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'This Is Our Time As Independents, But If You Don't Take Risks, Will You Ever Know?' Disney Renaissance Vet Dominic Carola On 'My Neighbor'

By **JAMIE LANG (HTTPS://WWW.CARTOONBREW.COM/AUTHOR/JAMIELANG)** | 09/03/2025 9:15 am |  1 (https://www.cartoonbrew.com/shorts/dominic-carola-premise-entertainment-my-neighbor-253689.html#disqus_thread)

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Disney vet and Premise Entertainment founder Dominic Carola didn't set out to make a studio spectacle. Instead, the animator chose to craft something intimate: a five-minute story about a cardinal, a bluebird, and the life-changing ripple of one small act of kindness.

My Neighbor, completed earlier this year, unfolds without a single spoken word, relying on gesture, expression, and timing to speak universally.



“It’s all on you,” Carola said of directing, writing, and producing the pilot/short himself. That pressure became freedom, allowing him and a tiny team at his Orlando-based studio to create what he calls “lovingly made by human artisans.”

The short was directed, written, and produced by Carola, with Justin Farris serving as animation director and Ryan Feltman as art director. Lauren Stevens handled editing and sound design, while Cameron Banker oversaw lighting, composition, and visual effects. The voice work, though limited to simple noises in this wordless story, features Stephanie Spahn and Carola himself.

From Disney Veteran to Indie Leader

Carola’s career began at DC Comics in New York before he enrolled at the California Institute of the Arts, where he won the inaugural Walter Lantz Animation Award. He went on to animate at Walt Disney Feature Animation for more than a decade, contributing to classics like *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, and *Lilo & Stitch*. In the early 2000s, after Disney consolidated its Orlando studio, Carola chose not to relocate to California

but instead founded Premise Entertainment in Florida. For over 20 years, the studio has thrived as a fiercely independent, artist-driven shop.

Balancing Service and Story

Premise has kept the lights on through service work for major studios while quietly developing its own pipeline of original ideas. “We’ve been a service studio for many years, and over so much time, you build up a lot of your own content that you’ve been developing, like full screenplays, full animatics, tons of publishing projects,” Carola said.

That balancing act, client projects on one side, passion projects on the other, has shaped the studio’s approach. “It always takes a back seat, because you need to fulfill the client’s needs, which we always would do. And you always want to fulfill it at the highest level, regardless of the budget parameters,” Carola explained.

“Maybe it’s the Nine Old Men meetings that we used to have back in the day, but as they would say, your work is there forever, so you want it to be great, whatever it is,” he said.

Now, with *My Neighbor* gaining traction, Carola sees opportunity in this hybrid model. The service work sustains the studio, but it also gives its team the freedom and experience to occasionally pivot toward stories of their own.

