

DON HAHN

FROM THE NINE OLD MEN TO THE DISNEY RENAISSANCE: A GUIDING HAND



INTERVIEW BY
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The highly regarded golden renaissance of Disney animation that enraptured filmgoers in the 1990s had many elements in common – captivating characters and story, lush animation, and musical scores that were instant classics upon release. Another common thread that may not be readily apparent is the guiding hand of producer Don Hahn, who helped bring *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* to the silver screen. In addition to producing films, Hahn made his directorial debut with *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, an insightful documentary that chronicled the “perfect storm of people and circumstances (that) changed the face of animation forever.” The film is uniquely told entirely with archival footage from the era. Additionally, Hahn is a noted author of Disney books, including the recently released work *Yesterday’s Tomorrow: Disney’s Magical Mid-Century*.

Hahn’s Disney career began as the “nine old men,” the vaunted animators who ushered in the first renaissance and beyond, were approaching retirement. *Celebrations* had the opportunity to sit down with Hahn to discuss his multifaceted Disney career.

Your story of how you arrived at The Walt Disney Company is fascinating. You were a music major in college and managed to get a summer internship at Disney animation as a runner. Can you describe that experience and what you took away from it?

The culture of the studio was really impressive to me. The veterans who were still around were generous with their time for the most part, and the studio had put a priority on bringing in new talent and the next generation. I wasn’t hired as a trainee, but felt thrilled to be walking the halls of the Disney studio and making deliveries to people like Ken Anderson. The studio was a little sleepy back then. It had a country club feeling to it, but that was all about to change.

You applied for and were hired as an assistant director working for Woolie Reitherman, one of Walt’s “nine old men.” How soon after your internship did this occur? What was it like working for Woolie, and what projects did you collaborate on with him?

The studio had a tradition of moving people up in the ranks, so when Woolie needed an assistant director, I went up to his office on a trial basis and ended up staying. I was still a kid but I got to sit in recording sessions, work to thread up Woolie’s moviola and take notes in story meetings. The access was probably the biggest stroke of luck in my life. When Walt started to pursue television and theme

parks, he threw control of the animated films to Woolie in large part. He knew Woolie was the kind of guy who could work with all the egos and be strong yet fair when it came to dishing out critiques. I never dreamed of becoming a producer but I think those early days with Woolie must have instilled me with the possibilities. It was a job that took in every aspect of production including things that I loved like music and animation. I had no idea what I was doing at first but I worked hard at it and learned fast.

What is your art background?

I’m a painter, something that I started doing in London while working on *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. I had taken art classes and was an art minor in school but was more of a graphic designer. Painting caught my interest when I went to Disney and was surrounded by scores of amazing illustrators like Sam McKim, Walt Peregoy, Jim Coleman, Lisa Keene and others. I studied their work and eventually studied painting with Sunny Apinchapong, one of the brilliant painters at the studio who really changed the way I painted. I paint to relax so I don’t really show my paintings in gallery shows. Someday I should.

I understand you were an assistant animator for *Pete’s Dragon*. How was that experience for you?

I was really more of an assistant director and in particular an assistant to Don Bluth who was the animation director on *Pete’s Dragon*. I did everything for Don from filling out sweatbox notes, to in-betweening his scenes, to paying his bills. It was an intense time of learning and I was so lucky once again to be in the same sphere as Don, and the animators of that time. The expectation from the studio was that *Pete’s Dragon* would be the next *Mary Poppins*. I’m not sure that was true, but the film stands up and was an important growth film for the animation team at that time.

You are a highly regarded producer of Disney films, both animation and live-action. Describe for us how you began as a producer and what responsibilities you had on your early projects.

I fell into becoming a producer on *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. I’d moved around in animation as an in-betweening, then a production manager and assistant director. Since I had worked on *Pete’s Dragon*, I knew a fair amount about how to combine live-action with animation. So when *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* began to surface, I was thrust into the film as the “expert” on how to manage the animation. At first I had

no real role on the film but the more I connected with Richard Williams the animation director, and Bob Zemeckis the director, the more I got seduced into the process of this film. They broke all the rules of combining animation with live-action film. The camera moved, the toons interacted with their environment in a way that had never been done before. Before it was all over, I was the Associate Producer of animation on the show and lived in London for two years. That led to *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*.

