Gene Deitch Feels Left Out in the Cold by ‘Frozen’

The Oscar-winning animation director again questions the very definition of an “animated film.”

By Gene Deitch | Tuesday, January 7, 2014 at 3:21pm

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It’s possible that Frozen will win the Oscar for the best animated feature.
It looks like the most elaborate and dazzling animated production yet.
Kids may likely go ape over it.
But is it really animated?
Today’s kids don’t know or care about what it technically professes to be. They would love it as an eye-popping, romantic show. They will not likely know or care that it’s a near avatar of every previous Disney Princess Movie, beginning with Snow White. (Only the names are changed to protect the innocent.) Each Disney Princess Movie, even without Walt himself, simply rearranges plot details, and progressively ups the technological dazzle.
Is Frozen now the ultimate, with nowhere more spectacular to go? No! Perhaps the next princess will be an alien lesbian…”Let’s see what other twists are still possible to the same basic story line…”

I may be wrong, but Frozen might well be an impostor, with the main characters not really frame-by-frame animated at all. The feature length credits are masked with categories labeled with new-fangled “Terminus Teknikus” which I can’t grasp. But it sniffs to me like Motion Capture for the main human characters. Who can animate humanoids this smoothly and realistically? Is this really Avatar technology masquerading as character animation? I feel it is. If I’m wrong, somebody please clue me in.
If I’m right, then this entry is faking it as an animation feature. It might just be a special effects fairy tale movie. The visual effects are indeed marvelous!
That’s why I have turned against technical categories in the Oscar competition.
All movies are supposed to be cinematic storytelling. Categories, such as comedy, drama, fantasy, historical, documentary, mystery, action, adventure, romantic… whatever… all can and do overlap, and nearly all use overlapping technologies in their production. In searching for an answer, how to categorize movies for awards. I’m currently in favor of just one category: Best Movie!
But I realize that in the real world, that won’t fly. Any ideas? We’re obviously looking for artistic and technical skill, originality, entertaining, exciting, and uplifting qualities, social meaning, human relevance… you name it.
It doesn’t really matter what technology is used to achieve these aims. What does matter is the skill, originality and creativity that has been brought to bear; how the movie has advanced the medium! That should be our purpose!
My twisted mind sees what I think is the real purpose of Frozen, the movie: Following the astounding success of the Broadway musical version of The Lion King and other staged versions of Disney movies, I feel sure the this one too, is a mere advance avatar of a planned forthcoming Broadway musical, titled, “FROZEN!” If so, I hope they come up with fresher and more original songs!
- Gene Deitch

Gene is the Oscar-winning director of Munro and creator of Tom Terrific, Mighty Manfred, Nudnik and a thousand successful cartoons. You can read more about him and his truly unique and illustrious career by visiting his website, genedeitchcredits.com, his Facebook page at facebook.com/nudnikrevealed and his revised online book, How to Succeed in Animation at genedeitch.awn.com.
Visual Development Degrees Come to Academy of Art University
Program Director Nicolás Villarreal shares his insights on the school’s new visual development degree program as well as the challenges of helping students become working professionals.
By Dan Sarto | Friday, June 28, 2013 at 9:22pm
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Nicolás Villarreal. All images courtesy of Academy of Art University.

As Director of the new School of Visual Development at Academy of Art University, Nicolás Villarreal’s passion for design and professional approach to core fundamental principles is readily apparent. From his own professional perspective to the underlying philosophy of the program, Nicolás emphasizes hard work, dedication and focus on practical skills. Helping students reach their goals, to become creative professionals working in their desired area of industry, is his main challenge and the reason he has come back to build and lead the program at the school he himself graduated from a decade ago. We spoke at length about the new program, the focus of study and the pressure students face preparing for a tremendously competitive job market.

Dan Sarto: How do you define visual development?
Nicolás Villarreal: Visual development involves three things. Number one, it’s designing with a goal, usually in support of a story. We base everything on a story or a script. Number two is setting the style or visual identity of the project. Though they involve similar elements, projects may look completely different. That’s because they have different visual styles. And number three, which is very important, is creating appealing designs that at the same time are functional, that help the story move forward.

