

Jump Cut

By George T. Marshall

(August 2006) I have always been fascinated by the work of animators and confess I fell in love with the genre at a young age. One of my first memories was as a four-year old child seeing Disney's "Snow White" for the first time. My dad was stationed in Yokosuka, Japan and we lived on the Naval Base. Movies were a major escape. We didn't have television—yes, I'm a tad older than I look—but we did have major adventures on the silver screen. I can still remember being enthralled with "The Vikings" starring Kirk Douglas and Tony Curtis. I also remember seeing a small film shot in our city. It was called "Escapade in Japan," and starred Jon Provost. It wasn't until we returned to the states that I learned he was in TV's "Lassie," with June Lockhart. Seeing our city on the big screen and the locations I had come to know as a child only drew me further in to the world of cinema.

It was the witch in "Snow White," that stayed with me, though. And, I remember being panic-stricken after seeing "Bambi" and trying to comprehend the death of the mother.

The power of these images remains burned in my memory.

Over the last few years, I've had the distinct pleasure of working with the Walt Disney's Feature Animation Division. We were fortunate to host the United States Premiere in 2003 of "Destino" a film that Walt had originally envisioned as a part of a sequel to "Fantasia" in the late 1940s. He commissioned Salvatore Dali to create the story and storyboards. But after a year's worth of work, the project stopped. It was infamously known over the years as the "Disney that never was," and would have remained that had it not been for Walt's nephew, Roy Disney. In 2001, Roy commissioned one of the lead animators in Disney's former Paris studios to complete Walt's dream—and Dali's vision. It took over two years and, the results were amazing. "Destino" was definitely Disneyesque and without question it was Dali. Both styles were synthesized into a new creation that clearly illustrated the power of collaborative art.

This year, we received another Disney short: "The Little Matchgirl."

The storytelling genius of Hans Christian Andersen is vividly combined with the artistry and imagination of classic animation in this luminous and entertaining new animation. Directed by Roger Allers ("The Lion King"), the Walt Disney Pictures' short utilizes a unique watercolor look, a stylized color palette, and rich hand-drawn animation to tell the story of a poor young girl who finds visions of happiness in the fiery flames of the matches that she lights to keep warm.

Now here's where the Disney magic works. The story is without question a downer. It's actually depressing and you have to wonder how happy Mr. Andersen really was with his life. Yet, in the hands of Roger Allers, the story is

given new life and greater depth. It is uplifting, not depressing. The choice of music: Alexander Borodin's "String Quartet No. 2 in D Major: Third Movement: Nottorno (Andante)," is so impassioned that it lifts the story to a poignant height that cannot help but touch any who see it.

According to Roger Allers, "'The Little Matchgirl' had been a favorite story of mine. I wasn't familiar with it when I was a child, but when my children were little, I used to read it to them as a bedtime story. I remember reading it to my daughter, and the two of us would be bawling by the end. I could never get through that story without the two of us crying our eyes out. So I thought, 'Wow, this is a really compelling story!' I'm really happy to feel like I've done justice to Andersen's story because I've felt a great debt to him. I wanted to pay honor to him because his stories have meant so much to me growing up and beyond. It was very rewarding to have done a true version of his story."

"The Little Matchgirl" was produced by Don Hahn, a 30-year veteran filmmaker at Walt Disney Feature Animation whose credits include such contemporary favorites as "Beauty and the Beast," "The Lion King," and "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," among others. Roy E. Disney (who executive produced "Fantasia/2000," and the short films, "Destino" and "Lorenzo") served as executive producer. Lending his passion, expertise, and creative stamp to the film was co-producer Baker Bloodworth. Bloodworth has played a major role in guiding the production of Disney's recent efforts in the production of animated shorts, including "Destino," "Lorenzo," and "One By One."

