

The Editor's Cut - Episode 050 - John Venzon, ACE

Carolyn Giardina:

Favorite snack or drink while you're editing?

John Venzon:

Movie theater popcorn and a giant Diet Coke. Don't do that, you'll die.

Sarah Taylor:

Hello and welcome to the Editor's Cut. I'm your host, Sarah Taylor. We would like to point out the lands on which we have created this podcast, and that many of you may be listening to us from, are part of ancestral territory. It is important for all of us to deeply acknowledge that we are on ancestral territory that has long served as a place where indigenous peoples have lived, met, and interacted. We honor, respect, and recognize these nations that have never relinquished their rights or sovereign authority over the lands and waters on which we stand today. We encourage you to reflect on the history of the land, the rich culture, the many contributions, and the concerns that impact indigenous individuals and communities. Land acknowledgements are the start to a deeper action.

Today's episode is the online Master Series that took place on September 29th, 2020. The Canadian Cinema Editors and the American Cinema Editors presented a discussion with animation editor, John Venzon, ACE. John is a feature film editor who primarily works in animated feature films. He was the lead editor on South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut, Dreamworks Animation, Ardman Pictures, Flushed Away, Warner Animation Groups, Storks, the Lego Batman movie, and is currently editing a new animated feature for Dreamworks Animation. Graduating with a BFA in film studies from the University of Colorado at Boulder, he made his way to LA learning his craft as an Assistant Editor on films from directors such as Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers, Robert Redford's The Horse Whisperer and David Finch's The Game, Fight Club and Panic Room, before he crossed over to animation with director Trey Parker. He's a member of both American Cinema Editors and the Academy. This event was moderated by Carolyn Giardina, Tech Editor at the Hollywood Reporter.

[show open]

Carolyn Giardina:

I'd really like to start with animation editing. It's often described as being different from live action editing in the sense that in live action you shoot first and then edit, and in this case, it's almost the opposite. You're almost edit first, and then produce if you will.

So would you take us through the process and some of the key considerations that you have when you're working on these movies?

John Venzon:

I find it really interesting when I talk with people who go, "What do you even do? In animation, don't you, isn't it you just animate it? Do they hand you the shots and you just cut off the slates and put it together?" And by the way, I never take offense at this because even fellow editors who have cut many, many movies will say to me, "What do you even do?"

And the best way I can think to describe it is to say to the fellow editors, imagine you get a phone call saying, "Oh, I want you to edit my next movie, but you know what we're going to do is we're to spend the next two to three years with you, me, the director, the writer, the cinematographer, and we're going to make the movie in the room, just us as a group, over and over and over again, making sure that we like the story and making sure we have the flow, we understand where the act breaks are, and that it has real emotion. And only after that time, do we feel like, yes, we've gotten the story, right, we then shoot the movie." Which, I think, is a really wonderful way to spend a couple of years, especially when you feel a kinship with the team you're working with.

Carolyn Giardina:

Now, tell us a little bit about the collaborative process and also the timeline. So, as you go through these stages, who are you working most closely with on the team? You mentioned the writers, you mentioned the director and from one of these, this could be a year or more. So would you give us a little bit more of a sense of what it's like to be in the trenches?

John Venzon:

Each one of these stages, I have a central partner, in addition to my director, that I'm spending the majority of my time with. The first stage being story, I typically work with the story department and they have a main storyboard artist who's usually called the head of story. That person is kind of like a junior director for the storyboard team. Obviously, everything we're doing is in conjunction with the director. The director in an animated movie serves the same purpose as a director in a live action feature, but just a little bit different specialized position, because they have to understand every stage of the process. Whereas I think in live action, you can tend to rely more on say your cinematographer if you don't understand camera. But if you're in animation, you have to know, deeply, what a 50 millimeter does to your character's face as opposed to 150 millimeter lens.

And so, as a result, I tend to find that animation directors tend to have a broader base, not always, but that tends to be the case. But in working through the story, we go through, we put up the script, and storyboard artists are almost like co-editors with me because they'll go through and they'll storyboard the sequence. And by the way, just to put it in a way that that makes sense, in live action, storyboard artists really exist to help with the cinematography, whereas the storyboard artist on an animated film works as a cinematographer, as the co-editor, and as the actor, because they have to act everything out.

And from my part, when I'm in storyboard, I'll get a sequence, and I'm sure just even in that little clip right there, it's a very short shot. And if I were treating it as a live action editing situation, that would be one cut. But in fact, that's five to 10 edits internally because I'm cycling between the boards to indicate movement. And those timings will then carry forward to the animators once they get it, to kind of see where I'm timing the acting change ups. And the director will work with me to say, "Oh, hey, you know what? Let's have his face turned from happy to sad a little bit later." So we're actually getting to be really granular. And we'll go through and we'll do temp voices, which are a lot of times people who are in the editing room with us. People at the studio who are actors will come in and do voices for us, and we iterate over and over and over again because we have screenings where we'll sit down and we'll watch the script, full motion with the storyboards, the voices, the sound effects and the music.

And we'll say, "Oh, well, the first act is great. That feels about right, but what is happening in the second act?" And by the time I get to the third act, I'm just way too confused. So we'll rip it apart and go, "Okay, where is it broken?" And we'll end up going through and redoing storyboards, maybe sometimes we'll go through and we'll combine characters. A lot of times, in the script, we'll realize, like on the movie Shark

Tale, there were two mafia type characters, one that was going to be voiced by Martin Scorsese, and one that was going to be voiced by one of the members of the Sopranos. And we realized watching the film that we only needed one mob character type. And so we ended up combining the characters and moving the story points onto the Martin Scorsese character. And these are things that you discover as you go through.

So what ends up happening is, I also, when I'm cutting these things, I'll look at what the storyboard artist's pitch is, and I'll say, "Oh, we could use a closeup here," or, "I'm a little confused here," or, "I'd rather be wider here." And so the board artists and I will kind of figure out how to adjust the timing and the composition. I'll take it and then cut it, and we iterate over and over and over again. I like to think of the Avid as the world's most expensive typewriter, because we're basically just rewriting the movie as we go.

Then after we get done with that, we'll say, "Okay, this feels good," then we'll bring in the actors. In the case of the Lego Batman movie, it was Will Arnett as Batman and Zach Galifianakis is the Joker, and we'll record the movie with them. And this is the case with a lot of comedians or improv actors, you'll end up getting stuff that was never in the script, and you'll go, "Oh, that's a great bit."

And I'll talk more about cutting improv a little bit later, but the idea is that we then look at the movie, again, and we say, "Okay, great, this scene is working and we're going to move it into the layout" which is the stage where you saw the digital mannequins, that's really when we shoot the movie, and it gives me the second chance to edit the movie. So I am editing the movie the first time in storyboards, and then I re-edit the movie completely because once we get in with like a real 50 millimeter lens, I'll say, "Oh, you know what? We can't see quite as much," or, "The Joker, the guy was standing in front of the camera, and the little guy was way in the back doesn't work." So we end up having to reshoot the movie and recut it.

Sometimes we'll combine shots, sometimes we'll do things that are too labor intensive for a storyboard artist. Like a steady camera, [a viper] like a moving camera is really labor-intensive in storyboards, but in layout it's much easier. Then we go through, we recut, we write new lines, so we're still rewriting, as needed, up to that point.

And then we go into animation and that's where the dollar values are double. It gets really expensive. So the further you go along, you want to get your story really dialed in because it gets to be really expensive. So, and the animators are, as I said, in the clip, they're really the actors of the movie. It's really interesting because if you think of a character, I'll just think of Will Arnett in Lego Batman, he really had two actors. It was Will Arnett as the voice, and then you had all the animators that were working to kind of pose him and do the change ups. And the animators are looking at the timing that the director has approved and the storyboards kind of give rough timings, but that's really where they bring it to life. And lengths will change, and we'll kind of get it to a place where we'll say, "Okay, that's it, the scene, that's exactly what we want from the scene."

And then we go into the lighting stage, which is really where the movie is lit. And up until that point, the textures, in CG anyway, are all kind of like digital mannequin-y, they're really kind of gray or one tone. Well, it gets into lighting, all of a sudden everyone's skin looks like real skin and there are real lights out there.

And we also integrate visual effects, so pretty much, and this is where it gets crazy, in order to interact with fabric or hair, that has to be treated like a visual effect. So, that's where everything gets integrated, in the lighting, and if you change stuff in lighting, it's really expensive. So that's why, for me, I feel like as soon as we go into animation, that's when we really shoot the movie.

