Since the release of *Toy Story* in 1995 to critical and commercial acclaim, Pixar has become a household name. Since then, Pixar has released seventeen additional feature length films. Further, Pixar has produced dozens of animated shorts that are not only mini-masterpieces unto themselves, but also serve as the perfect vehicles for in-house talent development and technological experimentation for use in future films.

Pixar was founded on February 3rd, 1986 by Steve Jobs, technologist Ed Catmull, and former Disney animator John Lasseter, after Jobs purchased Lucasfilm's Graphics Group, which was on the vanguard of CGI. The early years of Pixar focused on short animation sequences and the development of proprietary tools for CGI creation and final rendering. Creating CGI-centered television advertisements was the primary commercial use of Pixar's products and employees. But Jobs and Lasseter had a grander dream of creating the first CGI film. In 1991, Pixar and The Walt Disney Company formally agreed "to make and distribute at least one computer-generated animated movie." *Toy Story* was the result, and the rest is history.

Pixar began with 40 employees, and today its personnel count is around 1,200. Among its ranks is Bob Peterson, who brings versatility and many talents to Pixar. *Celebrations* had the opportunity to catch up with Bob to reflect on his twenty-three year career at Pixar.

You earned your Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering at Purdue University, focusing on computer graphics. Tell us a bit about that experience.

BOB PETERSON
THE ART OF BRINGING CREATIVE VERSATILITY TO PIXAR

INTERVIEW BY JAMIE HECKER

While at Purdue I studied with a group of post-graduate students at a place called the Purdue CADLAB, or Computer Aided Design Lab. We were an eclectic and fun group, not unlike the gang in *The Big Bang Theory*. Nerdy but interested in a cool topic, Computer Graphics. My thesis work centered around creating a user interface for a 3D Modeling package that would be suitable for artists who prefer to sketch their work.

As an engineering school, one of the classic icons of Purdue is a locomotive engine. You used a play on words on this as the title of your comic strip you wrote for The Purdue Exponent. *Loco Motives (opposite)* neatly captured the zaniness of the college experience. How did that opportunity come about?

I had done a weekly one-panel cartoon for my undergrad, Ohio Northern University, and I was chomping at the bit to try a daily 4 panel strip with consistent characters. I pitched it to Ken Armstrong of the Exponent in early 1984. I drew all of my characters on a big sheet of paper and pitched the loose scenario and the personalities of the characters. I wanted to use the events of Purdue as a seed for the strip but also skewer campus life in general. Since there hadn't been a strip for a while in the paper they went for it. Suckers.

You've often discussed the influence of your idol Charles Schulz, creator of *Peanuts*. How did he influence you as an animator and story artist?

Yeah, Charles Schulz was everything to me when I was a kid (still is). I actually just wrote a preface for a Peanuts Book

entitled *The Complete Peanuts Family Album: The Ultimate Guide* to Charles M. Schulz's Classic Characters. His influence has carried into my writing for sure! I enjoyed Schulz' interesting mix of angst (Charlie Brown) and surrealism (Snoopy). His characters were strongly established. He could find humor in the smallest of moments and the humor was based on character and relationships. The way he drew his characters influenced my drawing style as a story artist as well.

After graduating from Purdue in 1988, how did your path take you to Pixar?

When I saw John Lasseter's speech (as the keynote speaker at the 1985 SIGGRAPH annual conference), I saw how passionate he was about taking the technical side of CGI, which could be cold and lifeless, and pairing it with stories told in the Disney tradition with appealing characters who go on an emotional journey. This was novel at the time! I finally saw how my cartooning and technical background could come together, following Lasseter into battle. As a trainer at Wavefront, which created early computer animation software, I worked with many people throughout the industry. I learned from them what their jobs were like. Then I moved out into the industry at RezN8 creating animations for commercials and for events like the '94 Winter Olympics. It was there I met a freelance director, Roger Gould, and "it's who you know" kicked in – Roger recommended me at Pixar and I got hired as a third string animator on the Pixar Commercials. SO, quite a winding road to Pixar for me!

