

Studio

THE LITTLE FACTORY OF THE GREAT THRILL LAIKA STUDIOS

Text by David Hury

At LAIKA Studios, visuals are at the service of the story.
LAIKA's technicians and artists have mastered stop-motion
and CGI integration, the sole mantra remaining:
"The look is the rule."

Studio



Kubo And The Two Strings ©2016 Courtesy, LAIKA

"WITH THE RAPID PROTOTYPING, PEOPLE ARE SO INTERESTED IN THE TECHNOLOGY, AND SURE, IT'S REALLY IS. BUT, WHAT IS ALSO REALLY INTERESTING IS HOW WE HAVE ADAPTED IT TO MAKE IT WORK FOR US CREATIVELY."

As black as the night sky. As dark as the bottom of the ocean. As thunderous as the rumbling of a Hells Angels horde. The wave in the opening scene of *Kubo and the Two Strings* is insuperable and unsparing. As he drifts in the middle of the night in a canoe, with his mother as his sole guardian angel, Kubo has a brush with death and drowning. The viewer is then directed from the danger of this tidal wave that is ready to swallow up these two characters to another danger—one even more terrible. The story takes a turn in a split second to Kubo's face. We meet Kubo as a baby with a missing eye and the narrator tell us that his own grandfather, the Moon King, has already stolen one eye and would like to snatch the other. It's right there in the chilling category.

The spectacular scene is short and impactful. One that called for a treasure trove of imagination from several technical teams working in parallel to introduce Kubo, a character conceived by Shannon Tindle. Travis Knight, LAIKA's CEO, asked Shannon to develop the protagonist in the genre of "epic fantasy drawing on Japanese culture". For each of their films, LAIKA Studios commit to use, or even invent, new processes and to respect the story's culture of origin. In this case, these are medieval Japan, the samurai Bushido, and the indispensable *ukiyo-e*, Japanese woodblocks, for the scenery.

The opening scene of *Kubo* finds its visual roots in one of the most famous Japanese works: the famous *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* by the painter Katsushika Hokusai (1830). LAIKA's technicians transposed it to night-time using glass debris, paper, and fabrics to create the glistening water effect. The animators, led by Ollie Jones, worked long to find the right formula for the water's movement, shape, and texture. Artistic director Alice Bird explains the process, which consists

of a mix of different animation techniques, both traditional and digital. "Ollie made a machine with ripped paper pieces that moved in a wave formation and showed off the shifting pattern of the torn edges, mimicking how water behaves but with real tactile material. That was an early inspiration. The final product, spearheaded by production designer Nelson Lowry, was created by embedding some of the wood-block textures that had come from the concept art into a digital model, with a huge amount of back and forth between the design team and CG water team to get it tuned to perfection. It's definitely an example of how successful the blend of practical and digital art can be." It is precisely this "blend" that LAIKA obsessively pursues.

When leaving the screening, journalists made the common mistake of noting that *Kubo* was made entirely using CGI. This was not the case. Every second of the film in fact consists of 24 actual photographs. In an article in The Verge, Dan Pascall, *Kubo's* production manager, wondered why go through all this trouble, while expressing amusement at his own masochism: "God knows, there are easier ways to make movies, but we challenge ourselves to take ultra-detailed, time-intensive routes instead." And oh, how long the route traveled since *Coraline*, LAIKA's first feature film in 2009.

MASTERS OF HYBRID IMAGERY COMBINING STOP-MOTION AND CGI

The impetus comes from the top. LAIKA's chief insists on freedom for his artists so that they express themselves as much as possible. The CEO, Travis Knight, always repeats this in his interviews, as he did in 2016 in his interview with The Verge at the time of *Kubo's* release. "The ethos of this whole place is that we are artists first and foremost.

When we started LAIKA ten years ago, we could see the writing on the wall. Stop-motion animation was basically taking its last, dying breath. We had to come up with a way, if we wanted to continue to make a living in this medium that we loved, to bring it into a new era, to invigorate it." In the 13 years since its creation, LAIKA has always tried to push the boundaries of its own mode of expression, stop-motion, without ever renouncing it.