DS: How does visual development overlap with other areas of the creative process?
NV: Everything is constantly overlapping. Of course, design is always one of the first steps. Visual development can come before a script, during the “blue sky” design phase, or after a script is finished. It overlaps with various parts of the production. For example, on a film, when you finish a character or setting, which then goes to modeling, or it goes to the art department for integration with other designs. Everything overlaps and moves forward.
Why start a visual development program? What needs does it fulfill?

Visual development has been growing over the last few years and that’s why Academy of Art University created this department to address the needs of the students. There are opportunities for work in live action, animated feature films and television as well as in social and console games. The production value of films, TV and games continues to get closer. This is in part because of the convergence of aspect ratios. Before, TVs were 4:3. Now, in addition to movies, everything from TVs to computers to mobile phones is going widescreen. This gives the students a strong foundation not only in classical drawing and painting, but they can get exposed to so many different styles and platforms.

In visual development, it’s important to know where you want to work, so you can build a portfolio with that target in mind. I’m not saying students should mimic a style. For example, if they want to work making family films at Pixar, Disney or DreamWorks, the style of the work is completely different than if you want to work for Ubisoft or ILM or Weta. A visual development artist should be able to switch styles. That’s why it’s important to study different platform styles, take different classes.

What are some of the key aspects of visual development your program teaches?

We try to cover all aspects of visual development, from prop design to character design, concept art, backgrounds and everything in between. The goal of the program is to help them develop a strong, varied portfolio that will help them get a job. We try to teach them not only fundamental aspects of drawing and painting, but the process of visual development, which is very important. All the classes are based on that goal.

All of our instructors, not just in visual development, are working professionals. We bring different industry standards into the program. For example, for a character design, we start with a round of rough thumbnails, based on the story. We narrow those down to a final design, trying to capture the soul of the character. Often, even with very rough designs, you can find the soul of the character. From there we do the final design drawings. Based on those final drawings, if it’s a 3D production, we do the orthographics, which are the blueprint for the character. We show a front view, a side view, a back view and sometimes a three-quarter view. These help the modeler build the 3D character. The last thing we do is a final 3D painting of the character, to show the volume and textures. We also create a shadow package, which shows the textures of the elements of the character for the texture team. If the character has a shirt, it shows the type of cloth. If the character has goggles, it shows the type of metal. There may be other drawings or studies needed to help the modeler, so the collaboration of the designer and modeler doesn’t end with the initial set of final designs.
The job market is tough these days. How do you advise students to best prepare for the rigors and realities of a career in entertainment content creation?

NV: When I graduated from the Academy ten years ago, the foundation I received was crucial for me to start working in this field. The job market is tough and very competitive. But as cliché as it might sound, we teach students to treat their education very seriously, listen to their instructors, work diligently and be relentless when they apply for work. When they submit their portfolio and don’t get a response, they always get discouraged. But it’s important to learn that hiring is driven by production needs. That’s why it’s important to keep working on your portfolio and constantly send it out.

DS: Education is expensive and there is a lot of pressure on students. This area of study is not easy and requires considerable dedication. What are some of the biggest challenges you face?

NY: It’s always a challenge to help students keep updating and refining their portfolio so they can showcase their talent and capabilities in a way that best meets their career goals. We tell our students all the time how competitive it is in the job market. Our instructors share their own incredible work with students, to demonstrate just how hard you have to work in industry. We encourage students to go to different events, like the CTNX event in Burbank, which gathers together a lot of designers. Not only do they get to meet designers, but often, they get to meet the directors as well as recruiters, people who have work to show you that demonstrates the level of quality and standards they are looking for. Our goal is to help students achieve their goal, which is always a challenge. But it’s an enjoyable and rewarding challenge.

Dan Sarto is editor-in-chief and publisher of Animation World Network.