



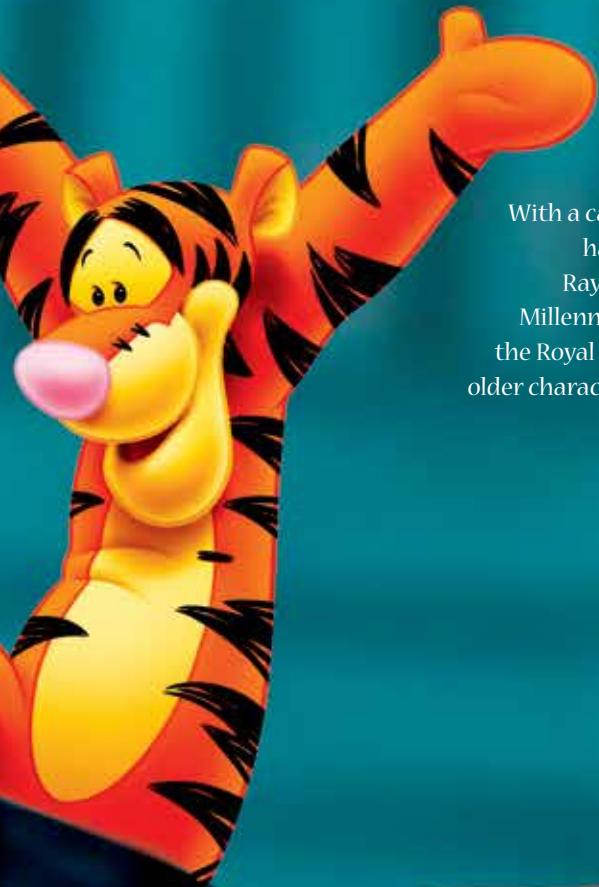
# JIM CUMMINGS

## A VOICE FOR ALL GENERATIONS

There are certain names that will forever be associated with Disney. Walt and older brother Roy, of course, but also those whose contributions have become so entwined with the Disney company that it is impossible to explore Disney history without encountering their work. Names like Ub Iwerks, Woolie Reitherman, Mary Blair, the Sherman Brothers, and Alan Menken.

Unquestionably, a name that stands alongside theirs is that of Jim Cummings. With a career that extends over more than thirty years and 400 characters, Cummings has brought beloved contemporary characters to life, such as Ed in *The Lion King*, Ray in *The Princess the Frog*, Hondo Ohnaka in the *Star Wars* franchise (including the Millennium Falcon: Smugglers' Run attraction at Galaxy's Edge), Razoul (the Captain of the Royal Guards of Agrabah) in *Aladdin*, and of course Darkwing Duck, as well as sharing older characters with a new generation, including *The Jungle Books* Kaa, *Alice in Wonderland's* Cheshire Cat, Pete, and of course Winnie the Pooh...and Tigger, too!

## INTERVIEW BY LORI ELIAS





Cummings recently sat down with *Celebrations* to share stories, marked with a lot of laughter and a number of the voices that have earned him animation immortality, in a candid, in-depth look at the journey that has led to his remarkable tenure with Disney, as well as some insights into some of our favorite characters.

**You have an extensive resume, spanning more than three decades and 400 characters. This takes incredible work ethic and stamina! You grew up in the hard-working, blue-collar steel town of Youngstown, Ohio, and then went on to work in New Orleans on the riverboats before beginning your voice acting career. What kind of impact do you think your early environs had on your career?**

It's funny that you put it that way, because I've always said that I have a blue-collar attitude toward a no-collar career. I was taught that you get up in the morning, and you go to work, you put in your hard day's labor for your hard-earned pay, and so I brought that attitude with me. That's a very workman-like attitude. It keeps you humble; it keeps you grounded. And I've had plenty of odd jobs, so when it comes to jobs, this one is much better than all of them!

**What were some of these other jobs you held?**

I worked in a steel mill of course. (*Note: from the late 19th century through the mid-1980s, Cummings's hometown of Youngstown was one of the United States' major producers in steel.*) And shoveling snow and freeing frozen cars from railroad tracks – it's 10 below zero, in the snow, and it's 3 A.M. – that was a good one! And I painted houses for a little while with my cousins. When I moved to New Orleans, it was kind of a bucket list thing – I joined the merchant marines. I was a deckhand on a riverboat, because I'd read so much Mark Twain, that I decided I really wanted to just live on the Mississippi River for a little while. I wanted to be on that raft! It wasn't quite the same, but it did have better bathroom facilities and a kitchen!