Carolyn Giardina:

Before you fell in love with animation editing, you actually started in live action. So would you tell us a little bit about your experiences in live action? And then how did those experiences bring you to animation?

John Venzon:

I went to film School at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and I had a really, as one does in your early twenties, I had a really rigid idea. I'm going to Hollywood. I always wanted to be an editor, I'm going to go to Hollywood, I'm going to become editor, and then I'm going to edit the next Star Wars movie. That was kind of what I had in my mind. And so what I found was, once I got out, I wanted to find editors whose work I really admire. So I had grown up really loving the movies that Donn Cambern had cut, the Michael Tronick, the Alan Heim, the Michael Kahn, Carol Littleton, these were the editors that really inspired me. And so I decided that if I was going to be an Assistant Editor, I wanted to have a chance to work with these people.

And I just really caught a really lucky break and got hired as an Assistant Editor on Natural Born Killers, Oliver Stone's movie, Natural Born Killers. And I was hired by Brian Berdan and Hank Corwin, both with ACE. And it was the thing where I got interviewed at 9:00 o'clock at night on a Thursday, I got the job at 10:00 o'clock on a Thursday night, and I was on a plane to Gallup, New Mexico, the next morning. And I think that was the thing, I was young enough to not realize that that's not a normal way to live your life. And thank goodness, I haven't really been paying attention to what seems like a normal life, because it allows you to kind of follow the things that seem really exciting. And thank goodness I did that, I made lifelong friends with both Hank and Brian and the other people that I worked on that show.

But the thing that was really interesting working for Oliver Stone and that particular group of people was understanding that you have the lead editor, but they're not the only editor. That you can actually have a really successful film that has its own unique identity because you have multiple people putting their own creative hands into the film. And I think that that was something I didn't really understand before. I thought it was the lone editor who was making all the editing creative choices. But, and certainly there are movies that way, and I've done movies that way.

But it opened my eyes to realize that there's another way to work, which is finding people that you feel that you can collaborate with and get to a really vulnerable state where you go, "This is what I think the movie should be," or, "This is what I think the scene should be," and being open to having someone say, "Well, have you considered exactly 180 degrees opposite from what you've done?" And not be hurt about that, not be upset or see that as a failure, but see it as, "Oh, wow. Well, wait a minute. Well, if we go completely other direction, what does that do?"

So that led me to, after Natural Born Killers, going to work on a movie called Little Giants, which was edited by Michael Tronick, Billy Weber, and Donn Cambern. And I got to assist for my editing idols, it was amazing. And that was kind of the beginning, my career really started to take off because I got to know more people. And I got a chance to, because of that show, it was an Amblin film, I was a known quantity to Amblin. And so when Michael Kahn needed a Digital Assistant Editor, I got the call. And I got to assist Michael Kahn, which, for me, was like being the bat boy for the Yankees as they were winning all those World Series back in the day.

And I really got a chance to watch Michael, watch his cutting, kind of learn from him, see how he handled screenings, see how he handles directors. And I think that that's probably one of the best things that editors can do for their assistants, which is just to be open door, to observe, and in so much as you

can learn by watching, that editors have more to teach than just covering a wide into a closeup, or making sure you don't trombone, like cut in, cut out, cut in, cut out. That's all important, but probably the more important thing is how do you handle it when your director is having a really rough day and maybe isn't really in a space where they can be their best creative person? When is it right to give them the space they need to kind of get to a place where they're ready to work? And when is it important to kind of help them along? And these are all things that you kind of realize and learn as you do films.

But basically what ended up happening is after working for Michael Khan, I can't even believe I got the good fortune of getting tapped to be James Haygood's assistant on *The Game* for David Fincher. And then we rolled right into *Fight Club*, and here I am, like an Assistant Editor, we were doing *Fight Club*. I'm like, "This movie is going to be amazing. It's unlike anything, and I'm going to be an editor. I'm going to work my way up and cut for David Fincher." When all of a sudden the phone rang and a friend of mine from college said, "Hey, John, I've got this low budget animated movie. Would you like to edit it for me?"

And of course, the smart thing to do would be, "What are you, nuts? I'm not going to leave a David Fincher movie to cut some no-nothing animated movie." But I said to my friend, "It sounds amazing, but I don't know anything about animation." And he said, "Nah, don't worry about it. We'll figure it out together." And that movie turned out to be the *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut* movie. My friend was Trey Parker, and Matt Stone, who I went to film school at the University of Colorado at Boulder with. And it was one of those things where when you get an opportunity in your life where someone believes in you, to say, "I'm going to take a chance on you. You've never done this before, but I like working with you." You can't say no.

So I ended up having to go into David Fincher's office and say, "David, I'm quitting," which it was maybe the hardest conversation I've ever had. And by the way, and to David's credit, he was so lovely about it. And so for me, I have two movies on my resume in 1999, *South Park* and *Fight Club*, and I think that pretty much the rest of my career, it's just all downhill from that.

So yeah. So *South Park*, I don't know if folks know about *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*. I'll just tell a really quick story, just to set up what it is to have worked on the *South Park* movie. We started out, the *South Park* movie, and it was originally kind of tentatively titled *South Park Goes to Hell*, right? And the MPA said, "You can't call your movie *South Park Goes to Hell*. It's an animated movie, absolutely not. You have to come up with a different name." And they said, "Well, what do you want us to call it?" And they said, "Well, submit a list of names, and then we'll tell you what ones are okay."

So they wrote up a list of names, and on that name was *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*. And they submitted to the MPA, and the MPA said, "Yeah, that's fine. It is up on the screen, so it is bigger, and it is longer than a TV show, and it is uncut because there's swearing in it. So, okay." And so they approved it, and then a week later, the MPA came back and said, "You snuck a dick joke into your title. No, no that's unacceptable."

And they said, "Well, you approved it." And they said, "Well, we're unapproving it." And they had to get Paramount involved to say, "Look, you said we had to change the title. We changed the title, and now you're telling us we have to change it again, no, no." And that's why it's called that, to this day. Just as an aside, I debated picking *Blame Canada*, but I didn't want anyone to feel like that was a slight, because honestly, from everyone who was working on the movie, we love Canadians. As a matter of fact, maybe my favorite part of the whole movie is when the Canadian Prime Minister gets to tell the US military, "Hey, fuck up buddy," which always makes me laugh.

But the reason I picked that scene is because in cutting that movie, I got to cut alongside Gian Ganziano and Tom Vogt, who came from the TV show, and they came on to cut with me on the show.

But my main co-editor on that show was Trey Parker himself. He is an amazing editor. He would always cut his stuff at school, and it felt really natural to be cutting with him. But I learned so much about comic timing from him. And you'll see in the film, he wasn't afraid to push me to do cuts that maybe they weren't exact match cuts, but, South Park has baked into its DNA kind of a crappy level of quality as part of its quality, at least in the early sessions, the early parts of the show. But the reason I really picked up there was, that was the first song in the first batch of songs that Trey wrote for the movie when I realized, "Oh God, we're making a musical because..."

Carolyn Giardina:

What? You have to tell us about how it actually became a musical.

John Venzon:

Here's the best part about Trey and Matt. At that point, they were in season two or season three of the show, and people were giving them advice, "Look, you guys have maybe two years more on the show max, and it's going to go off the air. So you guys need to do a cash grab, get in, get as much money as you can, and get out before the house falls apart." And Trey and Matt took a much different approach. They felt like, well, if we're only going to be able to do this for a couple of years, let's do a movie that we want to do, and just do something completely bonkers. They went to Paramount and they said, "Yeah, we're making a musical, it's going to be South Park: The Musical."

And Paramount went, "Under no circumstances are you making a musical. No one wants to see a musical, musicals don't make money. This is a cute, swearing, we're going to let you swear. That's the deal. Go make your swear movie. We'll make our money. We'll get out before this thing falls apart." So Trey basically went, "Well, we're making a musical." And they said, "No, you're not." And he said, "Yes, we are." And the studio went, "Do we understand each other?" And Trey said, "Yeah, we do understand each other." And then we went back and we made a musical.

And by the time the studio got a chance to see the screening, it was too late to really do much to change it. And so they're like, "All right, fine. Just give us something that we can put in theaters." And so Trey, they got to make the musical, and this piece of music I heard when Trey brought it in, when I was just starting to cut the scene. And it was really the first time I realized that my friend who I'd gone to college with was not only a comic genius, but he was also a musical genius. Keeping in mind that this song is being written 11 years before he wins the Tony for Book of Mormon, right?

