

ANATOMY OF A CONTENDER

MAKING OF How to Train Your Dragon

Two new directors, an award-winning cinematographer and wise words from a pair of filmmaking titans transformed a small story into a heartfelt epic

By Tom Roston

IN OCTOBER 2008, DREAMWORKS Animation CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg handed Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders the task of breathing new life into a moribund feature-length animated film project that had been in the works for nearly four years. If that weren't challenge enough, the co-directors had to reinvent *How to Train Your Dragon* in less than 15 months — a task that usually takes three years.

There was more at stake than simply taking the reins from previous director Peter Hastings (*The Country Bears*), who left the project when his wife died. In addition to the reported \$165 million budget, *Dragon* represented a major shift for DreamWorks Animation, which had a stellar record with a green ogre (*Shrek*), displaced zoo animals (*Madagascar*) and a bamboo-eating bear (*Kung Fu Panda*) but hadn't fully delivered on the human front.

"Disney had done that," producer Bonnie Arnold says. "This was a little different for us. Here was a kid protagonist at the time

when Jeffrey was trying to create an identity for the studio."

But the early version of *Dragon* wasn't shaping up to be anything that DreamWorks might want to hang its hat on. "We realized we needed something that would take us beyond the books," Arnold says. Indeed, the source material — Cressida Cowell's 2003 children's book series — might have conjured a wildly imaginative mythical world of Vikings who cohabit with dragons, but it also is a small story about 10-year-old Hiccup and his pet dragon.

Sanders, the director suggested by Arnold as Hastings' replacement, was immediately interested. (Sanders and Arnold had worked together at Disney on such films as *Tarzan* and *Toy Story*.) He brought aboard his *Lilo & Stitch* co-director, DeBlois, and together they met with Katzenberg, who declared the rock-solid release date of March 26, 2010, and assigned his new directors three tasks: They had to hang the story on a father-son relationship; have the smallest

Viking take on the "biggest, baddest" dragon; and set a broad tone for the film that could rival the grandest family films, e.g., *Harry Potter*.

Sanders and DeBlois took two weeks reviewing the work that already had been done and came up with a new take. First, they wanted to "age up" the lead kids in the story to early teens. They also wanted to replace the book's cowboys-and-horses dynamic between the Vikings and dragons with one that was warlike and perilous. And last, they wanted to make Hiccup's pet dragon, Toothless — a cute, iguana-sized runt in the book — into a giant, fierce creature he'd have to befriend then fly.

Katzenberg liked what he heard and encouraged the directors to "put the pedal to the metal," according to Arnold.

"We knew we didn't have time to explore," Sanders says. "We had to get this right the first time."

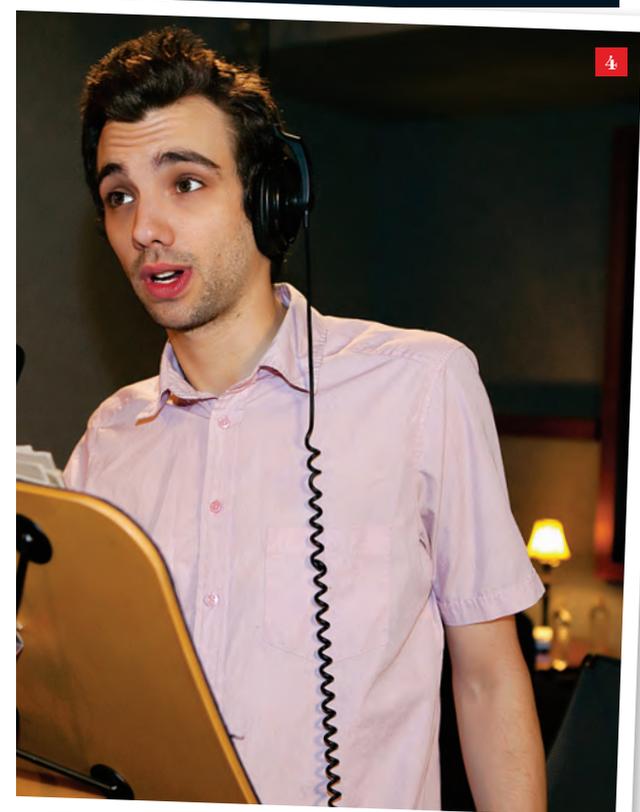
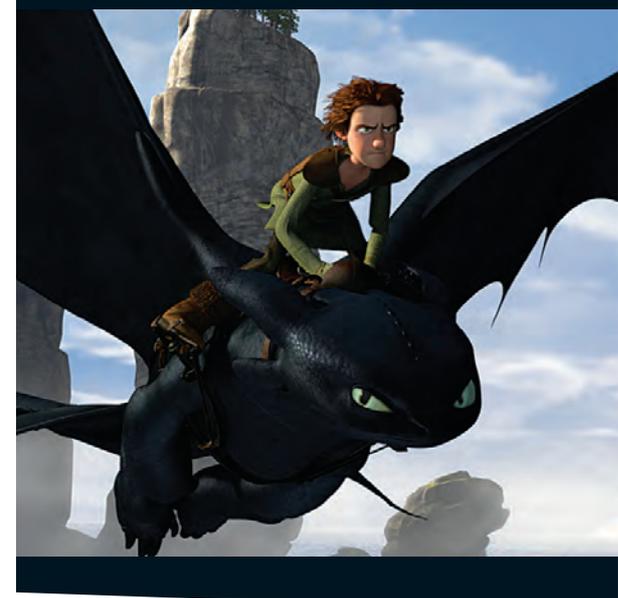
They could build on the work already done on the film's diverse population of dragons as well as keep the animated sets of