You experienced first-hand the second renaissance of Disney animation that began with *The Little Mermaid*. You produced two of the new classics, *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*. As a producer, how involved are you in the creative process with the directors? Can you share any examples of collaboration from these films?

I'm a creative producer. I love helping artists do their best work and I really love creating a safe space for artists to thrive. That's the job of a producer: to hire the best people you can possibly find and then do exactly what they tell you to do. There's no question that the directors and writers and story artists are the principle storytellers on a film. I love to contribute to that process, and I love to support that process where I can. Because of my background in music it also was helpful to contribute and coach the team on the musical aspects of the film. Having said that, when you have Howard Ashman and Alan Menken on your movie, you don't really need much help.

***The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* have both gone through new iterations and interpretations since their animated release. As the producer of these originals, what is your take on the Broadway releases of these films, as well as the live-action reboots (*Beauty and the Beast* in 2017, *The Lion King* as a future release)?**

The Broadway versions of these films, and *Hunchback of Notre Dame* for that matter, were a huge step for the company. There had been smaller shows of these films at the theme parks, but to mount a Broadway musical was a whole new world for the studio. I love the stage interpretations of the films I produced. I particularly love it when the stage version is a strong visual departure from the film like Julie Taymor's *The Lion King* on Broadway. And now of course *The Lion King* is being retold as a "live" film just as *Beauty and the Beast* was. These retellings might seem risky, and I suppose

they are to an extent. You don't want to disappoint the audience who has come to love these classic films. But by the same token, stories are meant to be told and retold so the chance to tell the *Beauty and the Beast* story as an animated film, then on stage, and then in a live-action film with Emma Watson, well that is every producer's dream.

Bill Condon directed the live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast*. What insights or wisdom did you share with him as he crafted the update?

Really almost nothing. I worked with writers for quite a while while the production was in development and I screened the film multiple times when it was in rough form to give notes. When you have a director like Bill and a cast like he put together, you really just want to stand back and cheerlead.

When approaching your producer responsibilities, what are the similarities in your style for animation features vs. live-action films? What are the differences in approach, if any?

Live-action films are based deeply on the written word and script and they also lean heavily on the casting. Animation tends to be a more visual medium because you are creating worlds and characters from a blank screen. Writers are important to both mediums, but animation benefits from a heavier visual development as a rule. That however is changing as live action films become more animated. The pre-production art on *Beauty and the Beast* live-action was really important for setting the tone and style of that film in very much the same way as the art was instrumental in the animated version. I'm a very visually oriented person, so the production design team is a place where great visual ideas can contribute to a film at an early phase, just as much as the written word. Both mediums are highly collaborative and both center around good storytelling and character development.

Disney has been tapping into its vast animation library for live-action remakes, beginning with *Maleficent* (which you produced), *Cinderella*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. In production now are *Dumbo*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*. From your position, how would you describe the process in which these remakes were pitched and ultimately green-lighted?

I'm not that familiar with how all these films were developed and greenlit. This is a question more for the studio

than for me. On my films, the development process is the place where you try to bring together the best possible elements to tell the story from cast, to script to music, art direction, director, cinematographer and the rest. The team building part of pre-production is really crucial to these films. And in my opinion you want to pull together a team that has a fresh take on these beloved stories. No one needs to see a literal remake of a film, but we love to be retold stories from the past in new and interesting ways.

What is your take on the remake of classic Disney animated films into live-action? Are there any titles you are excited about possibly being remade? Are there any titles that you don't feel should be touched?

I go back to what I mentioned above: stories are meant to be told and retold, and we as an audience love to hear them. Disney takes the telling of these stories very seriously and the teams of people they are assembling seem pretty exciting to me.

Let's talk about your directorial debut with *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, that chronicled Disney animation during the period of 1984 to 1994. You were able to interview the key principals of the film roughly fifteen years after the era chronicled in the documentary. How challenging was it to get Michael Eisner, Roy E.

Disney and Jeffrey Katzenberg to open up and speak candidly about that timeframe, given the friction they had with each other?