So I'm listening to the song and I'm going, "Oh my God, this has everything that's wonderful about Broadway musicals. It's not some crappy knockoff." And so I think this is an important thing to pay attention to when you're doing comedy, because you can imagine a less talented director doing this as a parody, because clearly it's a parody of a part of Your World from Little Mermaid. So you can imagine a version that is just like the filthy version of that. And you might get a laugh out of it, but it's just kind of a, "Ho, ho, I see what you did there," kind of comedy. But Trey and Matt did something really smart. They made the character of Satan not the worst person in the film. The fictional Saddam Hussein is really the bad guy in the movie. And so by taking and humanizing Satan, and realizing that he just wants to be loved and he just wants to be genuine and be himself and be with people he feels are like him up above now. Admittedly going up above fulfills the prophecy and then Armageddon happens. So it's kind of hard to root for Armageddon, but you do, because you can completely see the character separate from Satan,

but you see the character and you understand, I know what it is to want to feel accepted and loved and not mistreated by someone who should be treating me better.

Carolyn Giardina:

How did the character change and evolve during the process of editing? I'm sure you tried different approaches too.

John Venzon:

My memory of Satan and Saddam's relationship is being pretty bedrock to the movie. That was the one thing that changed is just making, coming up with more and more, just terrible things that Saddam would do to make Satan feel bad about himself, in being ashamed of being in relationship with him, just basically everything a bad boyfriend would do in a relationship. And just, I think that was really just finding the line between, just over the top, because obviously once they get up in the prophecy is done and the world burst into flames, it's very bad. But that the idea being that you understand emotionally what's going on, and that's actually one of the things that I tried to do on every single movie, because I'll sensibly...

When you think of bad animated movies, you think of just the cheap, disposable animated movies. It's about two friends who find out what it means to be friends, because they want to be friends. And at the end of the movie, they're friends. There's no, there, there. It's just so what. But if you can always wind your character back to something that's super relatable to you on a basic level and either relationships or just feeling you don't have a voice in the world or not really knowing what you want and being afraid to go out make yourself vulnerable. I think anytime you can tell a story where you reveal part of your heart, that is kind of scary to say out loud, and you can put that into a character.

People respond to that. You know, South Park is such a weird example to begin as my first animated movie, because by the time I got to the end of it, basically everything I learned could not be applied to just about any other animated movie I would do for the rest of my career. Most animated movies take between two and a half to five years to make, the South Park movie was made in 11 and a half months. Like I said, the crummy jitteriness of it is baked into the DNA. And even though it appears to be

Carolyn Giardina:

[it's just unheard of] in animation.

John Venzon:

That is, that is super fast. So the timeline is, I'm working on Fight Club. I quit Fight Club. I cut the South Park movie. I finished the South Park movie. And then I go back as an assistant and I finish Fight Club. Because David had had a year and a half to make Fight Club, I managed to squeeze another film right in the middle of it. So that was my career. I was like, well, I'm back working for David again. I'm an assistant editor again. That was a fun adventure, I guess that's my career. I guess it's very confusing until I get a phone call-

Carolyn Giardina:

Now it wasn't your career, because then the next step was DreamWorks animation and Aardman, wonderful comedy Chicken Run, which had also fantastic characters.

John Venzon:

Oh yes. And actually this is a really interesting thing that... Just going back to the idea of working with multiple editors and realizing that's a really wonderful way to work. And actually a lot of my friends like Rob Komatsu ACE, who is one of the top television editors on the planet and just a super gifted editor, he works with multiple editors.

And as they're swapping the episodes between the two of them you make something where you all figure it out together. I'm always really in awe of how those guys and men and women on TV shows make things that are as cohesive and as emotionally effective as any animated feature or any live action feature that it actually... I find myself gravitating more to TV shows these days than movies. If I'm being honest, it feels like that's where the really interesting stuff is being made.

In terms of Dreamworks, I get a call from Marty Cohen, rest in peace, Marty. He was the head of post for Amblin and he was head of post for Dreamworks. I worked with him on two shows and he said, "Jeffrey Katzenberg saw the South Park movie. He thinks it's really funny and wants to know are you an animation editor?" And I said, "Is there money?" And he said, "Oh yes." And I said, "Well, that is exactly what I am." And I'd never really thought of myself as an animation editor. I'd wanted to be an animator kind of for a while because Looney Tunes when I was a little kid. Because I couldn't draw, I just gave up on it. So then in realizing, oh my God, I could actually work on animated movies, as a thing, as a regular thing.

And so Jeffrey started me out on a directive video sequel to Prince of Egypt called Joseph King of Dreams, which makes sense. I do an R-rated animated movie. And then I do a Bible picture as a palette cleanser. Once they saw that I wasn't a complete maniac, they said they needed help on Chicken Run because they had discovered that the two rats, Nick and Fetcher, were feeling like something that they wanted to have as a runner through the film. And they were working over in Bristol. Mark Solomon, the lead editor, very talented editor, along with his coeditors, Robert Francis, and Tamsin Parry. They said, "Hey, we could use some help. And we heard good things about you and why don't you come work on it?" And so I was in Glendale, working on beats while they were in Bristol, where they were actually shooting the film.

Now, one thing I want to say about Aardman, it was a lifelong dream of mine. Well, when I say lifelong, since I saw the very first Wallace and Gromit short to be able to work with Aardman, I mean, oh my God, they're one of the best animated studios, animation studios it's ever been. And so for me it was again another one of those, "I can't believe I'm getting the chance to do this." And so I had to storyboard artists that would send me the boards, David Bowers and David Soren. And so what I would do is I would work in Los Angeles with the scratch voices. We would bring people with English accents in and they would do the characters and I would cut it together. And then once I cut the scene, I would send it over to Mark who would then integrate it into the film. And then he and Nick and Peter Lorde, the directors would work the sequences and they would give me notes and I would make changes.

Carolyn Giardina:

Nick made up the core team and the editorial team on that one.

John Venzon:

Mark Solomon, he was the lead editor. So he was the main person who was integrating everything and making sure that Nick and Pete were happy with everything. And then Robert and Tamsin, who I really hope I'm pronouncing Tamsin's name correctly. They were working over at Aardman. This is an interesting thing when you're working on... The scene I'm about to show you is the section that I cut, but

of course it goes through the process of the lead editor to make sure that I wasn't, that my timing... And I might've cut it a bit more aggressive than perhaps the rest of the film. And I think that that's... Just like a conductor doesn't play the music but they determine the pace and to make sure that everyone is cohesive. That's really the role of the lead editor. And so when I come onto a show, helping out, I'm always really respectful of the fact that the lead editor is determining the overall pace and tone of the film and you really want to get in and just help them out.

And I think that being an animation editor and maybe being a live action as well, it's really about getting in and supporting the lead and doing good work. But always asking yourself, What's the emotional point of the scene? What's going on and making sure that is done in conjunction. So then that way you're not throwing out a bunch of, "Hey, how about these jobs wakka, wakka, wakka." And then they get it and they go, "This is pointless. None of this is on theme. These characters are doing things that they don't do in the rest of the movie." You have to, you have to really be cognizant of how your pieces are fitting into the larger hole.

Carolyn Giardina:

I was trying to get to this with the team, is you were also working with the director who was also one of the founder's of Aardman-

John Venzon:

Yes.

Carolyn Giardina:

... So that played a big role in a lot of the creative decisions as well.

John Venzon:

Yes, absolutely. And Nick and Pete were both full time because this was getting close to the end of the film. So they were frantically shooting up... By the way, just as a thing about Aardman and all stop motion animation, that's like, Corpse Bride, any stop motion animated movie, you can think of. It's like someone said, I want to take everything that's miserable and difficult about live action filmmaking and everything that's difficult and miserable about animation and make one misery sandwich. Because you have to build everything and actually really build everything in real. If there's a tiny fork in that scene, someone has to carve a tiny fork. You can't go down to the grocery store and say, "I need a pinata, I need a fruit bowl." Someone has to physically make those things.

And then if that wasn't bad enough having to build sets, then you have to painstakingly make it one frame at a time. So I think that it takes a really special type of animator to really excel in stop motion. And God bless them. They make the best. I love stop motion movies. But that's... And another thing about stop motion is you go from storyboard to finished animation. There's no like weird middle step because you're actually on a set with a camera and you shoot it. So you still work the film in storyboards, but you really, you go from storyboards to that's it, you've got the movie and you color time it. Getting to cut something for Nick Park it was absolutely on my bucket list. It's a thing where you just end up doing something where you think how many puns can I fit into the smallest space area?

And the storyboard artists just were reeling them off. I think that those two characters really work as kind a Greek chorus to give the audience a sense of where Ginger and Roger are in terms of their development and whether or not they're actually going to be able to escape in time. But I think that it's

important to understand that you shouldn't always get too bogged down in story, that sometimes you want to make sure you have fun.