I stepped on the back of an alligator once by accident, thinking that it was a log, so I've got some pretty good stories. The deckhand always cleans out the radiator – well, there are no radiators on tugboats, so they just suck water out of the bayou, the river, the gulf, whatever, and use that as a coolant. This one time, all of a sudden, we were completely jammed up, which is not a big deal, because there are a lot of palm fronds and plant life, and you just go down there and you just scoop it out, and then it's unclogged and you start

moving again. One time I went down there and it was the middle of the afternoon...with the cooling system, and the water going through...and the biggest snake in the universe fell out, right onto me! It was dead, and it was this absurdly thick snake – it must've weighed a hundred pounds. And (his coworkers) couldn't stop laughing. They thought that was the funniest thing in the world! And one says (in a perfect Cajun accent), "I ain't never had that happen, boy – you must just be lucky! I'd rather that happen to you instead of me, though!" "Yeah, yeah, I'm sure you do!" (laughter) But trust me, it's not all that much fun! It's more fun now than it was then! **That's the stuff of nightmares!**

It got my attention! And I actually sold knives and pots and pans door to door, and then one of my favorite jobs ever is when I went in with a girlfriend of mine at the time. She was going to audition to become a sign-painter. They needed people to paint the names of the floats for the various krewe's – those are the organizations that put on each of the parades (for Mardi Gras in New Orleans). She was there auditioning for that, and I'm looking around, and there's people there with all these art portfolios. I asked one, "What have you got there?" and he said, "They're interviewing for artists to paint the Mardi Gras floats – to create the floats, and create the designs." I thought, "You've got to be kidding me," and I said, "Oh, okay, that's why I'm here too!" and I got in line. They said, "Have you got your portfolio?" and I said, "Uh, so what's a portfolio again?" (laughter) They said, "Well, that's a no. You have to know that you have to have some kind of artistic background." I said, "Okay, can I grab some paper from you? Some typewriting paper and a couple of pencils?" They said, "Suuuuuuure..." And of course, everybody else has these great elaborate designs, and these big art projects. A couple of them got the job...[including] me, with my pencil and my typewriter paper. I just thought I'd died and went to heaven. When it comes to really cool jobs, that was good one. It's not as good as the one I've had since then, but it's pretty good!

And I was the lead singer in a band. Played drums, then I ended up just the lead singer. It's easier to be the singer: you have less to carry, and you meet more girls!

And the rest is history!

**While you were doing all of this, when did you realize that voice acting is something you wanted to pursue?**

I was five years old. I knew I always wanted to do it. When I was a kid, I remember seeing Mel Blanc on the *Jack Benny* program. My dad said, "You see this guy right here? Bugs

Bunny and Daffy Duck and the Tasmanian Devil, all those cartoons you watch on Saturday morning – that’s the guy that does them.” I said, “No kidding,” and all I could think of was, “Well, he doesn’t have to stand in the corner (for) being obnoxious and loud.” I said, “I’m gonna do that when I get big. When I grow up, I want to do that.” And so I always had it in the back of my mind.

And then when I moved to California, I knew I had to make a demo tape. I was working in a Video Depot – my sister and brother-in-law owned this chain of stores in southern California at the time – and I was working there, and I just stayed after with my friend Chris Potter and made an audio recording. He edited it together, and I started handing it around, and I handed it to a fellow named Sal Romeo, and he had just made a “B” horror movie – I forget what it was called – sorry, Sal! But he and Bob Starr, who was the voice of the California Angels (now the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim) – they were the only two people I knew that were in “show business,” so I gave them both a tape. (Romeo) said, “I’m not doing anything right now, but I’ll pass it along.” A couple of weeks later, I got a call from Don Bluth Studios, and they said, “Hey, yeah, kid, we heard your tape, and we think you’ve got something. You should pursue it. Keep going. I’ll pass it along to anybody if I know they’re casting.” I thought, “Well, that was nice,” and I said, “Thank you very much”; it was very kind of him.

About two weeks later, I got a phone call from Frank Brandt, and he and his partner Caroline Hay were gearing up to do *Dumbo’s Circus* for the Disney Channel, which was about a year old at the time. They were going to do 120, 125 shows, and he said, “I’ve got this tape from my buddy at Don Bluth Studios, and we’ve got this show – do you want to come up here and take a swing at a couple of characters?” I said, “Sure!” and I went up and I auditioned on my day off, and I got that job. We started doing two shows a week, and it took over a year to accomplish all of the shows we were doing. And with those two shows a week, I was making about 450 bucks a week more for 8 hours than I was for fifty in the Video Depot. I thought, “I’ve been aiming at this for a long time. Time to pull this trigger.” That was back in ‘85... and now I get to talk to you!