A Handmade Response to an Evolving Industry

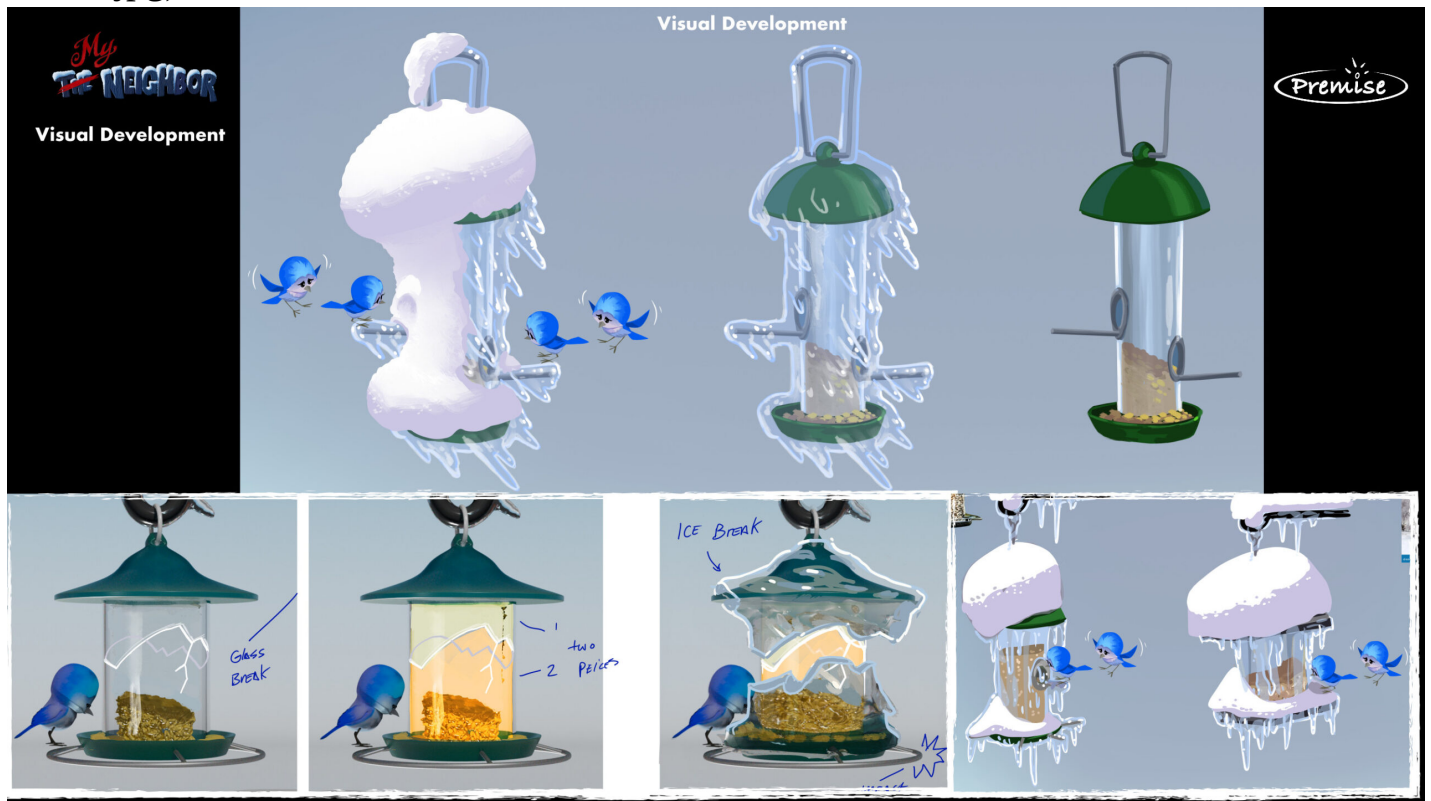
Carola is candid about why he chose to keep *My Neighbor* small. “We are fiercely independent,” he explained. “And I just think now is the time to really embrace the creator economy that we’re in,” he said, praising several indie filmmakers around the world who have made their own way on free platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

For him, that independence is more than a business model; it’s an ethos. “At the end of *My Neighbor*, we made sure to note after the credits that this is lovingly made by human artisans. There’s no AI at all used in it,” Carola said.





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The short, which began as a children’s book, uses pantomime rather than dialogue, allowing it to reach audiences everywhere. “One of the things that’s unique about My Neighbor is that there’s no dialogue planned for the show. And it is an animator’s dream because it’s all about pantomime,” Carola said. “We’re going to end up pushing it pretty far... It’s an open book.”