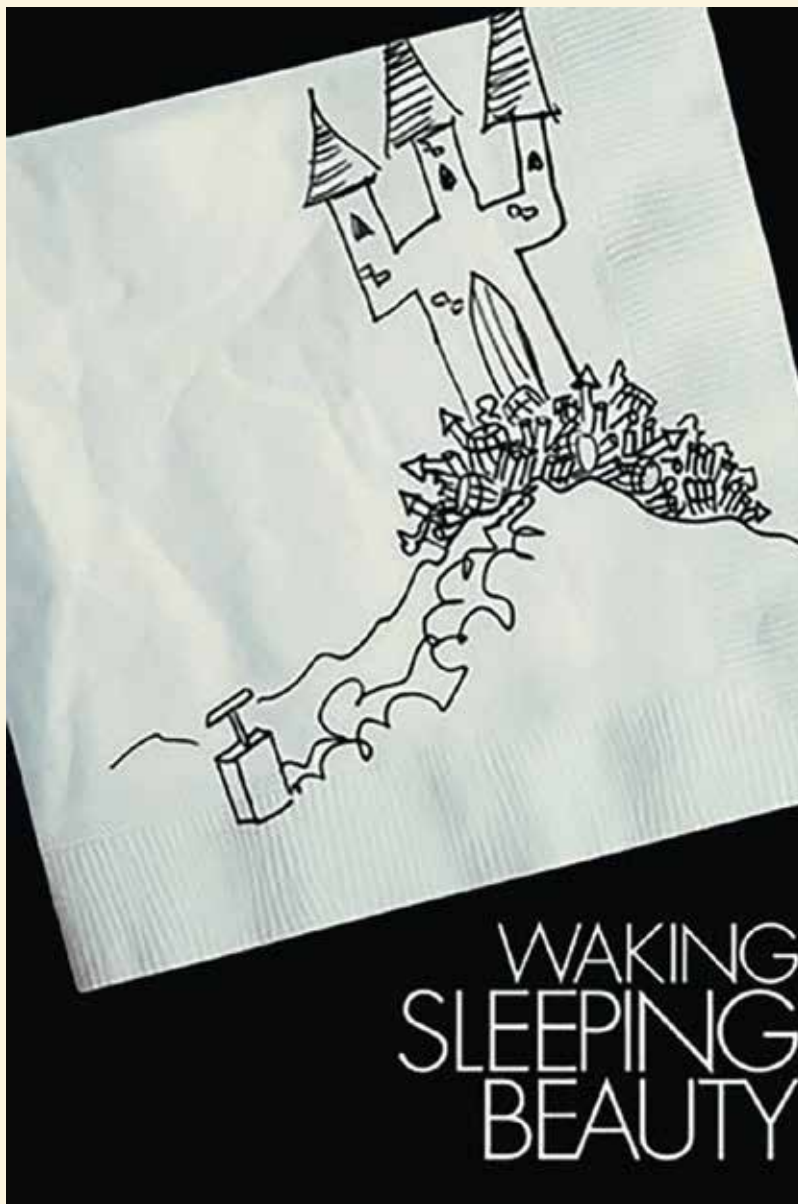
It was challenging to a degree, but enough time had passed that they were ready to tell the story as each of them saw it. They had to put a lot of trust in me and in my pursuit

of authenticity while telling this story. I was never going after a story that pitted good vs. evil. I just wanted to have each person tell their story about that miraculous era, and then present those facts, as they saw them, to the audience in a way that was almost like an attorney presenting facts to a jury. The audience can decide if there were good guys or bad guys, but the presentation of the facts were the primary driver for me. I never wanted to do a film about old guys reminiscing. It was more a story about ten blind men describing an elephant and what they each "saw" as they experienced it.

As a documentary, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* is unique in that it relies entirely on archival footage – amateur films at the studio, newsreel footage

(60 Minutes, for example), photo stills and animated sketches, among others. How challenging was this approach to you and your crew, to track down archival footage that dovetailed with the story?

It was impossible. You can go to the archives and find a pristine color film print of Walt Disney from the 1950's *World of Color* TV show, but you couldn't find anything but a scratchy video image from the late 20th century. Having



said that, I wanted to put you as an audience there in the rooms and at the tables that I was at, so you could feel the tension or the accomplishment of each moment in a very first person way. I didn't want to use traditional talking heads. It was more important to show actual historic footage no matter how grainy and horrible it was. It was the story that mattered on this film, not the quality of the images

If you were to direct a sequel to *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, how would the 1994-2004 era be represented?