THE BACKSTORY

Renowned Danish author Hans Christian Andersen first published his story "The Little Girl with Matchsticks" in 1848 in his fifth volume of "Fairy Tales." The story has been the subject of a 1928 live-action short by Jean Renoir, a 1937 animated short produced by Charles Mintz, a 1985 TV movie directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, and a 1987 musical feature starring Roger Daltrey and Twiggy, among others. Other versions of the classic story have been adapted for opera, Japanese manga comic books, and even an off-Broadway musical.

The story has been around.

The Disney animated production of "The Little Matchgirl" follows on the heels of two of the Studio's recent Academy Award®-nominated efforts – "Destino" (2003) and "Lorenzo" (2004).

The filmmakers felt that a watercolor look would best complement the mood and emotion of the film, and even found an innovative new way to paint the characters with a watercolor texture that would unify it into that stylized world. The use of color became an important element in telling the story, with a painterly gray and white monochromatic palette used for the harsh reality of the girl's everyday world, and warm rich colors reserved for her visions of an idealized life.

According to Don Hahn, "'The Little Matchgirl was one of those stories that was just right for a shorter format. Some stories can't sustain a 75-minute, three-act, multiplex kind of release, and yet they're still valid to tell. Sometimes these kinds of films are as completely powerful as something that does last longer. The length is not to be confused with the impact.

"One of the things I love about short films is that they can be so powerful from both a visual and storytelling perspective, and leave you with something to think about for a long time after you've seen it. They can be more experimental, and provide a great creative release for directors. This film doesn't have a word of spoken dialogue, so Roger was able to be very creative in telling the story in pantomime."

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

In 2001, shortly after the completion of "Fantasia/2000," Roy Disney suggested a new animated film that would spotlight music from around the world.

Don Hahn recalls, "It literally started on New Year's Day in 2001. I called Roy to congratulate him on 'Fantasia/2000,' and he said, 'Well, maybe it's time to start on a new one.' So we put together dozens of ideas for short pieces. And out of that came 'One By One,' 'Lorenzo,' and 'The Little Matchgirl.' Those were the beginnings of a world music movie."

Hahn showed Allers several of the ideas that had been suggested.

"Roger immediately gravitated towards 'The Little Matchgirl' and saw the potential of it," he recalls. "From the beginning, he had this great artistic vision to make the film monochromatic, with the dreams shown in vivid saturated colors."

THE FILMMAKERS:

Roger Allers (Director/Story Adaptation) earned a place in animation and film history with the 1994 release of the Academy Award-winning blockbuster, "The Lion King." The film, which marked his directorial debut, became a worldwide box office sensation. Following the unprecedented success of that film, Allers adapted the screenplay of the film for the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical. He received a Tony Award nomination for best book of a musical.

His association with The Walt Disney Company dates back to 1986 and he is considered to be one of the major architects that provided the creative foundation and resurgence of animation at the studio. In addition to directing duties on "The Lion King," Allers worked on a number of Disney projects in various capacities. He served as story supervisor on the Best Picture Academy Award nominated film "Beauty and the Beast;" and worked as a story artist on the films "The Little Mermaid," "Aladdin," "The Rescuers Down Under," "Oliver & Company," "The Prince and the Pauper," and "Lilo & Stitch."

He is currently directing his first all CG animated feature "Open Season" for Sony Pictures which will be released in September 2006.

Don Hahn (Producer) is a 30-year veteran of Disney's feature animation department and his credits as producer include "The Lion King," the Academy Award®-winning "Beauty and the Beast," "Atlantis: The Lost Empire," "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," and the Roger Rabbit short, "Tummy Trouble." He also served as executive producer of the Disney shorts, "Lorenzo" (a 2005 Oscar® nominee), and producer of "One By One" (featured on the "Lion King 2" DVD). In the area of live-action films, Hahn produced the 2003 Eddie Murphy comedy, "The Haunted Mansion." He also served as associate producer for the critically acclaimed Touchstone Pictures' release, "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," and executive produced the hit Disney animated comedy, "The Emperor's New Groove."