This passion for novelty and freedom begins, of course, with 3D printing, as *ParaNorman* director Chris Butler explains: "I think technical innovations (like 3D printing) have enabled the quality of what we put on screen to increase exponentially from movie to movie. I'm of the opinion that the final frame I see in the movie should be the best version of that frame, and I'll use everything at my disposal to make it that way." Whereas *Coraline* was the first feature film to industrialize the use of 3D printers, *ParaNorman* pushed it further. For the latter, LAIKA's technical team conducted many tests, sometimes crossing their fingers not knowing what their programming results would look like for sure. But the results lived up to expectations.

It was "like we were building the plane as we are flying it", recalls the co-producer Arianne Sutner, quoted in an article in Animation World Network. "Part of stop-motion is the perfection in its beauty as well as the imperfections too", Arianne explains, "so not everything in this movie is absolutely perfect in terms of the use of technology. But, that's what I love about it." Critics note that there is really a pre- and a post-*ParaNorman* when it comes to the use of technology. Alongside the 3D printer running at full capacity, more than 300 artists worked on details that are barely perceptible on the screen, but that are at the heart of the richness of *ParaNorman*. Yet, production costs did not

exceed the planned budget (60 million USD, just like *Coraline* three years earlier and *The Boxtrolls* two years later). Arianne remembers *ParaNorman's* creation process, and the team learning to use the new machines. "With the rapid prototyping, people are so interested in the technology, and sure, it's really interesting. But, what is also really interesting is how we have adapted it to make it work for us creatively." This need for technical skill in all departments and at each production stage rises to the challenges of animations "Made in LAIKA". The impossible never stopped LAIKA.

That said, there is no point in claiming victory too early. Each film brings new challenges. *Kubo and the Two Strings*, which was in production between 2013 and 2016, seemed particularly complicated to make into a film, especially for the transition from 2D to 3D. "The biggest challenge is translating the look of two-dimensional artwork into three-dimensional reality", says Alice Bird, *Kubo's* artistic director. "Because there's so much interpretation involved, the art director has to get inside the designer and director's heads, really develop an instinct for what they are imagining when they discuss a given set or scene. Sometimes the vision can be ambiguous even to the director, which can be a fun opportunity for the art director to input their own interpretation and show the way forward."

This "three-dimensional reality", which is visually impressive in *Kubo*, marks the convergence of traditional stop-motion, frame-by-frame techniques, and computer-generated imagery. An often-tortuous convergence, as Alice explains. "We've actually developed a really good system for sharing the look across practical and digital assets. The art department will often build physical samples for the VFX team to keep and reference when they are texturing an asset. Even things like water



Kubo and the Two Strings ©2016 Courtesy, LAIKA



Coraline ©2009 Courtesy, LAIKA

"WHAT IS OUT OF THE FRAME IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT WE SEE ON THE SCREEN: THE VIEWER MUST BE PART OF THE SHOW AND FEEL THAT HE COULD GO ANYWHERE IN THE PICTURE."

or smoke will usually go through a physical material exploration so that the VFX team have a starting point that isn't just mimicking reality. Of course, that doesn't mean it's easy! One of the hardest things is probably dealing with really big landscapes - when we design a set and make a small-scale model, we will try to show the contours of the surrounding landscape for VFX, but it always needs more refining when we see it in shots. So there's a whole stage of working with the digital team to dial in the shapes and textures, with the director of photography and production designer helping guide lighting to get the set extension to feel as real as the physical set." The teams' sole objective is for the images to dazzle, for the look to be perfect and for the animation of the characters to be up to the mark. As Alice put it, "to be sure that animation is supporting the story." It's always the story that dictates the rhythm, with the visual elements only there in a supporting role. At the little factory of the great thrill, the sets too are particularly important to the visual identity of the projects and to the success of the final shots.

KUBO: USING DÉCOR TO CREATE THE ATMOSPHERE

In order to bring their stories and characters to life, LAIKA's creative teams set for themselves the goal of creating never before seen sets. And this part of the process is thrilling and is also how LAIKA stands out from the competition. Whether it is in the thousand details of the city in *The Boxtrolls*, or in *ParaNorman*, the tones and the atmosphere are always painstakingly researched. For example, while *Kubo* was not the studio's biggest box office success, it is nevertheless remarkable in its finish and in its wide-angle sets. The team relied on the Japanese identity of the story, for both small details and wider shots, while employing the woodblock effect of the renowned Japanese prints as the visual basis for the entire film design.