And I think that that's a good example of just getting in and really having fun. I think the other thing I wanted to say is, is that sometimes when you do jobs, you're helping out, but it can lead to wonderful diversions in your career. Because of my work on that I ended up doing two more features with Aardman one called A Tortoise versus the Hare, and then Flushed Away, which was produced by Pete Lord, who was a co-director and one of the founding members of Aardman.

This pretty much this leads into the stage of my career where I call it, learn by doing. Which, when I was given the amazing opportunity to cut the South Park movie, not only was I beginning editor, but I was also a beginning animation person. And then I really needed to get in and start cutting and honing my craft and learning what, how far you could push timings. Because when you're in storyboards that times it a little bit different than the layout, things tend to expand and slow down. And you only learn these things by cutting. And so I was at Dreamworks for another eight years after that. And then I thought to myself, I bet the world's economy is going to collapse in 2008. I should probably leave Dreamworks and go start working in independent studios, which by the way, you can never control your career that way.

The world as we all know, can change on a dime and you just have to do what feels right. During, after leaving Dreamworks I ended up working for a number of independent studios. I got to work for Illumination. I got to cut over at paramount for a while. But the main thing was, is just getting to work with the different variety of directors, that sometimes come from storyboarding, sometimes come from animation, sometimes come from writing. And you really learn how... The person will usually direct from their strength of where they come from. And so you kind of learn the animator might not be able to communicate as well in storyboards as they do in the animation process. But sometimes you end up getting an experience with someone who comes from a writer, director, point of view, that you don't expect. And that's what happened when I landed at Warner Brothers to edit the movie Storks.

Carolyn Giardina:

John, I would really love you to talk about the use of improv in animation, because this is a fantastic example of what improv can really bring to a story.

John Venzon:

Thank you for bringing that up. Because the main thing you need to know about this, was the Warner brothers decided to try a different process of making films. What they decided to do was to pair a really talented live action comedy person, a director with a really talented animation director. And so I got my two dads, the amazing team of Doug Sweetland, who was one of the star Pixar animators. He animated so much of Woody in the Toy Story films, along with Nick Stoller, who was the writer director behind, Get him to the Greek, and Forgetting Sarah Marshall and Neighbors. And so as a result, they had two very different ways of working. Typically when we do scratch temp voices and when we record the actors, we record them in isolation. And then that gives us 100% control over overlapping dialogue. And what ended up happening is Nick said, "Well, Hey, can't we get a couple of microphones and get the actors in and record everyone in the room together." Which by the way, saying that to an animation person is like.... What?

We don't have complete control over everything. And so what Nick did is he chucked the standard way of working out the window. Basically, it's the story of Junior, who's a stork and Tulip, who is a young woman, and they have to deliver a baby, which Junior basically just wants to get the baby delivered and

go back to his life. That's the basic storyline and Tulip wants nothing more than to deliver this baby. And Junior's going to cut corners because he just wants this baby out of his life so he can get back to it. The thing that I love the most about that movie and the thing that was amazing about cutting it, was two things. One Nick decided to make that movie because of a really genuine life experience that he had. He and his wife were having trouble conceiving their daughter, and they were going to fertility clinics.

And it was, it was really difficult on both of them. And he remembered he had a thought that wouldn't it be great if you'd just write a letter to the storks and they could bring you a baby, that would be so much easier. And so that inspired him to create the story of the baby and kind of getting a family a brand new baby, because it's such a primal thing.

And also the fact is, is that when a baby smiles, I defy you as a human, you can be an ex-con. You can be a MMA fighter, but if a baby smiles at you, it melts your heart. There's no defense against a smiling baby. So that was number one, that was Nick's superpower, number one, Nick's superpower number two is, that he loves improv. And so in getting into the room, he would get... That was Katie Crown as Tulip, Andy Samberg as Junior.

And then the wolves. And I say the wolves, all of the wolves were voiced by Key and Peele. So Michael Key and Jordan Peele came in and recorded the voices for every single one of those wolves. And basically what would happen is Nick being the writer director would write the scene and then we would get into a room with all four of them together with four microphones. And then we would read through the script as written. So we would have a pass of the script and then Nick would start shouting out improv prompts. So he would just randomly say things like, "Okay, Andy, pretend that you can't hear Tulip. And let's just do a pass where you go through and go, no, I can't hear you. I'm not listening." And then Katie would respond to that.

Or they would just turn Jordan and Keegan loose and they would just improv. And what would happen was, is that I would be in the room with Nick, with the script and I would be lining it and going, "Okay, that's a funny thing. And Nick laughed at that." And then we would get done with a run and I would have to turn to Nick and say, "Okay, Nick, we need to write some dialogue. So we can get from seeing the baby and fighting and then kind of getting back into the aah section." And he would write the script on the fly and give the actors prompts. And then I would get back to the cutting room with literally five or six different versions of the scene. And it was just a matter of going, okay, not only what was the funniest, but what was also the most on theme for what's going on with Junior and Tulip.

But the other thing is that it allowed me to exercise a philosophy. I have of instant karma for characters who are undeveloped, when I say undeveloped, I don't mean they're not well drawn. I mean, underdeveloped in the sense that they are not, they've not come to the self realization that they're going to come through over the film. So Junior was a jerk and was mean to Tulip when, Tulip was just trying to help this baby and be a good person.

And so much of the comedy is watching Junior get hit over and over and over again until he starts realizing, oh wow, the world is bigger than just me and what I want, and actually this baby is maybe the most important thing in the world. And that actually is more important. And that's drawing upon my experiences as a parent and realizing that at three in the morning, when your kid is really sick, it doesn't matter that you love vinyl records or that you how to parasail or whatever it is.

All that matters is that, you know, instantly what pharmacy is open right now. So you can go get medicine, so your kid can feel better. And that those are the things that you really look for in characters. And you know, when you're working on an animated movie, what characters don't feel like they could be

real humans. I spend most of my time, when I'm editing an animated movie, imagining those characters are people that I would see in the world rather than talking birds. And then it allows you to relate to it. And it allows you to say to the director, "I'm having a problem because when juniors coming in, I don't believe what he's saying because he would..." And if he's going to say something exactly opposite, what he should be saying, I need to understand why he's pushing. Is he saying it because he doesn't want to deal with something or is he just unaware? And that's really how you and the director and the writer in this case, director and writer figure out the story as you're going through storyboards.

Carolyn Giardina:

Could you also talk about how the voice casting went for Tulip? Because, I think that also gives you an interesting-

John Venzon:

Oh Yeah.

Carolyn Giardina:

... Perspective on the behind the scenes process.

John Venzon:

Typically, what you'll go through, as I talked about the scratch voices, you'll get either an actor or just a normal human being, who happens to be working on the film and you'll do temporary voices. And every once in a while, you'll find someone who is so unique and has such a... It's so hard to point, but when you hear their voices, you go, "This is the character." Because I think that they had always thought, "Well, We'll get Katie Crown in, she's a standup comedian, she's a writer and she'll help us flesh things out, but clearly we'll replace her with Melissa McCarthy." Or with whoever, whatever actress that fits the role. But we realized about halfway through the storyboarding process that she is, that Tulip is so heartfelt and wonderful.

And if we bring someone in, maybe they can replicate it, but we won't get this specific thing. So Nick went to the studio, went to the head of the studio and said, "I want to cast this complete unknown woman because she is doing this magical thing with the film. And we really should hire her to be the lead voice" And to Warner Brothers credit they said, "Well, all right. As long as we have other people to do marketing. We had Jennifer Aniston in the film and we had Andy Samberg. And as long as we have people that can do the marketing push, yeah, we can cast her." And it also helped that everyone really liked her in terms of her performance. Also, she's a wonderful person. And to this day, she's the head writer on Bob's Burgers now. And she does voices on the show and she is, she's a wonderful and wonderful to edit and super lovely as a human.

Carolyn Giardina:

And because they creative process is so collaborative it's really not unusual to have even a director or a member of the crew end up voicing a character in these movies.

John Venzon:

That is correct. Improv because of the strength of what happened on... Oh, and by the way I need to mention is vitally important, that when I was cutting Storks, I was the lead editor. And just when I was working as an additional editor, helping out Mark Solomon on Chicken Run, I had Chris Cartagena and

Steve Liu, who are both wonderful editors and lead editors in their own right. Came and helped me out on the show. And so it allows you to focus on one area of the film while they're getting, say something in the second act cut together. So Jesse Averna and Christine Haslett are my current fellow editors on the film that I'm cutting right now. And I would be dead without them. And that's the thing where you give your all, when you're not the lead editor, because you know, the lead editor appreciates it.

