roy is one of those talents that speak to the essence of true artistry. As a director he conceptualizes worlds and scenarios which are often surrealist and filled with fantasy. As an artist Gino Roy has an ascetic and design sense that many of us can only dream of. His choice of texture and color is uniquely all his own and sense of form is equally diverse. I was lucky enough to have worked with Gino on a couple of projects, one of which is Blank: A Vinylmation Love Story where Gino pretty much was in charge of the art direction and he would later go on to direct Cranes in Love which is within the Dinsey Blank/Vinylmation Universe. So it's no surprise to see Gino being called in to direct/produce the Tyler the Creator short film for Vicelands television show Nuts+Bolts where Tyler dreams up a stop motion short film. I was lucky enough to actually build the puppets and race car for this production and I can tell you it wasn't an easy ride. For one thing I was completely in the dark as to who Tyler the Creator was at the time. Also, the story was so weird and out there for my little brain to fathom what was going on, but having worked with Gino Roy in the past and knowing his high level of thinking and skill I put my trust in his and Tylers vision and went ahead in building for the production. Instead of sharing my experience of the production I wanted to give you a different perspective. So I reached out to Gino and asked him to share a little about his adventure and give us a deeper look into the production. Also, he's not exaggerating about Mike Ambs, that guy is a genius. I hope you enjoy the interview.

SMM: Tell us a little about the project that you did with Tyler the Creator for the Viceland Nuts + Bolts Stop Motion Episode.

Gino: Out of the blue one day I got a call from a familiar voice. It was my previous boss from Disney, Margie Gilmore. Ironically, the last project we both had worked on was a very ambitious forty five minute stop motion short called Blank: A Vinylmation Love Story. She told me about her new company Whalerock Entertainment, and her new exciting project in the works. This bit of information wasn't without warning. Margie kept dropping vague hints of what to expect and told me that the "creator" of this project was eccentric to say the least. That "creator" of course was… Tyler the Creator.
I sat down with Tyler for what was only supposed to be fifteen minutes. They had two cameras set up on a white cyc with a small table and two chairs. Tyler and I sat down in the white expanse surrounded by a small crew and Tyler's close friends. He told me that he had seen a short film that I directed called Cranes in Love and thought I was a great fit. That fifteen minutes turned into and hour and a half of the most absurd, illuminating, confounding, and hysterical experiences of my life. Tyler's thought patterns at first made me question if he was the craziest person or the most brilliant person I've met in some time.
Only after replaying the interview in my mind many times over the next couple of days, I really could appreciate his genius. He took us on a journey by confusing us to the point where we all let our guard down and then orchestrated a series of absurd twists in the conversation. He went from addressing Andy from Toy Story in a very inappropriate term, to knowing if I "F@#$d with Creed" (The Band) then proceeded singing one of their hit songs word for word. Every joke went on and on and you didn't know if he was kidding or not, but now I know, with Tyler, he's almost always messing with your head.
In the end he informed me that he was in production of a new show of his called Nuts + Bolts for Viceland. The idea was to explore his favorite things, and this episode in particular, he wanted to explore his deep love of animation. So we set out to create his first professional stop motion film.

SMM: What was the process like in developing the story with Tyler the Creator?

Gino: Tyler was extraordinarily specific. Throughout Tyler's impressive body of work, he has often hinted of a fictional city through lyrics, but you didn't have to be a fan to know he had been crafting the details of the colorful city he named Okaga for years. Having said that, he would purposefully leave much of the loose ends open for us to collaborate. The initial brainstorming of the one minute short took a couple hours. Taking his vision, we worked for a couple of days and he would check our progress and offer refreshingly unique suggestions. Having this very flexible and constantly evolving story helped us optimize our very aggressive production schedule.

SMM: How hard was it to emulate Tyler's character designs and concepts for the story?