In her book *The Art of Kubo and the Two Strings* (LAIKA Ed., 2016), Emily Haynes tells us about the influence of Japanese painter and printmaker Saito Kiyoshi's work on the film's mood and feel, light and translucence. Travis Knight, director of *Kubo and the Two Strings* and co-producer of *ParaNorman*, *The Boxtrolls*, and *Kubo*, captures it best: "Saito's work is really bold. He uses simple colors and shapes. But within those shapes, he uses the texture of the wood to give dimension and nuance. This use of texture became a focal point for the film. There is something really interesting about him that is relevant to what we do here, beyond his artistic inspiration. At LAIKA, we have a fusion of

and new, a sense of tradition and history mixed with innovation and modernity. We work on a medium that's over one hundred years old, but we also bring a passion for cutting-edge technology and modern creative approaches. Saito did much the same thing. He was part of the ancient practice of Japanese woodblock printing, but he was very progressive. He synthesized and infused these divergent ideas into his own work. On every film we try to push beyond the edges of the form." Production designer Nelson Lowry agrees and remembers the magical moment when the visual identity of the film was born: "We did a model of one of our sets and we painted a Saito texture on the top of it. It looked just like you would expect a traditional Japanese woodblock print. Everyone totally freaked out, and from that day on it's been the look of the film." At LAIKA, there's a commitment to the look of films.

THE LOOK IS THE RULE

During a tour of the studios reported by the site io9, Anthony Stacchi, co-director of *The Boxtrolls*, asserted this versatility that is so characteristic of LAIKA, halfway between different techniques, stop-motion, 3D printing, and CGI. "We are not purists", Anthony Stacchi said, "the medium was less important that whatever delivers the look. The look is the rule." LAIKA only relies on CGI to enhance scenes shot in stop-motion, and never the other way around. So much so that even an effect or an element is sometimes first made with physical materials to be later created digitally. For example, in *The Boxtrolls*, the mist and the clouds were initially designed in fabric to be later realized in VFX in post-production.

LAIKA wanted to raise the bar even higher by staging complex group movements, like the ballroom scene. Stacchi explains the created effect that serves the viewer's experience like in the open world of video games: "Some stop-motion movies, you feel like you're trapped on the set. You can feel the edge of the set all the way through." For Stacchi and his co-director Graham Annable's camera, the *hors-champs* is as important as what we see on the screen: the viewer must be part of the show and feel that he could go anywhere in the picture. This was also the case for *Kubo*, for which LAIKA keenly worked on textures and elements with infinite patterns so that the viewer feels comfortable. "You don't want the audience to really notice it", art director Alice Bird explains. "You want it to be something that they sense. The same patterns that we used on the road surface in the village might appear



The Boxrolls ©2014 Courtesy, LAIKA

embedded on the surface of the water in the Long Lake. This design is not something that folks will look at, and say 'Aha! I've seen that before!' But hopefully it will unify the film in a subliminal way, give it all the same voice."

But everything might not be so easy once the graphic identity is coherent and correct. "We spend months working on look development - experimenting with materials, surfaces, color, texture and shapes to capture the feel of the concept art", Alice continues. "Then it was my job to figure out how to incorporate that in to each of the sets we produce, and guide all the artists in understanding it so well that they forget how to work any other way. At LAIKA, the art department is responsible designing and building all the sets, props, and graphics based on concept art from the production designer and their team. The production designer works with the director and director of photography to figure out ambience and lighting, then when a set lands on the shooting floor we continue to collaborate with lighting to achieve the look and feel, tweaking paint and lighting as needed until we get it just right."

