

# *Directing for* **ANIMATION**

*EVERYTHING  
YOU DIDN'T  
LEARN IN  
ART SCHOOL*



WITH INTERVIEWS BY  
**LEGENDARY**  
ANIMATION DIRECTORS

*DEAN DEBLOIS  
PETE DOCTER  
ERIC GOLDBERG  
TIM MILLER  
JOHN MUSKER  
JENNIFER YUH NELSON  
NICK PARK  
CHRIS WEDGE*

*by Tony Bancroft*  
FOREWORD BY ROB MINKOFF



# **DIRECTING FOR ANIMATION**

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# DIRECTING FOR ANIMATION

## EVERYTHING YOU DIDN'T LEARN IN ART SCHOOL

TONY BANCROFT



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**To my loving and supportive wife René** – Thanks for supporting me through the missed vacations, late nights and worked weekends in this life of animation. You signed up for this journey not knowing that you would often be an “animation widow” and yet have given me the gift of a wonderful life.

**To my beautiful girls** – You have been the animated characters that have inspired the animated characters enjoyed all over the world. I love you my princesses.

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## FOREWORD BY ROB MINKOFF

“But what I really want to do is direct.” A phrase you’re likely to hear in any Starbucks or Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf within the greater Los Angeles area.

And why not? Directing movies is a pretty good gig.

Alfred Hitchcock, Billy Wilder and Steven Spielberg, to name a few, have had their illustrious careers analyzed and profiled in dozens of books, but the directors of animated features and their craft have escaped the spotlight, until now.

Sure, you’ve heard of Walt Disney, and maybe even Chuck Jones or John Lasseter, but the vast majorities of animation directors work in the shadows and are relatively unknown to the general public. But that is all beginning to change.

Over the last several decades, animated films have risen in popularity and importance in the motion picture industry. On any given Monday, you’re likely to see an animated feature has climbed to the top of the box office charts winning their opening weekend. And with that popular acceptance, so has the public’s interest grown in how these films are made.

But directing for animation is often misunderstood. Not only by the fans who wait eagerly for each new release, but the very men and women who work within the industry. In a live action film we’re used to seeing the director shouting, “Action!” and “Cut!” But how do animation directors ply their trade?

It’s safe to say that all filmmakers start from the same place, with an ambition to tell a story. But it’s the combined efforts of legions of artists that form the bulwark of any filmed entertainment. And this is nowhere truer than in animated films. Hundreds of creative individuals work

tirelessly to create each new animated entertainment. But how do all these diverse artists join together to bring a unified vision to the screen?

## Enter the Director

It's his/her job to lead an army of artists to create a film one frame at a time. Every speck of dust every beam of light is created for the screen. There are no happy accidents. But that's what makes the job so challenging and rewarding. And there is nothing quite as satisfying as seeing your dreams become reality on the big screen.

So whether you're a student wondering how to make the transition to gainful employment, an animator or story artist already at work in the animation industry, or a fan who loves sitting in the dark with a tub of popcorn hoping to get a glimpse behind the scenes to see the wizards at work, this book is for you.

And if you have a story to tell and a yearning to see it realized in animation, then keep dreaming and perhaps one day your dream will become the next great animated motion picture.

Rob Minkoff  
Director – *The Lion King*, *Stuart Little*,  
and *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*



*Rob Minkoff*

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# Introduction

## Why this Book?

My head hurts sometimes. It hurts because, in my career, I have hit it against the proverbial wall so many times. Having worked in the animation industry for over 22 years, my head has found many walls to hit. There is just so much to know and communicate, both to your fellow artists and to your audience. As a young animation student, I read all of the animation books hoping to develop my artistic talents but nothing prepared me for directing an entire crew on an animated film. My hope is that this book enlightens the reader so that he or she may recognize the walls in his career and maybe . . . just maybe, hit his head against a few less.

## My Journey to the Big Chair

Like many young animation enthusiasts, I grew accustomed to the skepticism of friends and family when I expressed my interest in cartoons. To make things worse, there were two of us. My identical twin brother, Tom, and I would spend hours in our room drawing while other kids were outside playing sports. To us *football* was for nerds! That's how out of touch we were. Tom and I loved to create our own characters and spent hours copying our favorite newspaper comic strips such as *Peanuts*, *Calvin and Hobbes* and *B.C.* I naively assumed that a person had to be some sort of math genius to

“Once you have heard a strange audience burst into laughter at a film you directed, you realize what the word joy is all about.”