And then you give your all as the lead editor, because you've got people who are fearlessly cutting with you. It's wonderful when you find people that you feel that connection with. That's how these animated movies really get made and wonderfully. Because I had done all of this editing, all this improv editing, it was about eight months towards the end of the Lego Batman movie. And they needed help working on the second and third act. And so they said, "Hey, this guy knows how to cut improv and he's in house. Let's have him come help out." And that's how I ended up getting hired onto the Lego Batman film. So basically all you need to know is this is the big finale scene. Batman and Joker have been battling through the whole film and Joker has finally decided to blow Gotham up with a giant bomb that Batman isn't able to diffuse. The thing that's really interesting about the way the Lego projects are done is that they have very large editing crews because at least for when we were making the Lego Batman film that we had the team in Los Angeles, and we had the animation team along with the main editors over in Sydney, Australia at [Animal Logic]

Carolyn Giardina:

[Do you want to give a shout out] to the main team?

John Venzon:

Yes, I absolutely want to give a shout out to the main team. We had so many talented editors working on that and I had to write everyone's name down. So I made sure not to miss anyone. Well, first of all, the main editor, the lead editor was David Burrows, who was the co-lead editor on the first Lego film, really talented editor, along with Matt Villa, also an amazing editor. Garret Elkins, who was cutting on this. He also cut Anomalisa, just a [mwah], such a wonderful animated movie. [Vanara Taing], John Tappin, Doug Nicholas, and Todd Hansen, who are by the way, a team, they're working together at, I think over at Sony right now, working with Phil and Chris on their next project over there. Along with Ryan Boucher and our director, Chris McKay, who was the main editor on the first Lego film, in addition to directing, he was also another one of the editors on this film.

And so this was really a whirlwind thing because we had to get the second and third act really up on its feet and iterate over and over and over again in a fairly short amount of time. And boy, I'll tell you, David had his hands full along with Matt over in Sydney, just trying to get the film finished. I picked that scene because it was the culmination of something that I think Chris was so smart to do, which was how do you do a new version of the Batman and Joker story? Because it's, I mean, 70 years or 80 years, or however many years those two have been going at it. How do you do a new version? Well, I think the way you do it is you make it a super relatable story and you borrow the arc of a romantic comedy that you have the Joker who just wants to be heard and just wants to hear, "You matter to me."

And Batman, who is, of course, the Dark Knight in this film, is very much, "I'm a lone wolf. I talk to my low voice because I have to be by myself." And for him, the growth in that film, which by the way, I think it's super relatable. You can't reinvent Batman, but you can certainly take him from a person who is isolated and only cares about himself because he has to do the superhero job, to expanding his circle, to include Robin and Alfred and Batgirl and the Joker. And for the Joker, his arc is literally similar to the

Satan and the Saddam storyline from the South Park movie that if you're in a relationship with someone who takes you for granted and doesn't hear you, it's really relatable because you want to be heard.

You don't want to be in a relationship with someone who treats you poorly and just takes you for granted. And so by looking at the romantic comedy arc, it allowed us to do, to plot it. Basically, Batman in the first act saying, "I like to fight around, I didn't say you were the only villain I was fighting. We never agreed to be exclusive." And then kind of seeing Joker realized, well, maybe I should try and make him want me more and then finally turning his back. Yeah, I did say Matt Villa, by the way, Jenny McCormick says, Matt is, I did mention him and he's wonderful.

Anyway, the idea being that the arc is that he has to then say, "I'm breaking up with you, Batman." And then Batman has to get to [the point in the] story he realizes, I don't want to live a life without having the Joker in my life, because he pushes me to be a better superhero by him being a better villain. So I think that once we got that arc in, it allowed us to really shape it.

And I cut so many versions of that scene, where we protracted the breakout, the bit where the conversation kind of changed. But ultimately, in these cases, is you always have to keep reminding yourself what is the core emotion? And the core emotion is, is that Joker has turned his back and in the scene, he literally turns his back on Batman and then Batman has to win the Joker back.

And that the point is, is that he is genuine and sincere about what he says. So at any rate, that was such a wonderful experience, mostly because I was such a big fan of the Lego movie. It is cut so aggressively and I remember seeing it for the first time, I was cutting Storks when they released it, when I was at Warner Brothers, and I just saw it and went, "Oh, that is everything I want." The jokes are furious, they come right on top of one another, and it's probably more my taste to be a bit more aggressive in the cutting. And that's the Lego Batman movie.

Carolyn Giardina:

Let's bring us to where you are now. You are busy working from home. You have [a remote] set up in your house.

John Venzon:

Behind my evil layer poster, you would see a giant continuity bar with all the scenes from the movie I'm editing, which I had to hide. But yes, I'm back at Dreamworks and I'm editing a movie that I often realize that when you get a project that you work on you care so much about, you really draw upon everything you've learned and this movie is pushing me to cut in a way that informs. Every single clip that I showed you guys now funnels into the movie I'm editing now, it is what I'm considering to be the pinnacle of my editing career. And I can't tell you anything about it because Dreamworks will shoot me. They have snipers outside my window waiting to make sure that I'm not breaking my non-disclosure agreement.

But I can tell you it's called The Bad Guys. It's based on a book series from Australia by an author by the name of Aaron Blabey. And if you are a 10-year-old or know a 10-year-old, you know all about this book, it is a big hit and is really funny. And it comes out in the mysterious future. So look for it in the next a year or two.

Carolyn Giardina:

We look forward to it. We're going to go to Q and A. I'm going to ask one quick question first, before we go. And there are a lot of questions that we're going to try and get through as many as possible.

John Venzon:

All right.

Carolyn Giardina:

But real quickly, before we go to the ones from the audience. You often hear about writer's block, but what happens when you get editor's block? You have to get it at some point.

John Venzon:

Yeah. This is actually one of the real big advantage of being in animation, because when you're cutting a scene and you feel like, ah, nothing is working and it feels like you're pressing wet newspaper together, and nothing is sticking. I can stand up and walk to the storyboard artists, so Matt Flynn, who is one of my favorite storyboard artists who's ever lived, he was the head of story along with Craig Berry on the Storks movie, and I'm working with him on my current movie. I can walk into his room and go, "This scene is kicking my butt. I can't figure out, I'm doing the scene and the character is doing this, but none of the jokes are landing, and it feels like something is wrong in the movie."

And so [to kind of combat] what feels like writer's block is, is that a lot of times Matt will say, "Well, okay, what's happening in the scene?"

And I'll say, I'm just going to make something up. The guy comes in and he says, I want everyone to listen to me, right? And it's basically, I say, it's driving me nuts because the audience is expecting him to walk in. And then nothing is a surprise and nothing is funny. And Matt will suggest, well, what if he does the opposite? What if we flip the scene and we make it he's already there and he doesn't want to talk, and everyone is expecting him to talk. The audience and the characters in the scene, what would happen if we did that? And then all of a sudden he goes, "Oh, oh, oh, that's great." And then we'll hash out a basic pitch and then this is my microphone right here. I don't know if you guys can see, this is I record all my voice stuff for the movies I'm cutting on that microphone. And we'll get in and we'll record the voices and we'll cut it together using the existing storyboards.

And then we'll call the director in and say, "Hey, we had a thought, what if we did this?" And then we'll play the scene. And a lot of times, the director will go, "Oh my God, that's it. That's the problem. The audience is expecting this and they're bored when we give them exactly what they're expecting." So I think that kind of inverting what you're doing in so much as you can, inverting it and then trying it again. The other thing I do is I find work that inspires me. If I have an editor's block, I think my friend, Melissa, who's cutting the Ted Lasso Show, she's wonderful. And Ted Lasso, if you guys haven't seen it, is the best show on TV right now. It's on Apple TV and it's the best mix of comedy and heart. It is everything that I want. Most of the quite really talented editor or I watched The Good Place, the editors of The Good Place or the editors of 30 Rock. That's also how I get over writer's block or editor's block.

Carolyn Giardina:

Okay. Next question. You've been asked, if you could share a few tips on comic timing, what works and what doesn't?

John Venzon:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. One of the things that I focus on when I'm cutting a scene, is I'll try to stay as true as possible to the script, right? Or the way it's been boarded by the storyboard artist. And I'll go through it and feel my way through it and try and make myself laugh. I think that a lot of editors talk about how we editors are the first audience. And so I think that you have to always remind yourself that you're the first person to see the movie and react to it. And so you have to really remember that your honest reaction, the first time you saw it, either in [dailies] or, or in my case, the first pass assemble. But a lot of times, I'll watch the scene and I'll shape it and I'll shape it and I'll shape it and still, it feels loose or flabby, or the jokes aren't landing. And I'll think to myself, "[ugh], this scene would be so much better if we lost that shot."