Right now I'm working on a documentary about Howard Ashman, and in many ways it's a sequel to *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. It's a film that will expand and focus on Howard who was arguably the most crucial component of those times in terms of relighting the flame in animation. I've been working on the Howard documentary for two years now and it will be done in the early part of 2018. If there was another documentary beyond that, I don't think I'd look towards telling any more of the 1994 and beyond story. To me the most interesting untold story is really in the mid-century when Disney was coming out of the war years and expanding into television, theme parks, urban design, music, publishing and dozens of other ventures. It was an explosion of innovation that was in many ways much greater than the animation renaissance that would happen later. It's probably why I wrote a book about it and it would make a great documentary someday.

Switching topics, let me ask about your work for Disney's True-Life Adventures films of the

mid-century appear to be the catalyst for the Disney nature brand. You're closely involved with this unit, serving as executive producer of *Earth, Oceans, African Cats* and *Chimpanzee*. Tell us about carrying on the tradition of Disney's legacy on nature documentaries.

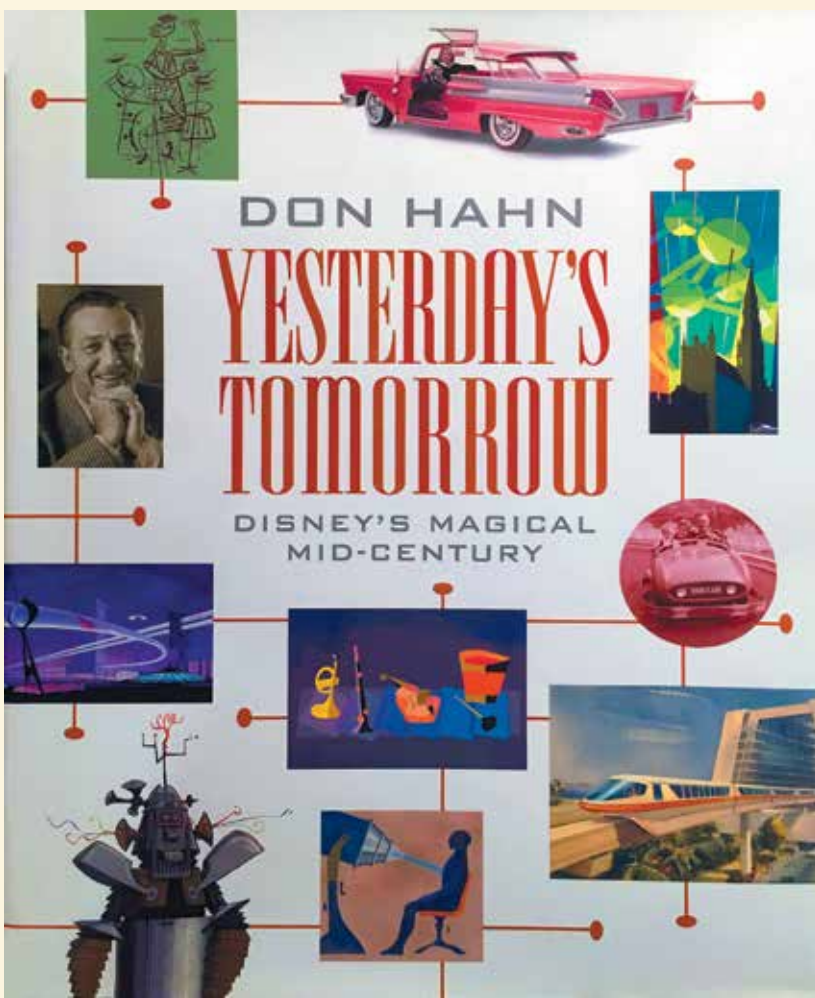
The Disney nature brand is partially about celebrating the legacy of Disney and True-Life Adventures, but more than anything it's about making new and visionary nature films with the best filmmakers alive today. The technology for making nature films is astoundingly advanced and can allow us to take the audience to places and see animals

that they would never dream of seeing in earlier decades. Today television is full of wonderful nature series, so the chance to film and show nature on the big screen with A-list directors, musicians and narrators is really a treat for us as filmmakers and for the audience as well.

How different is your approach for nature documentaries, compared to animation and live-action films?