Roy Edward Disney (Executive Producer) has been a major influence on the art of animation for many years, carrying on the legacy built by his uncle, Walt Disney, and his father, Roy O. Disney. From 1984 through 2003, he served as chairman of Walt Disney Feature Animation, and helped to guide the division through one of its greatest artistic renaissances with such animated favorites as "The Little Mermaid" (1989), "Beauty and the Beast" (1991), "The Lion King" (1994), "Tarzan" (1999), "Fantasia/2000," and "Lilo & Stitch" (2002), among others.

Disney took a hands-on role in creating "Fantasia/2000" and served as executive producer on that daring and experimental film. He served in a similar capacity on the 2004 Oscar® nominated short, "Destino," bringing to fruition a long-dormant project initiated by Walt Disney and Salvador Dali. A graduate of Pomona College, Disney began his association with The Walt Disney Company in the early 1950s. Disney served as vice chairman of The Walt Disney Company from 1984 through 2003. His current title is director emeritus of the board and consultant to the Company.

A PERFECT MATCH: DISNEY AND ANDERSEN

From "The Little Mermaid" to "The Little Matchgirl," Hans Christian Andersen's classic fairy tales have been enchanting readers for over 170 years. He published his first volume of fairy tales in 1835, and went on to complete several additional books during the course of his lifetime. Among his better known tales are "The Snow Queen," "The Princess and the Pea," "The Emperor's New Clothes," "The Ugly Duckling," "The Steadfast Tin Soldier," "Thumbelina," and "The Red Shoes." Walt Disney himself was one of Andersen's biggest fans, and even paid tribute to the Danish author's storytelling genius on his "Disneyland" TV series (The episode, "From Aesop to Hans Christian Andersen" aired in 1955 during the show's debut season).

Over the years, Walt Disney and the Studio he created turned to Andersen's stories for inspiration. Two animated short films were made from "The Ugly Duckling," including the Academy Award®-winning "Silly Symphony" version in 1939. Fifty years later, in 1989, the Disney animators (along with songwriters Howard Ashman and Alan Menken) started a whole new musical renaissance

with their unique take on “The Little Mermaid.” Roy E. Disney turned to Andersen for “The Steadfast Tin Soldier” segment in “Fantasia/2000.”

One of the biggest challenges facing director Allers and his collaborators on “The Little Matchgirl” was how to faithfully and sensitively deal with the story’s tragic ending. Throughout the course of production, a variety of different endings were explored and at least four were animated in one form or another.

Hahn recalls, “Even though it was somewhat controversial and it took a bit of convincing to wind up where we did, I’m proud of the fact that we stuck with Andersen’s original ending. Roger really defended this approach, and had a strong vision that this was a big part of the story he wanted to tell. At its heart, this is a story about a girl who has nothing and is trying to make her way in a very adult world that pays no attention to her. In the end, she finds great hope in her dreams, and there’s nothing more Disney than that message.

“Finding hope in your dreams is such a Disney story. Even though our film is set in a mythical Russia, the sad irony is that this little girl could be alive today somewhere in the world. It’s happening in the Sudan; it’s happening here in America; it’s happening somewhere right now. That’s the very powerful and controversial thing about this short. And it’s one of the things that I find so moving about ‘The Little Matchgirl.’”

THE LOOK OF “THE LITTLE MATCHGIRL”

Adding to the unique look, emotional impact, and aesthetic appeal of “The Little Matchgirl” is its design, art direction, and animation. Allers had a specific look in mind when he joined the project, and he enlisted the talents of art director Mike Humphries and a team of visual development artists to help him achieve the desired effect. Early contributions by veteran artist Hans Bacher (who had been the production designer on Disney’s “Mulan” and provided some character designs for “The Lion King,” among others), and animator/character designer Randy Haycock, laid the groundwork for the film’s art direction.

“Roger was adamant that we pursue a watercolor look for the film,” explains Humphries. “We spent several months experimenting with paints, pigments, and just trying to find the right paper. We didn’t want the texture to be terribly obvious, but we also didn’t want it to be so subtle that you didn’t notice it was art.”

