

# BIZ + BUZZ

## Confetti Times for Animation

Guillermo del Toro, Mark Gustafson and Henry Selick talk the state of stop-motion and the future of the art form

By Karen Idelson

Stop-motion animation is an art form that's at once ancient and fully modern. It's one of the first forms of animated filmmaking but now artists can use 3D printing technology to help tell stories. Several of the most iconic, accomplished filmmakers happen to have stop motion films out in the last year. Henry Selick, whose groundbreaking approach defined "The Nightmare Before Christmas," created the punk-rocktinged coming-of-age tale "Wendell & Wild" with Jordan Peele. Guillermo del Toro, an artist known for his spectacular visions of horror, fantasy and the macabre, retold the classic tale "Pinocchio" with co-director Mark Gustafson. Variety caught up with them in conversation about their art.

● **You've all worked in stop motion animation for a long time. What made you fall in love with it initially?**

**Henry Selick:** It's so rare that we get to do stop-motion films and



Guillermo del Toro and Henry Selick have taken stop-motion animation to new heights.

Cover photograph by Dan Doperalski

the thing I love it about it is that I blow the horn and the gypsies come together, some of whom I've known and worked with for over 30 years. And we go on our trip and we're close like family for year. What you hope for in the end is that you're all speaking to each other and you love the baby you made. That's the dream.

**Guillermo del Toro:** I think one hundred percent the only time in 30 years that I could feel the camaraderie of a carnival is in animation projects. Stop motion exists one level further than other types of animation because, as Henry says, these are the few and the faithful. It really is people that are keeping an art form alive that is considered archaic and somewhat oblique because it takes so much time, so much effort, and it takes much longer than a CG movie. It is done physically. We say jokingly that it is as difficult as during a live action film because we're doing real sets, real props, real wardrobe, and the puppets are to live action as Ginger [Rogers] is to Fred [Astaire] — we do the same steps going backwards in high heels. It is really terrifically complicated. That's where my partnership with Mark Gustafson, who is one of those few and faithful that have been there for decades is key because we've been living parallel lives admiring

the same people. I think Henry, same thing, you admire [Ray] Harryhausen. We all love the same things and have the same father figures. It's the family you didn't know you had. More than any other art form, stop motion is a family reunion and you leave the project after a 1,000 days together and everybody loves each other as much as they did when we get started.

**Mark Gustafson:** It's hard to think of another art form that is this collaborative. The thing about stop motion is that if you really love it, you've probably learned about every part of it. So, it's a rare art where everybody knows everybody else's job and we're all working toward a common goal and very kindred spirits, outcasts, artists. You try and maintain your distance as much as possible when you're making [a film] because you have to make so many choices that have nothing to do with making the film. So that's part of the discipline of making a film like this is understanding which of your ideas are going to serve the story as opposed to some instant gratification for you. You get that all the time, those moments where you think something is a great idea and then you're like, "I just can't do that because I have this bigger thing that I have to sort of honor."

"Pinocchio" co-director Mark Gustafson (left) on the film's church set



The "Pinocchio" crew in the midst of the forest set



Del Toro and the Volpe character puppet for "Pinocchio"



• **This year in particular there are a lot of stop-motion feature films and short films being released. Do you feel like this a renaissance for stop motion?**

**Selick:** I think because of streaming, the opportunity to take chances became a little greater. And will it last? Will the renaissance continue? It's hard it's hard to know. Ultimately, it's how successful the stop motion films are considered to be, but it's always been a risk. It's an art form that takes patience. Sometimes executives are worried they'll lose their jobs before a film gets finished, which actually happens a lot. But I think we're having a good renaissance and again, the streamers are taking the chances and that means more places where there is demand for more films. I think the interest has been revived. I would hope it keeps going.

**Gustafson:** The pandemic was actually, in some ways, a blessing for us because we're able to refocus on the story without the full weight of the full production driving forward on our backs. So it all slowed down enough that we took a breath. You get into

rhythms and you do have time to think about it.