Then I'll remind myself, "Well, hold on. Why don't you just try losing that shot and see if that works," and invariably, I'll do that and go, "Oh my God, the scene is so much funnier now," because it's sharper and you're paying attention to the setup for the joke and the payoff for the joke are much closer together. And so you have to give yourself permission to go through and do the good version.

And I know this sounds really lame, but I'm just going to say it out loud. Sometimes, you have to remind yourself, hey, why don't I do a version where I just take out the bad stuff and just use the good stuff? Because sometimes, you get really caught up in, this is the way the scene has always been. And it's been this way a while. And I think someone liked it, but I can't remember who and you have to go, "No, no, no, no. Set it aside because," good Lord, we have Avids or Premiere or whatever we have copies. We can always revert back, but give yourself permission to do the version you think is really funny. And invariably, you'll find the comic timing that way.

Carolyn Giardina:

Next question, does the storyboard timing for jokes or [inaudible] jokes stay the same into final animation?

John Venzon:

Sometimes it will. It usually will, if the joke is a big facial change up. So like if a person is like, oh, talking about Junior, the scene from Storks where Tulip goes, "Hey, I just realized this baby and I have the same birthday and Junior's like, "Oh really? I don't care." That change up that I used, the storyboard is going from I'm really interested in what you have to say. I don't care what you're saying. That timing stayed very specific of the timing of the board there into animation.

But I tend to pay attention to change ups, big change ups like that or the change up gets a laugh. And I tend to be a bit more less uptight about other elements that the animator is going to do a much better performance because they have the full range of motion of the body of the character. So I tend to remind myself to stay open and not be too rigid about mandating, "Hey, you didn't do it exactly in the [boards]." Only do that when you get to a place where you're like this used to get a laugh and now it's not getting a laugh.

Carolyn Giardina:

As an editor, do you ever struggle with the director to get your point across? I think the question is, how do you explain, convey a decision to a director?

John Venzon:

The interesting thing is the question under that question is how can I make sure the director hears me? That I want to make sure... I think because that's the thing that we're all creative people, and when we do a cut of a scene, we're really putting ourselves out there. I mean, we're really taking a risk and maybe we're thinking, "I know the writer wanted this, but I feel like the movie has changed. And actually this actor or this voice has changed the nature of the film. And actually, I really want the director to hear me when I say the old way that everyone has been holding onto doesn't work anymore." That's an old version of the movie. And that happens a lot in animation because we're throwing things out and reinventing things. And a lot of times, we call it vestigial organs that stay in the film, we're like, we don't need that placenta anymore.

That placenta was for an earlier version, we don't need it anymore. And sometimes, you can really be nervous about stepping forward and saying, "Hey, we don't really need it." Or maybe it's a thing where you have a director that has a really specific idea about something and then they don't really want to be open to it. There are two ways that I approach it myself. And again, this is just John [Venzon] and ACE, your mileage may vary. My feeling is do the version they're asking for always. Always do the version they're asking for, because here's the deal. Let's say I have a really rigid view on something and I'm like, "No, that guy's wrong. He's super wrong. When I play the scene, he's going to see how wrong he is." Because the thing is then you put the director in a position where the director has to go, "Come on, stop being a jerk. Just please show me the version I'm asking for."

And then you're like, ""All right, fine." And you do it, right? And it works. Oh, oh, you're an asshole. That's terrible. Or that's option number one or option number two, you do it and it works, and you're the genius who made the director happy, or the director sees it and goes, "Oh, oh, that didn't work." I had an idea that didn't work and then you say, "Well, hey, here's what I was thinking; another way we can go or options.

I tend to use language like options or suggestions or what if we tried, because the idea is, is that we're not like this warring state, we're a team. And I mean, there's diplomacy. And I think that's a big part of it. I tend to think of the director and editor as the mother and father of the film, that the film is our baby.

And that sometimes, the dad is completely right and sometimes, the mom's completely right. But the truth is, is that you both want to have a voice in how your child is coming along. And I think that it's a matter of if you say to the director, "Hey, I'm going to totally do the version you're talking about. I'm super onboard with this, but what if we tried this as an alt?" Use words like alt, so then that way, you understand that the director hears you say, "I'm super on board with what you want to do. I just want to give you options." Because that's ultimately what we do as editors.

Carolyn Giardina:

We have a question about the difference in assisting for animation vs live action. How [are they] same or different?

John Venzon:

I was only ever a live action assistant. And so my whole experience of seeing animation assistance is from the editor's point of view, but I can tell you what the... The assistance that I've seen that have been since gone on to editing. I can kind of tell you the things that are consistent with them instead of loading dailies, you're loading individual storyboards. And I mean, tens of thousands of drawings go in to make a movie. So you have to basically import and keep track of all of that. The scratch that you're recording is like hours and hours and hours and hours of voices that you're going to throw away. And then hours and hours and hours of voices that you have to track. So I think that consistency and strong organization is

consistent across the two. It's just your media management is a little bit different, but turnovers to sound are the same, turnovers to composer, prepping for screenings.

You're seeing cuts. By the way, one of the big advantages of working in animation as an assistant is that our films tend to be shorter, so your QC time is less. So that's a plus to me, as a person who worked on *The Horse Whisperer* as an assistant editor, having to QC a four-and-a-half hour cut of a movie is a real bummer. I tend to give the assistance more to cut in animation because you're building the scenes. The first pass at the assemble is usually the storyboard artist's cut of the sequence. And so I think it's important to let the assistants get a chance to cut that way, because it's fairly organized and the shots are in the order.

Because just as I'll take it and I'll go through and I'll say, okay, that's the first pass as pitched by the board artist, but I know that we don't want to be in a closeup that quickly, or there are three shots when we could do this in one. And that's something I can do once the assistant has done an assemble pass on sometimes. You get to listen to a lot more music as an assistant editor in animation because we're cooler. Maybe that's... We have Fridays, we drink on Fridays, we have cocktails. It's much cooler. I'm sorry. The answer is it's way cooler to be an assistant editor [laughs].

Carolyn Giardina:

We have so many great questions. Next one is, does your temp music and effects play a big part in storyboards?

John Venzon:

Yes. Oh my God. That is a brilliant question. Yes. The answer is a lot of times because our visuals are so threadbare because they're just black and white drawings, we have to really let the sound effects and the music do a lot of heavy lifting.

And a lot of times also, we'll record lines that we know we'll take out once we get into animation, because you might have a character say, "I'm so scared," that when you get into animation and you see the scared look on their face, you go, "Oh, we don't need to say it because we completely see it."

But I mean, we always fall prey the same way in live action that you can get into a temp love situation, where you go, "Oh, I love that piece of music," or "Those sound effects were amazing," And then you ended up mandating to you're a very talented composer, or you're a very talented sound designer. Look, just do a better version of the thing we already did. You have to realize that those sound effects and those pieces of music are just the boat you take to get to the new world. And when you get to the new world, you got to burn those boats and commit to being in the new world with the composer and the sound designer. Otherwise, you're going to make them miserable, and you're going to get a lamer version of the movie.

Carolyn Giardina:

And a related question, at what point does the composer get involved and, or do you ever use temp music tracks?

John Venzon:

If you look at what we call needle drop music, like songs that are going to make it in into the show, those songs might be picked and that might be in the temp version, and it might be in the final version. It's a matter of sometimes, the composer a lot of times will come on an animated movie typically, eight months before the release of the movie. The movie I'm on right now, I just had my first meeting with the

composer and I'm so excited. This particular composer started playing themes and the director and the producer and I were all just giddy with anticipation.

But so in animation, the composer like on *Flushed Away*, Harry Gregson Williams, started a year-and-a-half before our movie, starting to play themes. Again, animated movie release animation, the animated movie release dates tend to be a bit more flexible because they're so complicated to make, that a lot of times, that can push the release date out and then the composer is on for a lot longer. But sooner than usual, it isn't a thing where three months before the release or four months, you have your composer come on. It's composer really gets to live with the movie quite a bit.

Carolyn Giardina:

Other than the nonlinear editing system, what software must animation editors be well-versed in?