Designing Within Reach

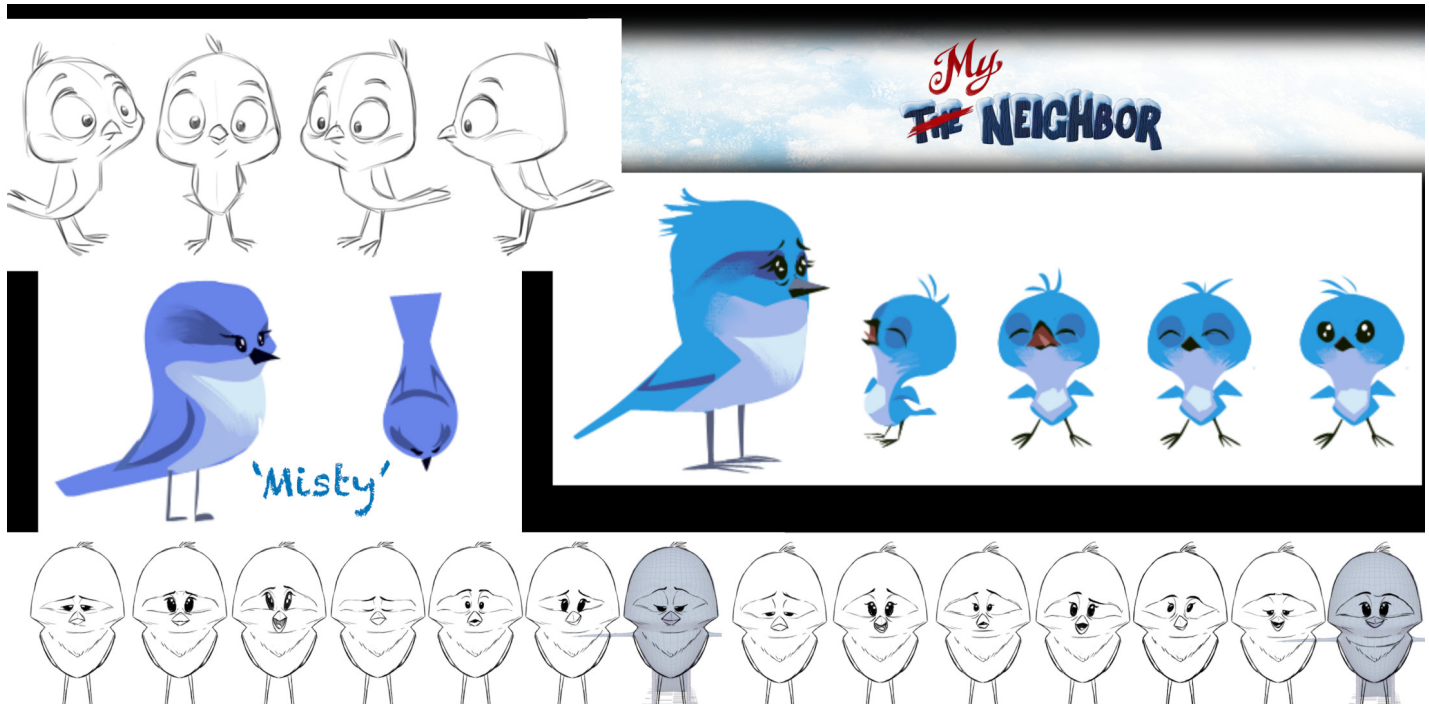
The look of *My Neighbor* also reflects its independent roots. “You want to stand out, but you want to design within your budget,” Carola said. “So what can we do? We had to find a look that matched our ambition. Something cool, but that fits in our per-minute cost. We had to figure out, can we make that work?”

A notable decision was to avoid human-style eyes. “We wanted to lean into pure emotion, but the characters don’t have whites in their eyes, so we had to come up with ways to

show concern. The eyes get bigger, the squint, the look side to side, and you can still feel what he's thinking, and it becomes alive for me. That started as a budgetary decision, but we leaned into it and it became a major part of our look," Carola explained.