**Did you have any specific training for becoming a voice actor?**

Just being in plays. When I was a kid, I always wanted to be the weirdo, the troll who lived under the bridge, or the ogre, or something instead of the cute little prince, because

that was kind of boring. I wanted to be the sorcerer or the bad guy. I’ve said it before: I think I was accidentally training for what I’ve been doing all these years, doing characters.

When people say you’re a voice actor, it’s a small “v” and a large “A.” If you’re not a good actor, then you’re really not going to be a good voice actor. You really have to work, because all you have is your voice. You don’t get to use your face.

**They also get to use costumes, which you don’t. How do you “find” those characters when you don’t have costumes to help get into character?**

Well, I’ve been “cursed” with a pretty good imagination. You go off of the physicality of the character, and some of them have been already established, so those are easy ones. But newer ones, like Darkwing, or Ray from *The Princess and the Frog*: when you see the picture – like with Darkwing, for example. He’s not super-big, he’s not super-small, but he’s very sarcastic, and he’s a wiseguy, and he’s a bit insecure. And next thing you know (in Darkwing’s voice) you kind of put that together. (In a very low voice) You don’t want him to sound like this (and in a very high voice) and you don’t want him to sound like this; you don’t want him to be miniscule. (In Darkwing’s voice) You want him to sound somewhere in the middle, and “I am the terror that flaps in the night! I am Darkwing!” (laughter) You put in the braggadociousness, and all of the character traits, and hopefully it comes out in the voice, if you’re doing your job. That’s the way I do it.

**Some of your characters were originated by other actors, so their personalities were more or less already established, such as Pooh, Tigger, and Cheshire Cat. Do you build on what was already set by your predecessors? Do you feel that you have to commit to how these previous actors created the characters?**

Well, I sure do. Rule one is that you have to sound like that character. You have to get the sound of it first. That’s the approach that I take, anyway, if it’s an established character. It has to sound like him exhaling, it has to sound like him saying, “Ouch!” or screaming, or yelling, or whispering. It has to sound like them, and then it’s an acting job, once you get the mechanics down. You just have to put the character in your head and let it take over from there.

One thing that has kept it fresh for me is just moving it forward a bit. Like (when) I did *My Friends Tigger and Pooh*: they allowed me to ad-lib a great deal. Tigger became less obsessed with bouncing and more obsessed with looking after his little buddy Roo. You just kind of expand those relationships to keep them from being stagnant. It can’t



always be about the bounce or the honey jar. It's got to have some heart.

And those characters: each one stands for an emotion, I think. Tigger is gung-ho ebullience, Piglet is timidity, and Owl is a bit of a know-it-all. Kang's just a sweetheart, Roo is the childlike innocence. Eeyore's gloomy. Then Pooh – I always say that Pooh is the center of the storm. He's serene in the middle of everything. Everything could be going to hell in a handbasket around him, and he's just sitting there having a smackerel, and it'll all be fine. Maybe he'll take a nap, and it'll be better when he wakes up. It's a very Zen approach (laughter). Pooh is either clueless or optimistic – blindly optimistic. Nothing really fazes him all that much.

**You had already performed several roles for Disney when the two for whom you are best known, Pooh and Tigger, came into your life, and you came into theirs! Can you describe how that came about?**

Well, they were gone for about 20-some years, back in the mid-'80s. Somebody brought them back at ABC and Disney – at the time, they weren't the same company. (Note: This series was *The New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, which aired on *The Disney Channel* for a limited run in early 1988 before moving to Saturday mornings on ABC until 1991.) The call for auditions went out. I auditioned for Tigger, Pooh, and Eeyore. I'm going to say that Rabbit was in there too, and maybe Gopher. I

auditioned for all of them, and I really thought I had a good Eeyore going. I felt really good about Eeyore. I called my agent and she asked: "How did it go?" "Well, it's pretty good... I don't know... but I think I have a shot at Eeyore."