Your latest work at Pixar was part of the writing team on *Cars 3*, released last June and will be available for purchase in Digital HD and 4K Ultra on October 24, 2017 and for purchase on Blu-ray and DVD November

7, 2017. Tell us about your experience with the film and how the story for it developed.

The pre-production process, as always, lasted a few years. The first question was "why do a sequel?" We wanted to make sure that there was a story worthy enough to tell. We ended up thinking about *Cars 3* as the third act in Lightning's life – the first movie was about his early years on the scene, the second film, which was Mater's film primarily, showed Lightning at the top of his game. Where do you go from there? We started looking at athletes late in their careers – Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, and racer Jeff Gordon – each had to become smarter at their sports as their physical prowess decreased. We thought that would make a great story. The early drafts did not have McQueen moving toward being a mentor. There was one draft in which his identity was stolen by another racer and he came to appreciate his life because of it. Another story line had him traveling to a distant salt flats where racers test their speed to follow in Doc's footsteps.

Pixar is known for extensive field research on its films. What scouting efforts were done for *Cars 3*?

I came on in the last year of the show so I didn't go on any scouting trips, but the team went to visit many old NASCAR tracks and the NASCAR museum. We were very interested in the history of NASCAR because as a first time mentor, Lightning was reaching back into Doc and Smokey's history to learn what racing and mentorship meant to them in their early years.

Growing up, did stock car racing appeal to you? If so, how did that help influence your writing for *Cars 3*?

The closest I come to being a fan of NASCAR growing up was watching the animated cartoon, Speed Racer. I also cre-

ated an advertisement for the local Midvale, Ohio Speedway and went to a few races there. Basketball was my game, and I felt lucky to work on one of Pixar's few true sports movies – applying what I know of aging basketball players and team camaraderie to the writing.

One of the central characters of the film is Cruz, who mentors McQueen and is equally mentored back in kind. How did the development of this character come about?

Cruz grew out of a need for a side character to help McQueen learn how to grow old gracefully. She went through many changes as we tried different fits for her personality. She started as a male character – more of an assistant, and then was a fanboy for a while.

We decided that in the world of racing, there aren't many female racers and that telling that story might be more interesting. Cruz…an underdog who didn't have much opportunity to be a professional racer…would give McQueen a sidekick who REALLY needed his help as a mentor. I came on the last year of production and established Cruz as an enthusiastic trainer who always was there to remind McQueen of his old age.

You have a history of folding personal anecdotes in to your writing. Did any dialog in *Cars 3* come from any personal past experience?

Cruz says a line to the cars she's training in the training facility – "Meet it, Greet it, and Defeat it!!" This is a line that my mom said a lot as we were growing up. It became a family heirloom saying! I had to include it!

Doc Hudson returned to *Cars 3* in flashback scenes. Since actor Paul Newman, the voice of Hudson, passed away in 2008, how did you handle the challenge of writing the dialog for Doc Hudson?

We had a lot of unused Paul Newman dialogue from the first *Cars* film. First of all it was wonderfully nostalgic to sit and be in his presence. He was very funny and just a master actor. We knew that we would have a limited palette to choose from and so we worked it in carefully to a montage of Doc teaching McQueen from long ago. We narrowed down dialogue that could work, boarded it, and then tried various versions. We decided to show the lighter side of Doc, with him balancing things on his hood, and found a serious line – "you might wanna pay attention to this" which played well with the humor.

Your Pixar career began as an animator on *Toy Story*. Since then, you've primarily been involved with the writing process. How did that come about?

Frankly, it was my daily cartoon strip at Purdue that began my writing career. That intense daily idea grind helped me to develop my creativity, and gave me a forum to see what humor works and what doesn't. I entered Pixar as an animator on commercials – and then pitched a few ideas to Lasseter and Andrew Stanton who recommended me as a story man. The great story legend, Joe Ranft, was a story supervisor and brought me in. This was during *A Bug's Life*. He mentored me and taught me the storyboarding ropes. I then moved up as Story Supervisor on *Monsters, Inc.* and pitched a lot of story ideas which won me the gig as writer on *Finding Nemo* writing along side Andrew Stanton. He's got a terrific story structure brain and is a funny guy and I learned a ton from him as well.