John Venzon:

I will tell you what extra programs I use, Pro Tools for sound design. Although you could use Garage Band, anything where you want to have a design work, if that is your side thing or After Effects. After Effects is wonderful because the storyboard artists are all drawing in Photoshop. And so you'll have layers and you'll be able to... Like, for example, if there's a shot where the camera flies into the room and goes past a bunch of people to end up on a character, if a storyboard artist was drawing it, it would be like kick, kick, kick, kick, kick, kick.

But if you get the storyboard artists to give you the layers, you can actually fly the camera in 3D past. So it's kind of like two-and-a-half D rather than 3D flying through up to the character. And so you can do basic animation. And I try to use those for shots where jokes aren't landing, because sometimes, change up on the boards allows you to sell the joke. But sometimes, if it's a gradual thing, like watching something rise, I think it's helpful to have After Effects to be able to do basic animation to sell the boards.

Carolyn Giardina:

Next one, do you ever try to assume a particular mindset to help you edit? I've heard of editors that try to assume the mindset of the character in the scene they're cutting or the mindset of the viewer, basically like method acting. Have you ever tried this or do you have your own method to help you edit?

John Venzon:

Yeah. To tell you the truth, the mindset I get into is reminding myself no matter what scene I'm cutting, pretending that they're real people, that I'm in the room that that scene is taking place. And if I'm in the room, I try to listen to my own internal voice of what am I paying attention to? Do I believe what this person is saying? In other words, like if I was in the room with them, would I be looking over at the person who's not speaking? Would I want to see them react like, oh, this guy or whatever. And then that will lead me towards how to cut that scene because it might not have been boarded that way, and it allows me to go back to the storyboard artists to say, "Hey, what would be great is if you could have this character getting more and more frustrated and annoyed as the blowhard keeps talking." So I think that the mind state is just pretending that they're real people and if they don't, and I know it sounds like a crazy thing to say because I'm imagining myself in a cave with hundreds of wolves and a woman and a talking bird. But the truth is if I imagine that that is a young guy and this is a woman who is totally wonderful and not being listened to and these wolves are people that want the baby, and they want the baby, I'm imagining, what am I paying attention to?

I'm wanting to clock the baby. I want to know if... Want to know how the... In that scene, I found myself cutting it going. I want to check in with the baby to let the audience know that the baby is in no danger because that was when the scene was pitched; my instant reaction was, "Well, no mother will ever let their children watch this film because they're saying they want to eat the baby?" How do you sell that? Well, then I imagined myself in the scene going, "Oh, if I see that the baby is okay and happy and that the wolves are doing basically the bare minimum of taking care of the baby, like putting the baby on a blanket that you feel, okay, okay, the baby's not in any harm." If the baby is happy, then I'm happy, and I can enjoy the scene, but that's really about making sure that you treat everything like it's really happening.

Carolyn Giardina:

Do you play a musical instrument? And if so, do you find this has an impact on your editing? I can help answer that question. Yes. He is a fantastic bass player. John, how does that impact your editing?

John Venzon:

I'll tell you that is a really good question. I think in so much as any one of us editors if there's ever been a time in your life where you were like, "I really wish I'd stuck with the piano," or "God, I always wanted to play the guitar," or in my case, play the bass, do it because it will make your editing so much better. Just on a very practical level playing music allows you to feel change-ups in the song so you'll know, "oh, I need to, I need to slide up the neck, and now I really need to come in hard on this beat in the song," because then when you're cutting music, you'll go, "Oh, oh, oh my God I hear the change-up in the ride of the song, I'm going to sync that up with when the character does this flourish."

And those are things that I didn't really pay as much attention to before I started playing the bass. I've been playing for about six years now, but understanding tempo and being able to listen and play at the same time will help your editing immensely because it is all rhythm. It is all rhythm. Sometimes it's visual, sometimes it's in music, and sometimes it's the sound of a person's voice.

Carolyn Giardina:

Do you start working on a film before panels or drawing? I think that means storyboards. If you get[so], what are you doing at that stage?

John Venzon:

That's a good question. The answer is typically... I start on the movie, right... Probably a week before the storyboards come up. So this is where it is analogous to a live-action show where you'll come on, maybe a week or two weeks, most before dailies start coming in because storyboards are effectively dailies. I'll come on a little bit before the boards because I'll need to record all the temp voices for the script. So the storyboard artists might still be drawing, but I'll have the script, and I'll be able to go through and say, "Oh, we need to cast a female lead and a male lead." And then we'll go through, and we'll actually audition temporary voices because those temp voices have to sell the movie until we can get to a place where we have our real actors come in. And if you have temporary voices that are terrible, it will sink your movie, and you will never get your movie made.

Carolyn Giardina:

Do you feel more connected to the story when you're working on animation, as opposed to working in live-action? It seems like the editor or editors are involved basically from the start to finish as opposed to live-action.

John Venzon:

Yeah. And I'll tell you the answer to that is a resounding yes. I feel so much more connected. When I was... And I've edited four or five live-action movies in my career. And in each of those films, I always felt like it was all about trying to get what was on the page implemented as best as possible because obviously, that's what's been shot. So I've always felt like these are the pieces, I can make a truck, or I can make a car, but it has to be a vehicle. In animation, I can say, "All right, we tried the truck, we tried the car, what if it's a plane? Or what if it's a cheeseburger?". The idea is that because I'm there talking with the director and sometimes the writer and the story team, and we're all working together, it allows us to go, "What's really important about this?", and I've worked on so many animated movies, including *Storks*, where we started out with one idea, and it changed very drastically.

The original version of *Storks* was about the military. The storks were an emotionless military organization, and it was a father and son story. And we did two screenings, and we realized no one wants to see another father and son story. This military thing where the storks are all emotionless is a stone-cold bummer. And that's when we realized, "Wait a minute, hold on, what if instead of the military, it was corporate?". So the idea is that it was emotionless, but kind of a phony bottom-line emotionless. And once we realized that was the way to go, it allowed us to reframe the movie completely, and that's what I'm talking about, where you have to kind of let go of the old idea, burn those ships. You're in the new world; commit to the new idea.

Carolyn Giardina:

Two-part question one: you ever miss working in live-action? And part two of that question is: would you recommend trying to focus your career on one genre that you love or being open to anything?

John Venzon:

I think I'll answer the last part first. I think you should really be open to anything because I think anytime you have a rigid view of your career, the career you end up having will end up feeling like a disappointment because it went in a different direction. And ultimately, we never really know. I never thought 20 some years ago that I would be an animation editor, but thank God I am. I love it so much. And to answer the second part of the question is I think you... Once you start doing something, then you have that kind of spark of, "Ooh, oh, I like doing jokes this way," or "I really like more emotional stories," or "I like quieter things or more contemplative scenes." You'll gravitate towards your strengths because you'll have success at it. And whether or not you actually get to do the thing you want to do, I still haven't ever edited a *Star Wars* film.

You kind of just say, "Okay, well, that if that ever happens, great, but I'm not going to kill myself." But I think the idea is to be open to anything and pay attention to the voice inside you, as you're building something going, "Oh, oh, oh, this feels right." I tend to think of the metaphor of if my hands get grabby, then I know I should do more of that. And then the ultimate thing is I do really miss a live-action from time to time, mostly because you ultimately can say, "Look, I have 10 shots, which take would you like?" The character still needs to walk into the room. There's some kind of... Cutting a live-action film is very much like cutting the animation on a film that you've been working on because unless you want to go re-shoot it at a great expense, this is what we've got. But if the idea of working on the same film for

three years terrifies you, then animations probably not for you, but it is the thing we always say, it's a marathon, not a sprint. And if you can imagine, an animated movie is an enormous... Enormous marathon, a live-action feature is maybe like a 5k and a commercial is like a hundred-yard dash. So that's... pay attention to your temperament.

Carolyn Giardina:

How do you find work-life balance?

John Venzon:

I think it's tough for editors. I mean, I'll be completely honest. I do my best with work-life balance, but the truth is when we have screenings, it consumes my life. I mean, I just have to go, "Well, I really would've liked to have gone out to dinner, but unfortunately, the director needs to see this tomorrow morning," and you push back when you can. And you try to find people who respect the fact that you have a family or that you're a human being with bodies that break. I will tell you that has been a big, a big surprise, a positive surprise on the animation side is that because we're making movies for families, most people in animation have families. And so when you say, "Hey, I have to cut out early tonight because my daughter has a concert recital or I have to pick up my son from the airport," that people tend to be a lot cooler than they would be if they were all people in their mid-twenties with no children.