So like a week later, she calls: "Okay, I've got some good news, but I do have some bad news." "Oh okay... well, give me the bad news." She says, "Well, you didn't get Eeyore." I said, "Oh, really? Who did?" and she said, "It's Peter Cullen," and I said, "Oh geez, Peter Cullen – well, you can't complain about that. You know – Optimus Prime." He's great. He's a great friend of mine too, and one of my oldest buddies in the business. And she says, "But, as a consolation prize, you're Winnie the Pooh and Tigger." I said, "Oh! Okay, well, that's all right then!" (laughter)

I was only really doing Tigger every couple of weeks, because Paul Winchell at the time, he was obviously still with us, may God bless him. A great, great, great guy. But in the midst of his genius, he was going back and forth to Biafra (now part of Nigeria), because there was the big famine over there in Africa, and he had an idea to raise these little mud puppies, hushpuppies – they're half-salamander, half-crawfish – they're just the ugliest things in the world. They live in the mud on the Mississippi River, and if you live down there, you know what I'm talking about. They're not much to look at, and they're not fine cuisine, but they're very

nutritious, and you can raise them in mud. So he theorized that he could go over there and set up these little ranches for these critters, and feed the people that way. As a result, he was gone for two or three weeks at a time. I'd fill in; I jokingly called myself "Tigger Lite." And then a couple of years later, he had a bad stroke, God bless him. We had a very emotional moment: he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Take care of my little buddy for me."

**Were there any specific actors you emulated, or even continue to hold as influences?**

Not really, unless there's a voice match, and then you just want to do homage. Kenny Mars (the original Triton in *The Little Mermaid*), my buddy, God rest his soul – I ended up being Triton in the third *Little Mermaid*, and you just have to get into a mindset. First, it's the mindset of the character, and then you have to sound like him. I don't know which one comes first for me. It's an amalgam, I guess. As long as it works, and as long as people like it! And I get the job!

**How much of the animation is complete when you are recording your lines in studio? Does it depend on the film?**

Well, *Christopher Robin* was a weird one to do because it was live-action and animation. That was a different one. But usually...people think you're looping to a finished product, but if you think about it, you can't really draw comedic timing. You can hear it, and illustrate what you hear, but you can't pull it out of your hat. So the voice recording comes first.

**How much time do you spend in the studio? I'm sure it's different for movies and series.**

Movies take a little longer, because the dialogue changes a lot. Scenes don't work the way they wanted, whereas when you're doing a series, everybody's got the format down to an extent. We're doing 20 minutes, 22 minutes, whatever it would be, and we have to hit this mark, the plot has to start here, then it has to rise, then it has to have the conflict, so it's...more cut and dried. Movies seem to be more fluid.

**Are you typically working with other actors in the studio, or is it just you?**

There are different situations. That's the one thing I like about working on *Star Wars*. I like doing it with the cast members, because you're getting to feed off each other's energy, and if somebody does ad-lib, which is usually me, the other person gets a chance to hear it and react live, and it's really organic that way.

But especially now (during covid restrictions): we're still doing *Curious George* and *Mickey Mouse Funhouse*, which is a

new one – I think it will (be released) in 2021. So nowadays, none. When we do *Mickey Mouse Funhouse* now, instead of being like 30 people in the building, I think there is literally three. The lady who lets you in, the engineer, who I don't even see anymore, and then it's me walking in the back door, and everything's all sanitized.

**Is that because of covid?**

Yes, but a lot of shows do it that way anyway. We did it that way before, but occasionally you get to work with somebody when they want you to do a scene and they want it to feel more organic. I like it that way. The more the merrier. You get to feed off their energy. It's like putting on a show, putting on a play. It serves the product. We come up with a better result, I think.

**It has to be incredibly challenging to create these moments without other actors.**

Well, a lot of times you'll have a reader. There will be somebody who reads you in, and they'll give it the inflections. If the reader is good, then you can react with full force.

And with singing, you'd think the whole band would be there, and that's very rare. In fact, in *The Princess and the Frog*, that was almost the only time that I've been there with the band. And we recorded that live. I did that live in the studio with the band. And that was the only time I've ever done that.