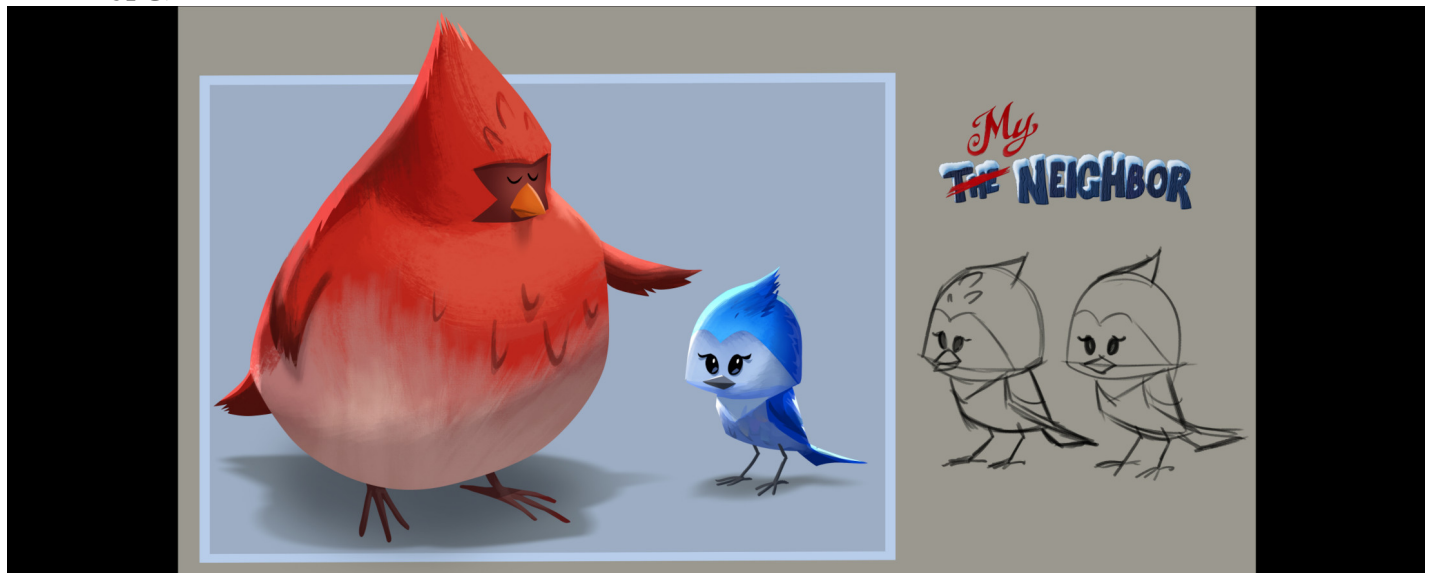
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Universal Neighbors

While the themes of *My Neighbor* stem from Carola's faith, he stresses that the story is designed for everyone. "This is a conversation you can have with anyone from any background. It's about caring for someone in need. My goodness. I mean, look what's going on in the world right now" he said. "I was trying to find a way to tell these very human, relatable stories in a way that takes out any sort of stereotypes. So we thought to

tell it through the lens of birds in a backyard.”

For Carola, Carl the cardinal reflects something personal. “In many ways, I’ll say we are all a little bit like Carl. We often tend to focus more on ourselves than others, but when you step out of your comfort zone to lend a hand, my goodness...it can make a positive difference in somebody’s life in ways you would never have imagined,” he said.

Looking Ahead

Carola envisions *My Neighbor* growing into a series of five-to-seven-minute shorts, each built around humor, pantomime, and heart. “They all have strong relatable themes.”

One thing that will stay consistent throughout is the emotional journey of Carl the cardinal. Viewers meet him in the pilot, but other birds will join the cast along the way.

“But in the backyard, Carl has always lived this solitary life. However, this simple act of kindness in the very first episode changes his life forever.”

Carola knows the risks of staying small in a turbulent industry, but he frames them as a challenge worth embracing. “This is our time as independents, and the scary part, I think, for people is you’ve got to take risks. And risks are very scary right now... but if you don’t, will you ever know?”

That conviction is the beating heart of *My Neighbor*, a handmade film about connection, created at a moment when the animation world itself is searching for new ways to connect.

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