You've discussed before about how *Loco Motives* sharpened your writing skills. How did that help prepare you for your work at Pixar?

A cartoon strip forces editing, in that it has to be brief and clear. Brevity is the soul of wit. The cartoonist learns how in four panels to set a situation up quickly and clearly, and then build enough tension to payoff in an unexpected twist which leads to a laugh. Characters and "camera" have to be composed in a way that the reader gets what the cartoonist is trying to put across. Comedy is fragile – if your left brain spins up and ponders a distraction or something not clear – the joke suffers. I was a layout artist and briefly an animator on *Toy Story*. I was a story artist on *A Bug's Life*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Monsters, Inc.*, and then moved into writing on *Finding Nemo*.

Story development and writing is different from screenplay writing. Your screenplay credits include *Finding Nemo*, *Up*, *Inside Out*, *Finding Dory* and *Cars 3*. Can you elaborate on the differences?

Story is the word we use for the emotional progression of a character. A writer at Pixar starts at the beginning of a production and deals in the overall movements of the story – who is the main character? What is the theme of the movie, as in what are we trying to say? Where does the character travel? Etc. We usually write a treatment which describes the general flow of the story. Then it's on to a full script with fleshed out dialogue and situations. At any time the story department can be used to help with ideas, and it is the wise writer who pairs with the story people to make their jobs easier.

Up is probably the most important movie to you, in which you served as writer, co-director and voice artist. What personal influences of yours made it into the movie?

I added a line for my sister – when Dug's collar is switched to other languages, it says "Estoy De Acuerdo Contigo!" or in English – "I am in agreement with you." This is an inside joke with my sister who studied in Spain in college with a bunch of kids who had thick Lake Erie accents. One kid would say this line every day but would crack my sister up with his Cleveland/Spain accent. Also, right after my grandparents, Frank and Lucille, passed away in the same year (1990), I went through their house with a video camera to chronicle their house knick-knacks. The archaeological layers were amazing – a magazine from the '90s atop a candy dish from the '80s atop a phone from the '70s. Their chairs were different – one hard one soft. These things helped in the development of Carl and Ellie's house and their characters. I remember things like my Grandfather's hat seemingly too big for his head when he got old. We dredged all of our grandparent memories and used them on *Up*.

I understand that Dug is based largely on your own dogs and how you interact with them. Can you elaborate on that?

Dug's voice is based on how I talk to my dogs – "You are a gooood dogg. I love you, dogg!" I just tried to pour my love of dogs into the part – Dug is eternally optimistic and gentle and loyal. When I wrote the "SQUIRREL!!!" line it came from a game I'd play with my dog. We'd be sitting hanging out, my dog panting away, and I'd suddenly stop and look up as if something had caught my attention, and my dog would do the same. "My master has spied something interesting and
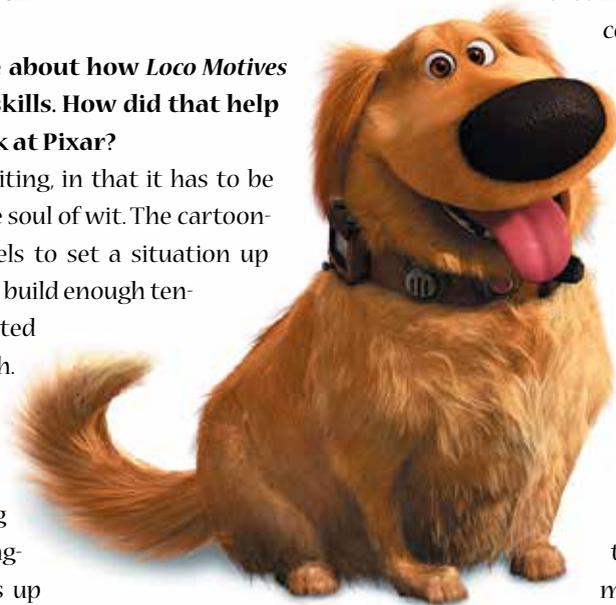
I must give it all my attention and do the same!" Also as an influence for "SQUIRELL!" I thought of Jerry Lewis (who just sadly passed away) who would light the flame in a lighter and then screamed as if he didn't know it wasn't gonna happen. Good stuff.