**You are a favorite at the D23 Expo and other conventions. What do you most enjoy about these fan interactions?**

The fans. The people themselves. You'll see a guy like 50 years old dressed like Tigger or Pooh. One thing I really get a kick out of is when you'll see a little 7-year-old walking up. This one little girl was so cute; she was a full-blown Darkwing Duck fanatic, and her dad couldn't have been happier. It was a really good cosplay: she did it all herself – she made the beak, she made the mask, the hat, she made these cute little shoes that went over her sneakers, and they were webbed feet. It was just cute as a button. I said, "How can you know about Darkwing Duck?" because it's been off the air for 20 years. And usually the dad will plunk down a stack of Blu-Rays, and he'll say, "We're raising him right!" and I'll say, "Yes, you are!" But (this time) her parents said, "We got Disney+, and Dad said, 'Oh, honey, look, there's Darkwing Duck! Would you like to see one, because that was my favorite show when I was your age,' and she said, 'Oh, okay,'" and then she sat there and watched the first season in a row. And she says, "I'm the terror that flaps in the night!" Now she's Darkwing Duck! (laughter) I said, "That's pretty good! She didn't even go in



for Gosalyn – nope, she’s Darkwing! And I thought, “That just makes my day.” So Disney+ is re-introducing them to a whole new generation. It’s really fun, and it’s a great idea, too.

**Which character(s) do you get asked about the most?**

Pooh and Tigger are kind of tied, and then it’s Darkwing. Ray is way up there, and Hondo Ohnaka is really big now. And oddly enough, Doctor Robotnik – he still has a lot of fans out there.

**Speaking of Ray, are you going to be part of the new Splash Mountain?**

I look to be, yeah. I think they’re still writing it. And then they’ll re-write it. And then they’ll re-write the re-write. (laughter) But yeah, I have to believe that Ray will be in there somewhere. (As Ray): You gotta follow the bouncin’ butt!

**Ray really is the heart of that film!**

Thank you! I thought so.

**There was so much weeping in the theater when he went to join Evangeline in the sky. How can you not get attached to him?**

My older daughters were unable to get to the premiere, but they went and saw it a day or two later, and I get this phone call from my older girl, Olivia – she’s 37 now. And she says (in crying voice) “I just saw *The Princess and the Frog*. You didn’t tell me you were gonna die!” I said, “Well, in a sense I didn’t die – I went to heaven.” “Yeah, I know, but still! I heard the crunch!” (laughter) I said, “Yeah, but he lives forever now!”

**I can imagine that asking if you have a favorite among your characters is a bit like asking if you have a favorite child, so instead, is there a particular trait regarding some of your characters that you find particularly endearing?**

*Darkwing Duck*: I like him. He’s a vulnerable wiseguy. He has an ego, but he has no business having this ego. He’s not all that super-tough, he has no superpowers. But he’s pretty crafty and he’s got a great heart. You gotta love the guy. He’s one of my absolute all-time favorites, so I’m very proud of him.

*Pete*: Oh, Pete. He’s everybody’s favorite bully. He’s probably as insecure as they come too, but he’s too bombastic to know it. I like him because he’s just the original blowhard. He’s always used as the closest thing to a villain in the Mickey Mouse lexicon, because they can’t have an actual evil demon type, so they just call on Pete to come in and throw a monkey wrench into the works. And it’s fun being Pete, because he gets a lot of good lines, and he gets some good laughs, and he’s got some cute kids too!

*Razoul (Aladdin)*: He was kind of fun. I was Razoul, and I was

also the guy who was getting ready to cut off her arm, so that was fun! It’s always nice to be just a big, stupid meanie, because they always get shown up. They always get what’s coming to them. I was very proud to be in that movie. Robin Williams did a hell of a job, that’s for sure.

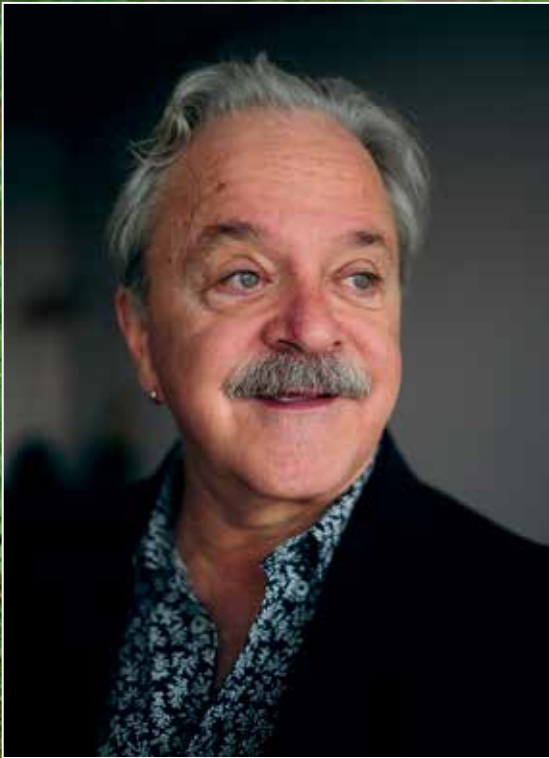
*Ed (The Lion King)*: Mr. Comedy Relief! He was the brain trust. (laughter) I thought he was great. They were trying to figure out how to use him, because a laughing hyena – you have to have one that laughs. You can’t have them all be serious bad guys. The way we did it, (co-director) Rob Minkoff asked, “How do we do this?” and we were brainstorming, because you can’t really write lines. So we just wrote emotions, and him, and (co-director) Roger Allers, they were all just sitting in there just shouting out, “Malice! Hunger! Avarice! Greed! Happiness! Stupidity!” There were all these various emotions, and I was just writing them down. One was “frightened,” one was “trepidation, great nervousness,” and down the list, and we just went down and I just did a laugh for each and every one of the words that we wrote down, to express an emotion. And they’re all furiously writing them down: “Okay, that one was anger. That one was, ‘What did you just say? I’m too stupid to understand what you said.’” (laughter) Ed was recorded in like 45 minutes, which is one of the quickest things I ever did.