Chuck Jones



The author in his youth pursuing his dream. Nerd alert: notice the *Star Wars* bedspread and curtains in the background.

pursue a career in animation. There was just something about creating a performance from a series of drawings that had no movement by themselves that stumped me. So, I was content to think of myself as a future comic strip artist who would develop the next *Peanuts*. It wasn't until Tom and I were in college that we met a guy who was animating inventive little films and music videos out of clay. That's when I initially discovered the potential of animation as a pursuit in my life. My brother and I joined our new friend in producing a short film that summer. The thrilling experience of seeing our little, clay characters come to life on Super 8mm film got me hooked! I thought if I could make characters come to life in clay, then surely I could do the same with my beloved still drawings. In spite of the fact that so many before me had already broken this "new ground," from that day forward a 2D animator was born! By the end of that summer, my brother and I decided to pursue animation as a career and went about figuring out how to do it.

We both loved Disney animated films, so naturally (and naively) we thought that's where we belonged. We read Frank and Ollie's *The Illusion of Life* and Preston Blair's *Animation* and felt like we were ready to earn our "ears" by joining Disney Studios on their next animated feature. First, we required a far greater education than simply digesting a couple of books on animation. We discovered that, at the time, Disney hired primarily from the talented pool of students who emerged from California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) located in the hills just northeast of Los Angeles. It didn't hurt that CalArts was founded by Walt Disney himself and the instructors in the Character Animation department were all past and present employees of Disney Animation – the icons of our industry. During this time, in the early 1990's, Disney and Don Bluth were the only two studios in town that were



Me at my first desk as a freshman at CalArts. Inspiration was all around.



The late Joe Ranft, my beloved story teacher.

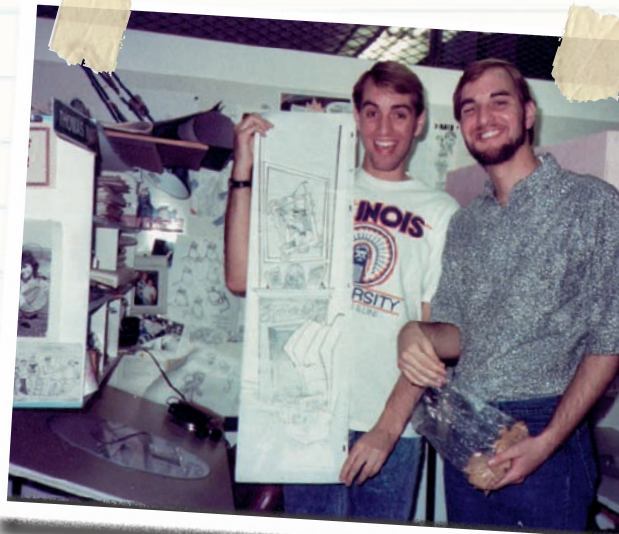


The energetic Chris Buck who taught me animation fundamentals.



Design teacher and program head, Bob Winquist trying to bring order to my freshman class at CalArts. That is my brother Tom in the foreground and Pixar director Pete Docter waving in the background.

doing traditional feature animation. Computer animation was nothing more than an experimental hobby reserved for flying logos and motion graphics, so 2D animation was king! Tom and I thrived at CalArts having the benefit of such a rich, creative learning environment that boasted the likes of the late Joe Ranft, Dan Hansen, Michael Giamo, Chris Buck and our wonderful design teacher and head of the department, Bob Winquist – animation legends all. Those were fun times, but also intense learning that often felt like drinking water from a fire hose! It was there that I first experienced the thrill of making a film from start to finish. Each student had to complete a short film on their own each year of the four-year program. You were the writer, storyboard artist, character designer, layout artist, camera operator and editor. At the end of the year, all of the student films were screened in the school's theatre to the applause of friends, family, and our instructors. What a great way to learn a snapshot of the entire animation



Tom and I at CalArts. Tom holds up his pan background from his freshman film while I celebrate with a snack.



My graduation photo from my nine-week Disney internship. We got a diploma and everything! From left to right: Paul Curasi, Marty Korth, Matt O'Callaghan, Peter Schneider, me, Bill Dennis, Bill Matthews and Max Howard.

process! Forget still comic strips. Forget illustration. People were laughing at a character that I had brought to life! It was all about animation from then on – I was a film maker!

Like a major league baseball team scouting talent from the minor leagues, we heard that Disney Studios was heading to CalArts to review artists' portfolios. They were staffing for a special internship that would employ and train young animators for the opening of a brand new animation studio. Fortunately, Tom and I were two of four students brought on board by Disney that day and we felt like astronauts being shot into space!