What worked for the first four films will probably apply to the next feature, *Missing Link*, due to be released in the spring of 2019. Chris Butler, screenwriter and director of this fifth LAIKA production, insists on the unique and central nature of the stop-motion technique. "All mediums have their own challenges. No animation is easy", Chris affirms. "Having said that, I think one of the unique aspects of stop-motion is also one of its biggest challenges. A shot is essentially a one-of-a-kind performance. It's much harder to tweak or change stop-motion animation after the fact, because it is a person manipulating a real object under real light on a real set. It's almost performance art. Of course, you can go back and augment, or doctor the animation digitally, but for the most part it's a singular performance. You have to know exactly what you want when you launch a shot, because a lot of the time, you get one chance." It's

out of the question to mess up during shooting, as corrections in post-productions are only minimal.

GIVING A SCARE

Fright is constructed like a firework; you need powder, a wick, and a spark. The powder is the story. The better it is, the more spectacular the explosion will be. But for that, you need a spark and the wick. The spark is the created world, the first shudder that gets the viewer into a story. "It can be sound, lighting, or animation", says Alice Bird, assistant art director for *ParaNorman* and *The Boxrolls*, and art director for *Kubo and the Two Strings*. "When you add in lighting, animation and sound design you have all these other tools which can bring the audience in to our world without even noticing that the characters have crazy proportions or the trees are made of popcorn. So I think each department strives to balance fantasy with realism in different ways, and the magic of seeing it all come together in the final product tells you if we succeeded in striking that balance."

What do LAIKA Studios have in store for us now with *Missing Link*? At the time of going to print, LAIKA had only released one sibilant image of Mr. Link looking out from behind a tree and appearing to say "shhh" with his finger on his lips. Basically, we know nothing. And don't count on Chris Butler to spill the beans. "As director, I wanted to make a different movie than my first (*ParaNorman*). I had played out my horror/zombie/John Hughes phase... now I wanted to touch on some of my other early influences... like *Indiana Jones* and *Sherlock Holmes*, and classic adventure movies, and big hairy stop-motion monsters, obviously. To that end I tried to do something aesthetically different. This is a bright, colorful, bold movie. A vibrant, kaleidoscopic travelogue. It's more ambitious in its scope and scale than anything we've attempted before! So we have to wait till next April to find out if the new production - an Indiana-Jones-style adventure - is a winning recipe. ●



- Art Director for *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016)
- Assistant Art Director for *ParaNorman* (2012) and *The Boxrolls* (2014)
- Started her career as Assistant Art Director for *Corpse Bride* (2005)

What fears affect you?

I was always fascinated by traditional fairy tales and the darkness that is at the heart of them. They contain so much horror: being eaten, being abandoned, physical transformations, ghoulish apparitions, magic, the cruelties of fate, ideas of justice and retribution. The way that, as a culture, we have historically used these kinds of stories to teach children about life and being human is equally awful and attractive to me. Even as an adult I have had visceral nightmares about the supernatural that seem to spring from childhood memories of these types of stories. So while I was definitely fearful of them, I also love how you can subvert the ideas in them to challenge conventions of say gender roles or what a happy ending means. That stuff has real power for me.

What graphic influence were there for *Kubo and the Two Strings*?

Woodblock printing techniques were probably the key theme in terms of what the *Kubo* look was. Where on other movies we had a heavy focus on the line quality as a way to inform our style, on *Kubo*, line was pretty much absent. It was all about texture. We wound up isolating a handful of textures from the concept art that we used as templates for paint and texture on both practical sets and digital assets, rescaled and repeated across everything from skies to tea cups. It meant every surface of every frame contained a tactile sense of the textured patterns you find in woodblock prints, and really gave a strong cohesive look across the show.

How do you see LAIKA's future?

I would say there are no companies such as LAIKA! Each animation studio is unique - LAIKA maybe especially so because we work in the niche world of stop-frame and because we are completely independent. As for the future, I hope we're able to continue making unique films. Ultimately a movie is only as impactful as the story it tells, so I think our future success depends on finding exciting scripts that can speak to a range of audiences. I also harbor a secret wish for LAIKA to create short films, perhaps to screen ahead of our features. I think it would be a great way to start teasing out interesting concepts, as well as help develop studio talent.

And that of animation cinema?