And, and ultimately I ended up crossing over into animation right around the time I became a parent, and sort of working at Dreamworks for almost 10 years was great because it was stable work, it wasn't far from my house. And so I think that... I think the idea is that you always have to be vigilant about making sure that A you work with people in so much as you can, that aren't maniacs, and that don't have kids. And if a parent... If you have a director that has a kid, you've won the lottery, because then you know when I say I need to do this for my daughter, the director is going to go, "Well, I don't understand why I thought why you're doing that." So it's, you have to... it's difficult. Sometimes you get... Sometimes it's a bad balance. Sometimes it's a good balance, but we always have to keep trying.

Carolyn Giardina:

You mentioned television...

John Venzon:

Oh yeah.

Carolyn Giardina:

Inspire to do more television. And what are the separate challenges to each?

John Venzon:

Television animation work is very different than live-action animation work. I would say, I would say that if you talk to Robert or to Melissa, that they would tell you that the schedules are more compressed, but you're effectively working on a nine-hour feature film that it's spread out over however many episodes. In animation, television animation is difficult because the compressed schedules means that you have to cut corners. Sometimes you can still do good work. By the way I'm not condemning all television.

If you look at... look at films like Avatar: The Last Airbender, or you look at The Legend of Korra, you look at like any number of animated TV series. You can do great work, but by and large feature animation

work tends to be three to five years on a project. You'll do six or seven series in the amount of time it takes me to do a feature. So I tend to like to stay in feature land just because I like to have the time to expand. But I do think the appeal of being able to get it onto something and finish it and move onto something new that has its appeal.

Carolyn Giardina:

Do you have dreams of cutting any particular style of animated film? Is there a story you'd love to see animated with you as the editor? Also, have you ever cut a documentary, or would you like to?

John Venzon:

I have cut a documentary. My senior thesis for film school was an hour-long documentary I made about selling my family home. And actually, the thing that you'll find is animation editors, and documentary editors have a lot of weird crossover in our jobs. We're trying to figure out the story. We're kind of trying things and throwing things away and trying to manufacture the structure of the film out of things of disparate parts that maybe weren't meant to go together. So I have a feeling if you're a documentary editor and you feel like you have an aptitude, you probably would do really well in animation.

And in terms of style, Brad Bird, his films are wonderful. I would love to cut a film for Brad Bird. If I ever can. The Incredibles is one of my, if not my favorite animated movie of all time, one of boy... Anyway, so like a superhero, Brad Birdy, Pixary thing, that sounds like something... That sounds all right for me. And also, the other style that I would love to do would be a heist movie. I would love to cut a heist movie. I'm such a big fan of film noir and heist movies. I would love to do that would make me really happy.

Carolyn Giardina:

Speed round. We're going to try to do a couple more before we wrap up.

John Venzon:

Oh yes, here we go. Give them to me, give them to me.

Carolyn Giardina:

Will we ever see another South Park movie?

John Venzon:

I wonder the same thing about Trey and Matt. I mean, maybe I think tonight is the premiere of their quarantine episode. So the thing I find with Trey and Matt is that the stuff like Imagination Land was originally meant to be a feature, but they ended up doing it as a multi-part thing on the show. And so maybe they'll never do another movie. I think that Trey has aspirations greater than South Park someday. I mean, Book of Mormon is brilliant. I can't wait for him to write more musicals.

Carolyn Giardina:

Favorite snack or drink while you're editing.

John Venzon:

Oh, well, okay. I'm going to... I'm going to do a category. Favorite snack or drink, things that I should be eating and things that I shouldn't be eating, things I should be eating our water, more water. My favorite

snack is of course, movie theater popcorn and a giant diet Coke that, but again, don't do that. You'll die, but I'm trying to figure out how much I can do and not die.

Carolyn Giardina:

Favorite actor you worked with on a film.

John Venzon:

This is going to sound really strange. Martin Scorsese. Martin Scorsese was my favorite actor I've ever worked with on the film, just because he was like, "I'm not an actor. I'm just going to talk like myself". I could listen to Martin Scorsese for hours. So weirdly Martin Scorsese in Shark Tale.

Carolyn Giardina:

What are some of your favorite animated movies that you would recommend everyone watch?

John Venzon:

Oh, wow. This is good. Storks. Number one top of the list Storks full-stop. Well, of course, Storks, but if you haven't seen Princess Mononoke, Miyazaki's Princess Mononoke, rent that it is a wonderful film. And it's an amazing film because it's actually really mature in the sense that it deals with conflicting emotions. You actually have characters where the villain, you see the villainy, and you're like, "Well, actually the villain has a good point and she's actually doing really good things for people. So she's kind of not the villain, but she's also doing terrible things". And so you see everyone's point of view in that movie.

I would say Akira, if you haven't seen Akira, it is one of the best animes ever created. If you haven't seen Anomalisa, which is Charlie Kaufman's film that my friend Garret cut. It's wonderful. It's a movie that really sneaks up on you because it's really about depression. It has a really relatable thing. And of all the Pixar movies, this is going to sound really crazy, my favorite thing that Pixar has ever done is the short Presto, which Doug Sweetland directed. I think that's the best thing Pixar has ever done. And I wish they would do more stuff like that.

Carolyn Giardina:

Someone asked if you'd clarify the difference between a co-editor and an associate editor.

John Venzon:

You'll hear the expression associate editor, and then you'll hear co-editor. I think that it really depends on how the lead editor wants to organize the show. There are some editors, and I was certainly this way on Storks, where I wanted to have my hand in every single scene because I wanted the specific execution because of the immense amount of improv and the fact is there was no script to follow. So I had to be the point person for all of it, but now the movie I'm working on right now, I have an associate editor, and the associate editor tends to be more like a junior editor, but they are, let's make no mistake. They are editors. My associate editor, Christine, is an editor. She edits on the movie, and my co-editor, which is Jesse Avena. He is also an editor, and I'm just the lead.

So they tend to be... it tends to be however the lead editor wants to organize the show. Sometimes the associate editor will just do music and sound effects or basic assemblies. Sometimes they're actually working with the director. The way we were organizing the show right now, Jesse works with the director, Christine doesn't tend to work with the director as much, basically by virtue of the fact that we

have to set up remote connections to be able to drive the avid in sections. But if we were all together in the same room, Christine would probably be working with the director from time to time, as opposed to not at all because of internet connections and Evercast licenses.

Carolyn Giardina:

Do you have any personal projects you aspire to create?

John Venzon:

I do have a movie. I have a movie that I have a pitch for, but I think part of me stops doing it because I don't want to appear like, "This guy talking about his movie." the best to kill a friendship is to say, "Hey would you read my script"? you really have to be good friends with someone. Maybe you've bought them a car, and then you can ask them to read their script. But I do have a comedy that I think would be fun.

Carolyn Giardina:

And if you could only be involved in one part of the editing process, would you choose cutting the storyboard or taking over in the animation phase?

John Venzon:

I have to tell you, I think my favorite part of the process is the story processes, storyboards because the way I like to work is to work with the storyboard artists because you are really, you are joined at the hip because they are co-editors they're cinematographers, and you're making the movie together, and you're discovering what your film is becoming together. So if I had to pick one, it would be storyboards with layout being a very close second because then you get to re-shoot and recut the movie a second time. But this time with actually achievable shots.

Carolyn Giardina:

We're done. Would-

John Venzon:

Yay. Thank you, everyone. This was really nice. That's all I'll say. I'll say one last thing. And then you say one last thing. My last thing is I deeply appreciate everyone in CCE and in ACE coming to hear this talk. We're weird people that work in dark rooms. And so it's really lovely to come see my fellow editors in a discussion. And I'm really humbled and deeply appreciative that you want to hear what my experiences have been. So thank you. Thank you all for coming. I really appreciate it.

Carolyn Giardina:

Thank you to both organizations, and thank you, John, for being such a fantastic guest and sharing so much information and everyone; thank you for great questions. Have a safe evening.

John Venzon:

Thanks, everyone. Goodbye.

Sarah Taylor:

Thanks so much for joining us today, and a big thank you goes to John and Carolyn for taking the time to sit with us. Special thanks goes to Jane MacRae and Nagham Osman. This episode was edited by Jana Spinola. The main title sound was created by Jane Tattersall, additional ADR recording by Andrea Rusch. Original music provided by Chad Blain and Soundstripe. This episode was mixed and mastered by Tony Bao.

The CCE has been supporting Indspire - an organization that provides funding and scholarships to Indigenous post secondary students. We have a permanent portal on our website at cceditors.ca or you can donate directly at indspire.ca. The CCE is taking steps to build a more equitable ecosystem within our industry and we encourage our members to participate in any way they can.

If you've enjoyed this podcast, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts and tell your friends to tune in. 'Til next time I'm your host Sarah Taylor.

[Outtro]

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