Nature film making is its own animal. The filmmakers we work with have deep experience with nature and often have worked for decades

on films for the BBC and its renowned nature unit in Bristol, England. The other huge difference is that on a nature film you don't start out with a script. Yes there is a detailed outline of what the story might be, but as soon as the cameramen and women get in the field and begin to photograph the story, nature changes things up. I remember on *Chimpanzee*, it was originally a story of a mother raising her son in the wild. After a few months of shooting in the Ivory Coast, the mother left one night and never came back leav-



ing the baby chimp abandoned. We thought the film was over, but miraculously the next day, the giant male of the tribe of chimps adopted the baby and made sure he was taken care of. That became the new and astounding story that the crew followed. Nature filmmaking is like white water rafting. You go in the direction that the river takes you.

You take off with a plan and then film as much as you possibly can from that plan. The new digital cameras allow for hours of shooting where cameras from fifty years ago would have allowed for ten minutes or so before you would have to change film. Newer cameras also are better at low light levels and can master slow motion and time lapse as well as drone photography so as to bring several breathtaking views of the story to the audience.

What future projects is Disney Nature working on?

Born in China was this past year's film, and there is a terrific film *Dolphins* coming up (slated for release April 20, 2018).

In addition to being a successful producer and director, you are also an established author of Disney-related material. You share insights into the creative process and the art of animation with such titles as *Drawn to Life, Volumes 1 and 2, The Alchemy of Animation, and Brainstorm: Unleashing Your Creative Self*. How did you apply your own points on the creative process when you drafted and wrote *Brainstorm*?

Most of the stories in *Brainstorm* come from working with truly amazing people. There is no particular pattern or rules to creativity or storytelling, but what I wanted to get across in the book was that creativity requires risk, vulnerability, and luck. Working on a film or book or play, it's all the same challenge...the team has to be fearless about throwing out the weaker ideas in favor of better more entertaining ideas. It's a process that Walt called "plussing," where each person on each film would push the idea forward with their art, story ideas, music, voices or whatever, to make the film the best possible experience for the audience.

You previously mentioned about the creative Disney spirit of the 1950s and beyond. That work is chronicled in your most recent book, *Yesterday's Tomorrow: Disney's Magical Mid-Century*. Tell us about the research you put into this work. Tell us about your new book.

I lived in Southern California most all of my life and over time have realized that this was the perfect setting for Walt and his company of artists to revolutionize not only anima-

tion but pretty much any industry that they touched. Los Angeles was and is home to the first freeways, to aerospace, to NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab and space travel, to movies, and the music industry. All this supplied Disney with the inspiration and talents to create his form of entertainment. But also important during the mid-century in California was that the audience was there to take it all in. Southern California was flooded with young families in the 1950s and real estate developers filled former orange groves with housing tracts. Americans had endured two World Wars and a Great Depression and they were ready for some optimism and the land of sunshine, land and opportunity offered them just that. *Yesterday's Tomorrow* is all about that time and how Walt brilliantly captured the optimism and wonder of that time in his parks and entertainment and in turn how his artists affected the design and style of mid-century art and architecture even today.

You have several decades of experience working for and with The Walt Disney Company. In the present, you are now seen as the wise Disney veteran and the voice of institutional knowledge. You were prominently featured on PBS's *American Experience* four-hour biography of Walt Disney, offering commentary on Walt and the company. You also work closely with the Walt Disney Family Museum in San Francisco. In light of your extensive work for Disney, how would your future biography summarize your career?

The thing that I keep coming back to in my life, and the thing that I've learned from being around Disney and the great artists here, is that story is everything. If I've had success in my life it's because I've been able to work with great storytellers who captured the imagination of the audience. That's true for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and it's true for Disney-Pixar's *Coco*. That storytelling bug is also in everything that Disney has done. Other people had amusement parks, but Walt's parks had stories, so you didn't just ride a dark ride in a tunnel, you rode with Mr. Toad or you flew with Peter Pan. Story is the common currency that we all use to communicate. It's universal, it's international, and it's inescapable. We can't get enough of good storytelling, that reinforces our need for love and belonging, and for hope in a very chaotic world. There's a great quote that Tom Hanks says as Walt Disney in the film *Saving Mr. Banks*. He says "That's what storytellers do . . . we restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again." That says it all.