I'm going to leave out the glaring answer of video games and VR because those aren't of interest to me, although I realize that makes up the bulk of work going on in the field! As for other formats, I'm encouraged by a crop of bold and beautiful animated series that I've seen in recent years. Gorgeous, inventive kids TV-shows like *Puffin Rock*, *Sarah & Duck*, and *Tumble Leaf* are so refreshing in avoiding the usual goodies & baddies stuff that kids have been inundated with for years (and in my opinion are vaguely damaging in how they portray humanity and the world). And there are weird, hilarious shows like *Big Mouth* and *BoJack Horseman* that do things no other medium could. My hope for animated films is that we throw away the boring old Hollywood rule book about three act stories and predictable character arcs, and really embrace the weird and wonderful things you can do in animation. ●

(SOME)

AMAZING FACTS

WHO ARE YOU LAIKA?

394

EMPLOYEES (2015)



President and CEO
Travis Knight
Date and place of creation
2005, Oregon, USA

4.88M
HIGH
+180KG

For *Kubo's* skeleton model LAIKA's team had first bought an animated machine on eBay before building its own mechanism animated by a software worthy of the best flight simulators.



Coraline's shooting was done in a warehouse of 140,000m² divided into

50
SETS

1.5
MILLION

POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS,
JUST FOR NORMAN'S FACE

The character of Hanzo's protégé (the beetle) is inspired by the actor Mifune Toshio who often lent his features to Kurosawa Akira's films.



BUDGET / BOX OFFICE (USD)



60 MILLION

124.6 MILLION

Coraline (2009)
Directed by Henry Selick



60 MILLION

107.1 MILLION

ParaNorman (2012)
Co-directed by Sam Fell, Chris Butler



60 MILLION

109.3 MILLION

The Boxtrolls (2014)
Co-directed by Graham Annable, Anthony Stacchi



60 MILLION

77.5 MILLION

Kubo and the Two Strings (2016)
Directed by Travis Knight

For *The Boxtrolls*

VFX

† were introduced in all the plans, for the characters or for the textures like the mist, the sparks.

60

CAMERAS (CANON 5D MARK II) WERE PERMANENTLY MOBILIZED FOR *PARANORMAN'S* PRODUCTION.

3D
PRINTING

IS USED FOR THE FIRST TIME ON A FEATURE FILM FOR *CORALINE*. ON *PARANORMAN* THE USE OF THE POLYJET 3D PRINTER IS GENERALIZED AND COUPLED WITH ANOTHER PRINTER, ZPRINTER 650 (3D SYSTEMS), FOR COLORS.

4
SEC.

OF FILM IS WHAT 30 ANIMATORS, ON A TEAM OF 300 PEOPLE, WERE EACH RESPONSIBLE PER WEEK FOR *THE BOXTROLLS*.

ANNIE AWARDS

CORALINE - 2009

Bruno Coulais Music in an Animated Feature Production
Shane Prigmore & Shannon Tindle Character Design in a Feature Production
Christopher Appelhans & Uesugi Tadahiro Production Design in a Feature Production

PARANORMAN - 2012

Travis Knight Character Animation in a Feature Production
Heidi Smith Character Design in an Animated Feature Production

THE BOXTROLLS - 2014

Ben Kingsley Voice Acting in a Feature Production

KUBO AND THE TWO STRINGS - 2016

Jan Maas Character Animation in a Feature Production
Nelson Lowry, Trevor Dalmer, August Hall & Ean McNamara Production Design in an Animated Feature Production
Christopher Murrie Editorial in an Animated Feature Production



3 THINGS YOU NEED FOR A GOOD FEATURE: A GOOD SCRIPT A GOOD SCRIPT A GOOD SCRIPT

Text by David Hury

Before creating beautiful imagery, you need, first and foremost, a good story. And a scary one at that. At LAIKA, storytelling is the cornerstone of each film. It dictates the technique used and often pushes it to its limits. LAIKA's brainpower is its gold mine.

November 2009. I am on my terrace in Beirut on an autumn evening. The city is buzzing. Suddenly, I hear voices coming from the living room. I rush there to find my two daughters, aged six and nine, barricaded behind the sofa. The eldest is holding the TV remote as if it were an RPG, and through her bloodcurdling screaming I hear: 'Will you to turn it off or what! Turn it off!' Twenty minutes earlier, they had both settled in the living room, not feeling reassured by the movie I had put on for them that I'd bought earlier that day. I usually watch them first so they don't have nightmares. I don't know why I didn't stay with them that day. I should have. I had picked up *Coraline*.

