



INSIDER INTERVIEW: DON HAHN

Straight off the annual whirlwind known as San Diego Comic-Con, producer Don Hahn sat down to chat about Disney's much-anticipated animated feature "Frankenweenie," director-artist Tim Burton, and the diehard fans who make life good. The film, due in theaters October 5, features the voice talents of Catherine O'Hara, Winona Ryder, Martin Short, Martin Landau, Christopher Lee, Atticus Shaffer, and Charlie Tahan as young Victor Frankenstein. Check out what Don had to say ...

IS "FRANKENWEENIE" THE FIRST BLACK-AND-WHITE ANIMATED FEATURE FILM?

It is. It's funny, because you'd think there would be something back in the history of film. But by the time features got going with Disney in the '30s, black and white films were long gone. Since then, features have always been in color. So this is an oddly groundbreaking idea.

HOW DOES THAT ENHANCE THE STORY?

For me, it's not only a tip of the hat to monster movies, but I actually think the atmosphere and world that it creates is really wonderful. We're used to seeing highly colorful, beautiful animation, but sometimes that kind of candy-land world can get old.

To be able to create an atmosphere and world that's built around this beautiful lighting and the shades of gray that Tim's able to achieve on-screen is actually something really special for the audience to enjoy, and certainly really different. I think you saw a little of that last year at the Oscars with "The Artist" winning Best Picture. Seeing something in black and white is not negative or primitive -- it's actually a really wonderful, sophisticated art form, and it's something we don't get to see that often.

TELL US ABOUT USING STOP-MOTION ANIMATION ...

It's one of the oldest animation techniques, probably even pre-dating hand-drawn animation. Making puppets or objects move around the screen one frame at a time is reminiscent of our childhood fantasies -- like, if only our doll or teddy bear could come to life. Stop-motion kind of does that for the audience.

It's a technique that worked well with a story about bringing inanimate objects to life. And since the film pays homage to the great monster movies of the past, using the stop-motion style with puppets in black and white seemed like a really great fit.

WILL THIS OPEN THE DOOR FOR MORE BLACK-AND-WHITE ANIMATED FEATURES?

I hope so -- I think that would be so great. It's really an art form, and an artist should be able to use whatever tools, techniques, or styles that he or she wants. And in this case, using black and white in stop-motion really seemed to fit the story that Tim wanted to tell.

HOW DID THE DECISION TO TURN THIS SHORT INTO A FEATURE COME ABOUT?

Well, I had the idea about eight or nine years ago, because I thought it was a great Disney property that Tim had done when he was just a kid. The Studio gave him a few thousand dollars and said, "See what you can do." He came up with this story about a boy bringing his dog back to life in a little half-hour short.

When I visited Tim in London in 2005-2006, we started talking about different projects. I asked him, "Have you ever thought about expanding 'Frankenweenie' into a full-length feature?" And he said he had.

I don't think he'd consciously worked out the story, but it's the Frankenstein myth, which is a very rich piece of literature. So there was no reason why it couldn't be expanded. By doing it in animation, as opposed to live-action, there was an opportunity for a lot more fun and fantasy, you know? It's a wink to comedy and old movies. That intrigued Tim and within a few weeks he was really serious about bringing in a writer to play with it.

So I think it's one of those ideas that was somewhere in the back of his head -- I just poked him enough to say, "Yeah, let's try it." He jumped in, and the rest is history.

IT KIND OF BRINGS TIM'S CAREER FULL CIRCLE, RIGHT?

It does ... and I think it's personal, too. It's not just a movie. He talks a lot about how one of your earliest relationships in life, aside from your parents, is your pets. So the story's about the love for your cat, dog, hamster, or whatever you might have had as a kid, and how difficult it is to lose that pet. I think in many ways this is a really personal, early-life story about Tim. It takes place in an imaginary, somewhat boring, suburban neighborhood with an extraordinary story and all these amazing creatures ... and that's Tim's way of saying, "I grew up in this Burbank kind of atmosphere."

The idea of having these unbelievable fantasies happen in an ordinary town is something that was really personal to him ... and that's what I think makes the story special and emotional and funny 'cause, in a way, it's Tim's story.

WERE THE CHARACTERS AND SCENES CHANGED FROM THE ORIGINAL SHORT?

Well, in some cases they were very similar, but I think Tim wanted to do something that was his own movie. So certainly Victor, Sparky, and the Frankenstein family were very similar. But Tim expanded the idea that school can be a weird place with really interesting characters in your classroom, and added new faces like Edgar, some of the pets, and the neighborhood kids.

I think all the new characters -- like the kids in the class and eventually their pets, who get turned into monsters -- gave us a much, much bigger palette to draw on than the original short. So you not only have the kind of relationship, fun, and love between a boy and his dog, but there's also an escalation of all these other pets coming back to life as monsters. It adds a lot of fun to the movie.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT SOME OF THOSE PET MONSTERS?

Well, they're the classic pets that we all had -- the turtle that lives on a plastic island in the middle of a water dish, the hamster, a kitten named Mr. Whiskers. It's a tribute to all those little animals that we grew up with. The turtle, of course, turns into a giant, fire-breathing monster. The hamster comes back as a kind of mummy. And you get these really, really fun cameo appearances by animals in the form of monsters.

HOW WAS COMIC-CON?

We set up our display and the puppets [from the film] on Thursday night before the press preview. It was so much fun watching people come in for the first time and “ooh and ahh” at all the sets and puppets and watch Tim come down and sign autographs. It was just great.

WHAT WERE THE FANS TALKING ABOUT?

Tim Burton fans are crazy. They're loyal, sophisticated, and understand what Tim does -- and they like it. They understand that this guy is not just a filmmaker. He's an artist -- his touring art show has traveled from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to LACMA in Los Angeles, Europe, and Australia. He's one of the most iconic contemporary artists of our time.

So they're really fans of everything Tim Burton. I think it was a religious experience for fans to walk in and see Tim on the floor signing autographs for a while, surrounded by his drawings, his desk, and all the puppets that were part of the exhibit – they loved seeing it all.

And they've been kind to this movie. Fans are very loyal, but they also want to be treated well or feel like the movie is going to be something special for them. They've been more than kind and loyal to us as filmmakers in their anticipation of this movie and how much they're looking forward to it. So they've been fantastic.

ARE YOU FINISHED WITH THE FILM RIGHT NOW?

Yes, we finished mixing it, Tim took off on vacation, we did some screenings, and Danny finished his score. So yeah, it's all done and it's a little gem. I hope you enjoy it!