**Del Toro:** As you say, Henry, everybody talks about the relationship of streaming and theatrical but nobody talks about the relationship with streaming and high-risk projects being rendered, which I find to be a fascinating and blissful circumstance. I also think young people love stop motion and they've devoted the time and the energy to [pursuing] it and there's a new batch of animators coming up. It's almost like the need for something tactile is coming back. The digital cinema went as far as possible and now we want something analog, beautiful, that is moving in its artistry. I think that is coming back. But every time stop motion wanes, somebody comes in and picks it up. Whether it is Harryhausen or it's Laika or it's Phil Tippett, there's always somebody that takes the torch. We are all pushing the medium as much as possible.

**Selick:** The best thing of all is that how many young people are doing stop motion, that they can learn about it online. There are free programs to capture images. I

meet students, college age mostly, and they have cards with their name and the words stop-motion animator underneath their name. ... You know, we used to make a film and it would come and go but now kids started showing up at Halloween with homemade costumes based on those characters. That time is much quicker now. They're doing cosplay before the film even comes out just based on the trailers. So studios are always going to be a little behind the curve, because it is risky. That's what we got with streamers — they're gonna take a chance this week, maybe next weekend. But that audience is there and the talent is there.

**Del Toro:** I jokingly say we went in when the streamers were throwing confetti, and right now everybody's sweeping the floor.

But one of the greatest things is that it's one of the few forms of animation or filmmaking that you can do with your iPhone and while you're alone. You can tell a story that is incredibly personal, without any other group, that there is the possibility of making a feature or a short alone with the resources that come from being a 20-year-old animator.

**Selick:** Stop motion is the church of the weird, but it can be very sweet. It's always gonna be weird, but in the same way that kids when they find the dead bird they want to study it, stop motion is a great place for the creepy and the weird. Not all kids run screaming and they wonder, what does this mean?



"Wendell & Wild" production against a greenscreen

**Del Toro:** If you're thinking about the late 20th century, early 21st century, in stop motion, most of it deals with darkness. It is because most of the teenage lives at the end of one century and the beginning of another are incredibly complicated to figure out. You have pandemics, wars, death all around you, lies being told on TV, things that you're knowing that are not true. So, in other words, in the 1980s you thought about a teenager and your thought was about somebody skateboarding in suburbia. Now, a teenager is Greta Thunberg, somebody that is going to question you on a deeper level, and who knows the fact that when you tell them childhood is joy and light, they say, whose childhood? That's an incredibly strong connection, which is one that is in the very craft of stop motion. It is to speak truth, not to power but to the establishment in a way. That's the great

thing about it. And when you when you talk to somebody like Henry, who has never given up who he is, and what he believes, stop motion can heal. It's remarkable.

● **It's interesting that you both chose to tell these beautiful stories about parent/child relationships and loss.**

**Del Toro:** I think Harry has a moment that I think is so beautiful, which is letting go. It's so powerful. And I think kids need that. There's a disintegration of the nuclear family. And everybody in the last couple of years went through death and have to cope with that.

**Selick:** Your kids can handle almost anything. All the kids know that life does have darkness and sadness and why not put that in our films and show people surviving it and dealing with it. And being OK with it.

**Gustafson:** I just feel like ["Pinocchio"] is not as dark as people

say. There's a misconception that it is a gloomy, dark thing that you're going to have to sort of trudge through and it's really not that at all. There's a lot of humor in it. That there's a lot of love and lightness, and I think that's against a dark background, but it makes the light all the more light. I think the takeaway at the end of the film is going to be this: You may be crying, but it'll be a bittersweet sort of cry. We all understand there are these things that these characters are going through, that we're all going to have to face at some point and it's sad, but in a way, it's not the end of the world. There's hope.

**Del Toro:** The main thing is that this is a very good year to talk about animation, even if we don't take it all the way to the adult level in every case. You'll have things like "Mad God," which is a Freudian, Jungian descent into Phil Tippett's innermost self, that would save him decades of therapy. It's important that this year neither of our films was crafted as a child's film. We were tackling big themes. We're tackling big questions and this is because animation is not a genre for kids. It is a medium for artists. And, as Henry says, the studios are way behind. TV already did it. TV has already been tackling this for a long time. Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon have been tackling animation in all its latitudes for longer than film. Film is more conservative than TV and this is why coming in during the middle of the confetti times of the streamers is very useful. 🍀



An animator works on "Wendell & Wild."

Suzanne Twining, lead animator on "Wendell & Wild," finesses the Kat puppet.