And then I was the gopher. I was the guy who popped up and went back down again – I was the sight gag.

And I wrote the fart verse in “Hakuna Matata,” so I’ve got that going for me. Rob Minkoff wasn’t happy with the (original) verse, and I said, “Doesn’t he stink?” “What?” “The warthog – doesn’t he stink? Could he have a flatulence problem?” So I made up the verse: “Oh the shame/What’s in a name/And I got down-hearted/Every time that I... Pumbaa, not in front of the kids! Sorry!” So I wrote the fart verse! I’m very proud of that.

And then I sang “Be Prepared.” All the talking is Jeremy (Irons, the voice of Scar), but he never says the name of the song once. Every time you hear the words “Be prepared,” it’s me. And I sure have a lot of great platinum. The album went platinum at least eight times, so it made for some nice wall covering!

*Ray*: He’s near-sighted, but he’s got a heart of gold. He was the heart of the movie, I think. He was all optimistic, and definitely “the glass is half-full.” He just made the best out of every given situation. He saw the world through rose-colored glasses. You couldn’t tell him that that star wasn’t a firefly that was in love with him. And then he got to join



her at the end of the movie, and everyone was just bawling! He's one of my all-time favorites. He's in my top five, that's for sure. I can't really have a top "one"; I have like five.

*Hondo*: He's one of my main men. I really, really, really am proud of Hondo, because he was only in *Clone Wars*. He was in a three-show arc, and that was it. He was written in, he was there, and he was written out. But I think people responded to him really well, and I'm happy about that, because one thing about (director) Dave Filoni and George Lucas is that they encourage expansion. They encourage ad-libbing. And I'm either the best guy to say that to or the worst, depending on how committed the writers are to their words. I've ticked off a lot of writers over the years! But I just went nuts with him. I totally kind of made him my own. By the end there, some of the last few things we did with Hondo, I don't think I said anything that they wrote. I always do give them one as written, because you have to.

Somebody on the Internet came up with a "top 12 Hondo Ohnaka quotes," because someone decided that he was a bit of a philosopher, and he was a rogue, but he had his morals. He didn't want to do anything that would allow any harm to come to children, which a real evil guy wouldn't have done that. I kind of infused some of that into him. He's one of my all-time favorites, period.

I think I'm starting a campaign – let's start it here. I think Hondo should show up on *The Mandalorian*.

**Let's put that out to the universe and see what happens!**

Let's put that out there! I've had people ask me that, and I said, "No, he hasn't been on there, but I like the idea! I think he'd get along well with Mando.

**And of course we have to talk about Tigger and Pooh.**

Tigger is the storm, and Pooh's the eye of the storm. He sees the world through honey-colored glasses, and the glass is always half-full. They're the two biggest characters I've had period, but also the two first ones. I was probably in the business for a year and a half when they started doing the series, and I think they're just blessings.

I see myself as an acolyte or a torchbearer to bring them to new generations. I think a (new) Pooh generation (comes along) about five years, so I've seen several generations' worth. I'm just a caretaker of these great characters, because they came originally from literature, and they've been around for almost 100 years at this point. I'm just very proud, and I'm very proprietary. They're family now, and I look out for them. I would never let them be involved in anything untoward. I'm a caretaker and part of this beautiful tradition that was started so long ago. 🐻