'How could you do this to us' cried out my eldest daughter, describing Coraline's alternative mother the way she appeared first on screen in her kitchen when she briskly turns around. 'She has buttons where her eyes should be! You're out of your mind, it's too horrifying!' The damage was done. I switched off the TV. I did not watch the movie. They both had nightmares that night. That's how I was introduced to LAIKA. Through vicarious fright.

It's July 2018. Nine years have passed. I live in Paris now. My youngest daughter, who's now 15, brings up *Coraline* out of the blue. 'Let's watch it!' I said. And right there and then, nine years after that November evening on my terrace and the scare of my two blondies, I realized what a bad father I had been then. How could I have done that? From the opening credits, *Coraline* was horror, pure and simple. Forsaken children, adults who are out-there, or, at best, lost in their own world. And then there is this parallel world, where everything is out of control. Where the great villain is much darker and terrifying than initially feared. But it's *Coraline*'s story that strikes me.

What follows is the story of LAIKA and how they write the best stories they can. It's through the lens of Chris Butler who is, Mr. Storytelling at LAIKA, screenwriter of *ParaNorman* and the upcoming *Missing Link*, among others. *Coraline*, like *ParaNorman*, appeals to the primal fear of being alone. Her parents are distracted by their work; they don't listen to her. She prefers to explore the house and what's around it, straddling our reality and a parallel world, where you have to strike a deal with a frightful lady and exchange our eyes for stitched buttons on our faces to live 'happily'.

A GOOD STORY: BETWEEN SCARY FAIRY AND SCOOBY-DOO

For several years, Chris Butler has been the strongman of scary stories. It's in his blood. He came into the world of animation by creating storyboards for *Tarzan 2* (2005), *Corpse Bride* (2005), *The Tale of Despereaux* (2008), and *Coraline* (2009). His work in Burton's *Corpse Bride* was the spark. That's when he decided he would do this for the rest of his life. Chris was 31.

He then went on to write *ParaNorman* (2012), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2012), and now *Missing Link* (2019). Chris knows how to build a story and dip into the fears of children, as he did in *ParaNorman*, where the characters of all the horror films from our childhoods (the glorious eighties) are gathered under green and pink lighting worthy of a good giallo movie. Butler talks

"YOU'RE TRYING TO ENTERTAIN KIDS, AND MAKE THEM THINK AND FEEL, AND SCARES ARE JUST PART OF THE MIX."

about his predilection for scary stories: 'I have always gravitated towards spooky, creepy stuff. I think, historically, stop-motion animation has always danced in the shadows. There's something grotesque and magical - necromantic, even - about the bringing to life of an inanimate object. Ladislav Starewicz, Jan Svankmajer, the Brothers Quay, they all contributed to an allure that was both enchanting but perhaps a little bit forbidden. Tim Burton utilized this mystique in both *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Corpse Bride*.' The first sketches of *Coraline* clearly draw inspiration from the works of Burton.

Chris wants to scare and to entertain. He wants spectators - or children - to get their money's worth. So you need a cornerstone to this wonderful construction: a good script. And this was the case for the first cathedral erected by LAIKA, *Coraline*, adapted from British author Neil Gaiman's novel. 'Henry Sellick [director] and Neil Gaiman [novelist, screenwriter] were brave enough to tell a story that did not shy away from the weightier themes of classic fairy tales', says Chris about *Coraline*. 'When you make an animated movie like that, you're following the same 'rules' that you'd follow if you were making a live action movie. But I think

you still have to remember you're making a film that will be primarily seen by kids. You're not just trying to scare them. You're trying to entertain them, and make them think and feel, and scares are just part of the mix.'