Gino: Tyler has a very unique style of illustrating. It's simple and raw. But if you look closer, it's very interesting; Deliberate but wild. The entire process I was inspired to sketch ideas in his style to design characters, sets, and props. Physically drawing in his style was a bit of a learning curve. It was kind of like trying to recreate someone's signature. His choices are very unpredictable but always are fresh and exciting. In the end, filtering every idea through his style, I felt like we were crafting one voice in all stages of production.

SMM: How do you plan out your productions and designs?

Gino: I'm fortunate enough to have one of my best friends in the world, Mike Ambs, to work on all of my animation projects. He is a genius, let's leave it at that. Actually, let's not leave it at that. He is a genius but a bit of a wild card. He doesn't approach any problem with the "logical" answer. He always has the better answer with four additional new technical problems. That gets me excited and I add more fuel to the fire. Trouble is, the more we collaborate and experiment, the more expensive things get. So let's leave it at that.
Together we scout the location where we will be creating the set. Once we knew the physical boundaries, we worked backwards to calculate how big our characters and set will have to be. With that amount of space one thing was for sure, we would have to force perspective of the set and have puppets in different scales to match.

SMM: How long did the production take in whole?

Gino: All in all I think we prepped for four weeks and had six shooting days with our amazing animator Tyson James.

SMM: Can you tell us a little about the set building process?

Gino: Building the set took a little ingenuity and whole lot of luck. We ended up using the entire first day sitting on the ground cutting cardboard to mock up the set and characters. It wasn't until the fourth week that we saw the background to test the perspective. Luckily, the shots matched the storyboards.

SMM: Can you tell us a little about the space where the animation was done?

Gino: This project was bar none, the most mentally straining because of the sheer size of the location... an 11’x16’ meeting room in an upscale “don’t-scratch-anything” type of office. I feel like Mike and I work best in very restricting situations. As I had mentioned, Mike always loves to escalate a difficult situation into a difficult situation with side orders of technical and creative challenges. In this case, he interpreted a concept illustration combined with something I said to thinking we would build the diner set with a large sweeping curved wall. I never ever thought we would build a curved wall. We both agreed it would look awesome but how would we build that? The answer, bending pegboard and plexiglass. That bend created a lot of pressure on the set. I crossed every finger I had that the set wouldn’t spontaneously explode during shooting.

SMM: Tell us about the methods you used to light the production?

Gino: Lighting is the only thing that has been a constant through our different animation projects. For sunlight we use a lightbulb inside of a frosted fish bowl because It has a great natural bloom and flare. We use miniature train lighting hardware for practical interior lights. The diner overhead lights that are seen on camera were tiny rice lights wedged in gold ping pong balls. All of these fixtures run through a dmx box to have ultimate automation control.

SMM: Was it difficult building a stage and puppets using forced perspective?

Gino: We've used forced perspective before so the only obstacle is keeping the illusion of perspective even when breaking the optimal angle. Our coverage of the film was calculated and considered to preserve as much of that magic as possible, but we came to the conclusion that in animation, scale is very forgiving. We were super fortunate to have a personal friend and colleague, John Ikuma, to help navigate these intense hollywood illusions. He is always a great source of industry secrets to not only solving a problem, but utilizing the solution of that problem to elevate your scene. John was in charge of taking my stylized illustrations and creating the physical puppets in the scene, and he more than nailed it. It's always great to have someone with creative integrity to put your trust in; Especially when you want a good product and time is not on your side.

SMM: What's next for you?

Gino: I'm always down to do anything in the animation realm that touches me emotionally. I love the heartfelt storytelling of Pixar and Dreamworks. My dream is to merge the emotional integrity of those stories and infuse the art of some of the exciting new independent international animated shorts I've seen on Vimeo and animation festivals. At night, after my day job, as a director, editor, and visual effects artist, I have been writing a dozen of ideas that really speak to me. Additionally, I hope to continue to work with people who really inspire me, and in that regard, I'm feeling very fulfilled. Most of all, my goal is to create and produce stories that I'm proud to share with my wonderful wife Forest, and three beautiful daughters.

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