My brother and I had finally earned our “ears” and officially began our professional careers as assistant animators at the new animation studio at Disney/MGM Studios Theme Park in Orlando, Florida. My brother and I immediately relocated to Florida upon Disney's promise that the team would be working on a series of original *Roger Rabbit* shorts. However, the best-laid plans had to change



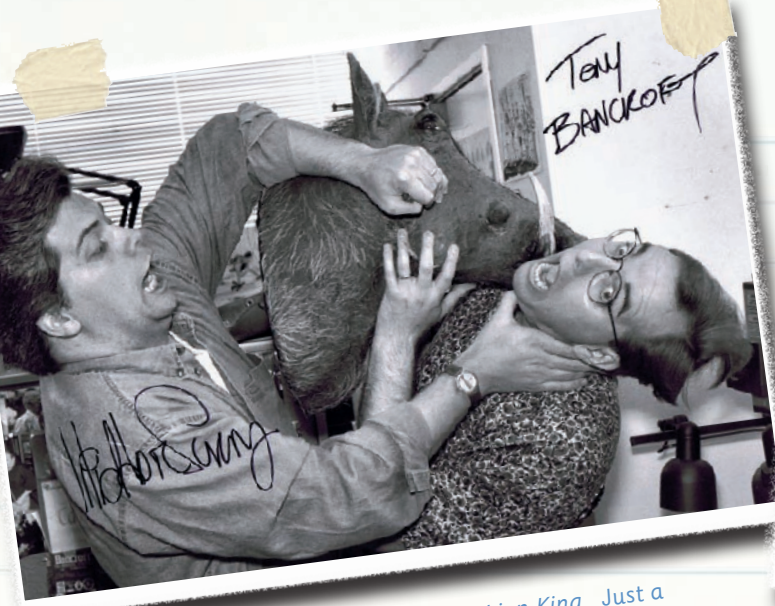
The opening day photo for the Disney Florida Animation studio. Tom and I are in the middle with glasses.

after the Florida studio produced only three shorts. Our very young, still wet-behind-the-ears crew (about 75 percent were fresh out of school) quickly proved ourselves worthy enough to assist as a secondary animation unit to the California feature crew. The main Burbank crew was behind schedule and their films needed to get done. It was like playing backup support to the star players, but we didn't care. We were working on animated features . . . and not just any features. We all had a creative hand in animating Disney classics!

After about a year and a half on the Florida team, I was halfway through my first feature, *Rescuers Down Under*. I decided to apply for and secured a beginning animator position back at Disney's main studio in Burbank. Upon returning to California, I was placed with a supremely talented and generous animator named Will Finn who taught me many of the basics of working with dialogue and comedic timing. I went on to work in Finn's animation unit on such characters as Frank the Frilled-Neck Lizard in *Rescuers Down Under*, Cogsworth the Clock in *Beauty and the Beast* and Iago the Parrot in *Aladdin*. Then came *The Lion King* or, as I like to call it, the "game changer." Upon completing animation on Iago, I was hoping to get the opportunity to supervise *The Lion King's* Zazu. It seemed, to me, to be the most obvious transition – from bird to bird. Things were not quite so easy, because all of us junior animators were asked to submit a video of our best animated scenes for consideration for a character lead. When I got a call from the directors I was surprised to learn that they not only wanted me to take the lead on a character, but were putting the now-famous warthog in my hands. Being cast to supervise on Pumbaa was one of the happiest days of my life – a dream come true! To add to the good news, my best friend and office mate, Mike



My fine animation mentor and supervisor Will Finn.



Mike Surrey and I clowning around on *The Lion King*. Just a normal day in the office for us.



An animation drawing of mine of Pumbaa.

Surrey, was cast to supervise on Timon. Like us, Pumbaa and Timon were the purveyors of comic hi-jinks.

Contrary to its unbelievable success, *The Lion King* was originally thought by the studio to be the lesser “B” project to *Pocahontas*. Disney executives were sure that *Pocahontas* was a “homerun” and that *The Lion King* was a “ground ball single” at best. In addition, then studio head, Jeffery Katzenberg, had a new mandate for the animation department to produce one animated feature per year; an aggressive schedule that had not been achieved by any studio at that time. So, one half of the animation crew would go onto *Pocahontas* – while the other half stayed on *The Lion King*. The most experienced animators, heads of departments and directors were assigned to the “A” project – *Pocahontas*, while *The Lion King* was assigned to the studios’ fresh-faced, up-and-comers like me, with limited experience. The film was challenging work with many surprises, but the greatest of which was the opening weekend box office numbers that cemented *The Lion King* as the biggest smash hit of all time for an animated feature. More satisfying was the fact that it was produced by first time directors, department heads, and the “greenest” crew of animators in the history of Disney Feature Animation.