In *ParaNorman*, Chris Butler wore two hats, that of screenwriter and co-director. Throughout the film, he worked with several co-producers, including Arianne Sutner. From the start, Arianne was certain that she had in her hands a solid story. In an interview with AWN.com, Arianne recalled: 'I think it had a great script. The pacing was all there. We had a third act that worked, almost from the beginning, which is fairly unusual. We had a great hook, a really fun contemporary film, a nice fit to follow *Coraline*. I think also it just jived with Travis' taste, kind of a contemporary *Scooby-Doo* movie. It could push the animation boundaries a little bit more.

We could make a bigger stop-motion movie. That was something on our list that we really wanted to do. Pushing those boundaries, creating a feeling of real chase scenes.' Chase scenes, adrenaline rush, empathy for the characters, and bingo! *ParaNorman*'s small-town folks are the characters that give the story its full weight. Butler took the opportunity to criticize the American society of 2010, like Joe Dante did in the past with *Gremlins* (1984), *Gremlins 2* (1990) and particularly with *Small Soldiers* (1998). The real danger is not always what meets the eye. And for a good scare, let's have double-edged characters.

CHARACTERS WHO ARE LIKE US

What is more terrifying than ourselves being the true villains? A father wrapped up in his work, a child who's used to getting their way, an authoritarian mother. LAIKA's films feature many characters everyone can identify with. The writers and character designers have free rein. In *ParaNorman*, for example, some characters didn't look anything like what their creators originally had in mind. Heidi Smith, the film's character/conceptual designer was the movie's lucky charm. *ParaNorman* was her first job after graduating from the CalArts where LAIKA

noticed her for her "crappy and unhinged" drawing style. That was 2008. The film would be released four years later.

In an interview published in Cartoon Brew, Heidi recalled the genesis of Norman's great-uncle, who entrusts him with the mission of putting an end to the curse of the witch: "When I read the script, I would just go with what I felt the story needed. Chris Butler didn't give me any kind of guidelines or art; he just told me to read the script and have a go at drawing the characters. So what I went with was my gut reaction. I would do a bunch of drawings, and then Chris and the others would tell me which ones they gravitated towards and we'd go from there. I found out later that Mr. Prenderghast was originally drawn to be a skinny person, but my rendition they went with was as a fat, hairy guy." Total freedom in the development of the characters, total freedom of tone in narration, total freedom to scare to death spectators, people ages 5 to 95.

LAIKA knows that nothing is perfect and reflecting that in its worlds are perfectly deliberate. "ParaNorman has a lot of asymmetry", Heidi points out. "That's one of the things they told me they liked about my portfolio coming into this project. They liked the asymmetry and 'nervous line' of my work. It had a scratchy looseness they were looking for. One of the things they pointed out that they liked was that, for instance, in a character's eyes one pupil might be bigger than the other." Asymmetry throws you off, disorients and unsettles. Heidi readily recognizes the influence of some great masters: Stanley Kubrick, Canadian animator and director Richard Williams, and Russian

animator Yuri Norstein. The color tonality of *ParaNorman* borrows a lot from Norstein, as well from American photographer William Eggleston whose colorful America is on display in *ParaNorman*.

A SPECIAL MENTION TO THE BAD GUYS

For a good story, you need good characters with their rough edges, and you especially need some spooky villains: the witch who spies on children through the eyes of their dolls in *Coraline*, the villain snatcher in *Boxtrolls* who is only motivated by his ambition, the two sisters with the impassive masks in *Kubo and the Two Strings*. The art director of the latter, Alice Bird, started her career as the assistant of Nelson Lowry, art director of *Corpse Bride* (2005). She joined LAIKA at the same time as Lowry, as assistant art director for *ParaNorman* (2012) before moving on to *The Boxtrolls* (2014). She explains how characters like the two wicked sisters or that of the giant skeleton are great tools to instill fear. Whether through textures and materials (for the costumes of the two evil sisters) or through the size of the models constructed for the shoot. "For the skeleton, we knew it had to interact with our hero puppets and with the set. We see Kubo, Monkey, and Beetle at various points climbing up the arms, on the skull, being stepped on by the feet which also crush bone and crack the floor. Doing all this in a comp would have been really challenging, and likely wouldn't have looked so convincing, especially with our desire to keep a strong sense of the physical qualities of the skeleton, the layered, brittle material that made up his body. So while it might seem a crazy excess, it actually meant we could achieve so much in camera without

leaning on post production. Plus, we got an awesome giant puppet to keep forever! Once everything is in place, the characters will be able to embark on their adventures and follow the story's paths.