You're also the voice of Dug and Alpha, both canines in *Up*. Your voice work goes back to *Monsters, Inc.* in your deadpan portrayal of Roz. How did you get that original voice part?

Pixar needed a middle-aged slug to play the role and for some reason looked at me, I don't know why. I helped realize Roz in the story boarding and a bit of writing and I knew that she needed to suck all the life out of the room. I do an impression of the trees in Wizard of Oz – "Let go my apples!" I stood at the mic and slouched into myself and tried that voice on and it seemed funny. I also crafted what I call the "Archie Bunker dismount" in which I'd trail my voice off after a line – "Hey Edith, the boy's in my chair again-hahhahhhh." If you listen closely to Roz you will hear that.

Did you write the Dug and Alpha dialog since you were going to do the voice work for them?

I wrote their dialogue and so I knew the characters well. Generally I developed the characters so they weren't intended for anyone else. Alpha was originally going to have

a sort of Rod Serling meets "badly translated into English anime" vibe. He was almost thrown out of the film because he wasn't funny and we thought Dug could just be picked on by the pack of Muntz' dogs. And then we thought why not give him a flaw – his voice box is broken and he sounds like a chipmunk. When we pitched the Rod Serling/anime up – it gave it a weird stilted quality and we fell down on the floor laughing.

Your other voice credits include Mr. Ray from *Finding Nemo*. Did you get that voice part based on your earlier work as Roz?

Yes. Andrew (Stanton) and I had the idea to pep Mr. Ray up so that he sings his scientific lessons not unlike Tom Lehrer who used to sing a song about the table of elements. Since I have a technical background, I got to write the songs and attempted to stuff in as much techno jargon as I could. I then gave it a nautical sort of sea shanty beginning – OHH-HHH and Mr. Ray got a laugh and I had the job.

Your most recent voice work was in *Cars 3* as Chick Hicks, originally voiced my Michael Keaton in *Cars*. How did you get this role in *Cars 3*?

Michael was busy filming *Spider Man: Homecoming,* and I had actually done the temporary scratch dialogue for Chick back on the first film, so they threw me in. Keaton is amaz-

ing, and I chose not to attempt a sound-alike for Keaton, but played Chick with my own voice and hopefully kept the acting in that self-centered bad boy Chick Hicks range.

Outside of Pixar's good luck charm John Ratzenberger, are you the second-most utilized voice artist on Pixar films?

Uhhhhh. Don't know. Bill Hader is now getting there (*Inside Out* and *Monsters University*). I've had a blast doing voices – the genesis for that is just sitting around the table as a kid making your family laugh and doing voices with friends – you know, like Doug and Jeff. Very funny guys but don't tell them that.

Pixar utilizes an internal peer-review process to aid in the development of its films. Pixar's President Ed Catmull describes this as the Braintrust. How have you been involved in this process?

I've been part of the Braintrust since early on – and it's now a group which changes from film to film based on the expertise of the person and what the film needs. I'm not a story structure whiz and many times when I watch a film I need some time to process my response to it. My role has often been to pitch the weird Gary Larson-esque funny left field ideas which leaves the brain trust group scratching their heads for a moment and then…people get it and still don't laugh.

Over your twenty-three years at Pixar, what technology changes have you seen implemented to aid in the story process?