It was a short seven months later that opportunity knocked again. I was supervising the three characters of the Gargoyles for Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* when I got a phone call. I was asked up to the Vice-President (V.P.) of Development's office for a Friday meeting. Being that Fridays were notorious layoff days and that I had never, ever met with that executive before, my mind raced with thoughts of receiving my pink slip that day. Boy, was I wrong. The executive asked me if I would join the team of a movie in early development that needed a second



*Me at my desk on *The Lion King*.*



*Barry Cook and I directing on Disney's *Mulan*.*

director. A director with character animation experience to contrast the first director that had mostly a special effects background. That movie turned out to be Disney's *Mulan*. Upon accepting the position of co-director with Barry Cook at the age of 27, I had become the youngest director at the time in Disney's long history. Here I was in just my fifth year at Disney and I was living out my dream! However, I must admit that there was much fear and trembling over the thought of heading a crew with far more experience than I had at that point. After all, I was directing some of the same artists who had previously been my bosses and mentors only a few short years before.

My initial preconceptions about directing an animated feature at a major studio were shattered within my first month on the job. I learned a very important lesson on my introductory meeting with the crew of the film. It's a simple one that has stayed with me all of these years. "Respect does not come by title but by actions." I may have been given the authority over this amazingly creative crew at Disney's Florida Animation Studio but that did not mean they would listen to what I had to say. And so it went. *Mulan* was a director's course in itself and certainly a trial by fire for me. But because of the talented Florida animation folks it was the rollercoaster ride of a lifetime. The most important thing I took away from my first directing experience? One very important rule and the theme of this book: **The director should serve his crew and the crew will serve his vision.**

In the years since *Mulan* and my time at Disney, I have developed independent features, run my own animation studio, served as a director and animation supervisor on various projects ranging from DVDs, corporate IDs, commercials, live action/animated combo features and everything in-between. I have had the privilege of managing large teams of over 400 and teams of less than 10. No matter what the project, the one thing that has fascinated me the most is witnessing multiple creative minds coming together under one vision in order to create art. After all, at its core, that's what animation is – shared art.

## And So...

How do you lead a crew? What are the skills needed? How do you get the best out of your crew, while focusing on a singular goal? These are the things you rarely learn in film school, which I will explore in the following chapters with the help of some of the industry's top directors from across the landscape of animation. These world famous directors include such luminaries as [Dean DeBlois](#), [Pete Docter](#), [Eric Goldberg](#), [Tim Miller](#), [John Musker](#), [Jennifer Yuh Nelson](#), [Nick Park](#) and [Chris Wedge](#). Each shares his or her anecdotes and words of wisdom on directing for animation, whether in features, television, shorts or commercials.

My definition of a director is a person working with, guiding and inspiring a team of artists in a corporate environment to create a film, television show, commercial, visual effect or video game. This book is for those directors and future directors who share the belief that animation is a "team sport." Lastly, by writing this book and interviewing some of my idols and mentors my hope was to better my own directing skills as well. It has been an invaluable experience for me. By reading this I hope that you will find your own potential in animation as well.

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## C.C.V. – CHIEF CREATIVE VISIONARY

### What is an *Animation Director*?

At family gatherings, church activities or at a party the dreaded question arises after I tell a stranger what I do for a living. “An *Animation Director*? How do you direct a *cartoon*?” The alchemy of how animation is made is such a mystery to people outside the entertainment industry that they cannot fathom why an animated project would even require direction. After all, presumably there are no “real actors.” My trite answer: “Well, you know how a live action director oversees the creative process of a film – from script, casting, production design and costumes to developing the scenes, editing, and score? Well, I do all of that, except I do it **one frame at a time!**” Usually that leaves them with an even more confused look on their faces. In a nutshell, that is one of the reasons I decided to write this book. To help others understand what a director or supervisor in charge of a creative team does to make the magic happen.

// A director must be a policeman, a midwife, a psychoanalyst, a sycophant and a bastard. //

– Billy Wilder

### The Love Affair Begins . . .

“In a galaxy far, far, away . . .” that’s where it all started for me. We all have those defining moments in our lives where we realize what we want to do in life. I was 10 years old in 1977 when my brother and I rode our bikes to the local theatre and bought our tickets for *Star Wars*. My mother had seen it already and told us it was too scary for us to see. After a week of hearing gushing reviews from every 10 year old in the neighborhood, we begged our mom on bended knee and she finally conceded to let us go see