Dave Bossert, the film’s artistic coordinator, adds, “One of our big challenges was figuring out how to integrate the characters into the watercolor backgrounds. We were able to do this in our CAPS system (Disney’s Academy Award®-winning post production system) by processing the line drawing to give it the appearance that the pigment seemed to pool towards the edges of the paint shapes. This is an indicative attribute of watercolor painting. We were also able to create a mottled grain within the painted character. If you were to look at the pixels close up, you would see almost an impressionistic painting. The pixels have variations of color. By bleeding the line into the paint surfaces, we were

able to get the same kind of pigment pooling effect that you get with watercolor.”

The art direction for the film also called for an innovative use of colors. The portions of the film that take place in the girl's harsh, cold workaday world are portrayed in monochromatic, almost black-and-white, imagery. With the exception of some flesh tones, color is used minimally throughout the entire film, except for the dream sequences.

“The storyboards dictated that the dreams or visions would be more in vivid colors in her imagination,” explains Hahn. “We were trying to build a contrast between the world she existed in and the world that she wanted to be in. This is probably just the opposite of what happens in our own lives where dreams are in black-and-white. Having her dreams in saturated colors seemed to be more appropriate for our story.”

Under Bossert's direction, the film used a variety of traditional and computer-generated effects. Four different types of snow, including actual effects from the Disney animated classic “Bambi,” bring a sense of chilling cold to the film.

Bossert explains, “The film called for a lot of different types of snow effects, and we used a combination of real snow that was photographed many years ago for ‘Bambi’ along with computer-animated particle system snow. We actually built a selection of snow effects ranging from flakes shaped like doilies to cornflake-style shapes. It was Roger's intent that the snow be fantasy-like and spectacular. We blended Disney's heritage of snow to give him the desired effect.”

The film also called for several crowd scenes, and Bossert and the effects team found stylish ways to accomplish this. Up to seven different styles of humans, a mixture of men, women and children, were animated on a walking cycle. Costume changes, and different color models, brought the variations up to more than 30 distinct characters. By re-sizing and re-positioning the characters within the CAPS system, the filmmakers were able to create crowds of dozens of unique individuals populating the scenes.

THE MUSIC

During the initial phases of developing “The Little Matchgirl,” the filmmakers experimented with setting their story to French composer Claude Debussy's dreamy piano piece, “Claire de Lune.”

Allers had never been very fond of that piece of music and the producers started looking for other possible musical choices. Borodin's “String Quartet in D Major” was suggested. Given that the story is set in Russia, in a mythical St. Petersburg, the music seemed much better suited.

“We originally set our storyboards to a symphonic version of the Borodin piece with a 100-piece orchestra,” says Hahn. “But then we discovered that the

original music was composed for a string quartet. We located an earlier recording of the piece by the Emerson String Quartet from about fifteen years ago, and it seemed much more appropriate to the story.”

Once the story was set, and the film had been boarded, Hahn and Allers approached the Grammy Award-winning quartet about making a new recording of the music for the film.

SOME LAST WORDS

The film was completed in early 2006 and is just now making the rounds at the film festival circuit. It is a unique and special piece of work that touches the viewer deeply and with emotion. Watching “The Little Matchgirl,” I was reminded of the power of art and the medium that would eventually become such a singularly part of my life. The images that touched me as a child are still a part of me and continue to swirl and spark the imagination.

“The Little Matchgirl” has its East Coast Premiere at the 10th Annual **Rhode Island International Film Festival**. The film will be screened on Tuesday night, August 8th as part of the Festival’s Opening Night Gala. The program will kick off at 7:30 p.m.

The **Rhode Island International Film Festival** runs Aug. 8 to 13th; most tickets, other than special events, are \$10. The Festival Web site is www.rifilmfest.org and the phone is (401) 861-4445. The Festival is based at the historic Columbus Theatre Arts Center, 270 Broadway, Providence, RI

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