I've seen storyboarding go from a purely drawn on paper art form to a digital one. The tools we have are amazing now. A story artist brings up a program and draws directly on the screen to create boards. Then when pitching, the artist can step through one at a time to give more of an edited feel. In the grand old days we would pin drawings to a board, grab a pointer, stand in front of the directors and story people and act out the film, pointing to the drawings as we went. I kinda miss those days!
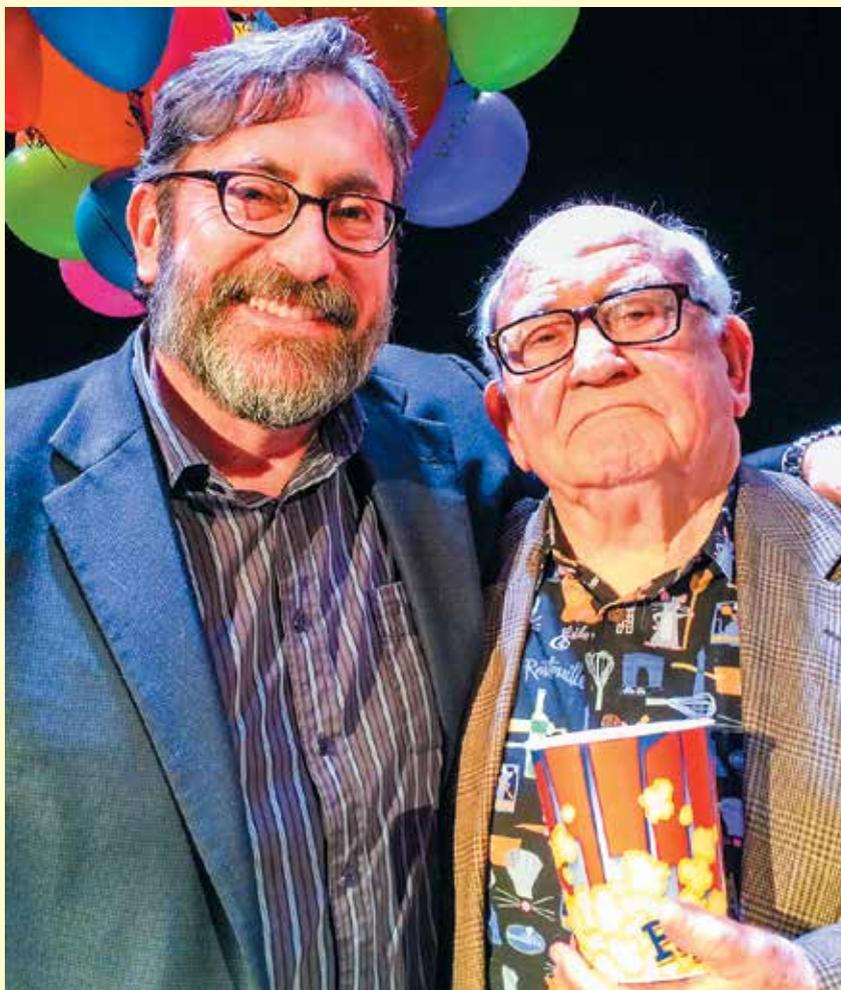
Pixar films are created in a computer environment, but ultimately the work of animation artists, set designers, lighting and shading must be rendered as a movie cel. Pixar's famous Renderfarm is where it all comes together. What's your view on this final process of each Pixar movie?

Renderfarm is more of a conglomerate industrial farm now – SO POWERFUL. And yet we find ways to make the films more technically complex that it still takes forever to render our films!

Looking ahead, Pixar's next theatrical release is *Coco*, which comes out November 22, 2017. Did you play a role in the development of this film?

I worked as a Story Consultant for Lee Unkrich on *Coco*. I sat in on story pitches and brain storming sessions throwing out genius brilliant ideas.

There you have it….an insightful look of how the magic of Pixar makes its journey from the imagination to the silver screen, seen through the eyes of one of its veterans.

We hope you enjoyed this interview!