At LAIKA, the story reigns supreme, whether it's an original scenario or a free adaptation, as with Neil Gaiman's novel *Coraline* or with *The Boxtrolls* adapted from Alan Snow's *Here Be Monsters!* But the choice to develop original scenarios is certainly the most complicated option, according to Arianne Sutner, co-producer of *ParaNorman* and producer of *Kubo and the Two Strings* producer. "Companies are always looking for a franchise, something that has come before, or something that is based on a book, something that is known already", she says. "So for us to take a chance, for LAIKA to take a chance on a story artist, working from original material, I think is a huge risk. Original material is risky these days, in this kind of culture. Yet original content is the kind of thing I want to see."

BUT WHAT'S NEXT?

This last sentence that is also true for the studio's upcoming feature, *Missing Link*. But Chris Butler won't reveal anything, no matter how you phrase the questions. The secret is well guarded. There's plenty of cool and surprising ideas bubbling away in the background, but I'm afraid my lips are sealed! But for *Missing Link*, LAIKA seems to have had a change of heart: exit the zombies and enter the nice monsters with an environmentalist message. The state of the planet is surely something to be scared about... ●

4 QUESTIONS TO CHRIS BUTLER



- Director of *ParaNorman* (2012), *The Missing Link* (2019)
- Co-screenwriter for *ParaNorman* (2012), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016), *The Missing Link* (2019)
- Storyboarder for Disney's *Tarzan 2* (2005), *Coraline* (2009)
- Started his career as director and designer for *The Tigger Movie* (2000)

ParaNorman is an ode to your childhood. As you grew up in Liverpool, why did you choose to set the film in an American suburb?

The setting for *ParaNorman* is a vital part of its DNA. Quite literally, that story couldn't happen anywhere else. The history of New England, and specifically the witch trials of Salem, is pretty extraordinary. I built the story around that history. Plus, if you're making a movie that's an ode to '80s cinema, like *The Goonies*, or *The Breakfast Club*, or *Stand By Me*, you really have to place it in the USA.

You played an active role on ParaNorman, The Boxtrolls, Kubo and the Two Strings, and now Missing Link. What does LAIKA offers as a studio creativity for you above others?

I like the feeling that LAIKA could make any kind of movie. Any genre. We're not trying to fit into a box. Creatively that means we can be quite daring, and nothing is off the table. What it comes down to for me is this: I love animation, in all its iterations. I love seeing other studios' movies. Disney, Pixar, Cartoon Saloon, Ghibli. I eagerly drink it all in. I think what's great for me right now is that I'm not being asked to copy them. I've been given my own voice.

A remarkable memory?

I recall, watching *ParaNorman* with a Q&A audience, a number of people were asking how we realized "Angry Aggie" (the little electric girl at the end). These were studious moviegoers - experts of the medium! - and they weren't quite sure what they were looking at. Was it a puppet? Was it all digital? Partly printed? I loved that this character on screen in front of us was surprising people, and this is at a time when audiences see amazing cinematic miracles play out in front of their faces on a daily basis. I think there are still a lot of stories to tell in stop-motion. It has an aesthetic appeal all its own, and that's not going to be superseded any time soon. I'm by no means a stop-motion purist. I'm all for digital animation, but it shouldn't be the only option out there. Personally, I'd love to see a broader application of the stop-motion art form, in the way that modern movie-makers have embraced old-school practical FX, almost as a reaction to an over proliferation of by-the-numbers digital FX. Why not have *Star Wars* creatures or spaceships realized in stop-motion, just like the good old days?

As this is the actual addition of Marimo is called Phantasmagoria, and as we are re looking at fears, we would love to know what was your biggest childhood fear?

I guess it isn't surprising to say, given the movies that I've worked on, that my biggest fear when I was younger was being alone. And by that I mean, never meeting anyone who was like me. Never meeting someone who could really see me for who I was. Every kid wants to know how they fit into the world. I think that really troubled me when I was growing up. That, and zombies. ●



Coraline ©2009 Courtesy, LAIKA