1. The bond between Hiccup (Jay Baruchel) and the feared Night Fury dragon he names Toothless was inspired by Disney's 1979 film *The Black Stallion*.

2. Toothless and Hiccup, from artist's rendering to finished product.

3. The father-son relationship between Stoick (Gerard Butler) and Hiccup evolves during the course of the film.

4. Baruchel's workload included nearly two dozen two-hour recording sessions.





the Viking village of Berk. The voice cast was nearly set, with Jay Baruchel as the voice of Hiccup, America Ferrera as tough Viking chick Astrid and Gerard Butler as Hiccup's father, Stoick. But the directors had to dump most of their recorded dialogue because the screenplay had to be rewritten.

Surrounded by bulletin boards filled with storyboard scenes, DeBlois and Sanders hunkered down to write, sitting across from each other in their office on the main floor of DreamWorks Animation's Glendale campus.

Although they were under the gun, DeBlois reports that the production mood was optimistic. "I've worked on a lot of stinkers," he says. "There's the term 'polishing a turd,' where you know that the movie's not going

to be very good but you work on weekends anyway. In this case, everybody felt confident."

One of the key scenes they focused on early was dubbed "forbidden friendship," in which Hiccup and Toothless cross a threshold of trust. The outline was that the dragon is injured and the young Viking brings him food. They knew that the scene would be musically driven "and pretty," DeBlois says, "but how do they make that connection?"

Sanders came up with the idea that Toothless would begin to mimic Hiccup's gestures, like his smile, which would create the bridge toward their budding friendship. Inspired by the image of the encounter, Sanders illustrated the scene before writing it.

Disney's 1979 film *The Black Stallion* served as inspiration to the directors as they reinvented

Toothless. They thought of him as a giant pet — part horse, dog and cat. And they worked in a damaged tail, which would bring Hiccup closer to him when the boy creates a prosthetic that has a "Miyazaki vibe to it," says DeBlois, referring to the Japanese animation master.

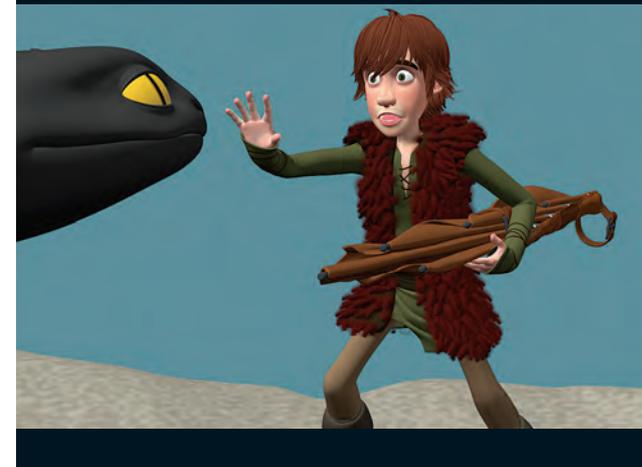
As the writing progressed, scenes were pushed down the pipeline: Storyboards were generated, layouts were constructed, and previsualizations created rough mock-ups of the scenes in motion. (Scenes that were flagged as particularly conducive to 3D treatment were then developed by a dedicated 3D department.)

DeBlois and Sanders also went back and forth to record dialogue sessions with their cast, most of whom did about 10 two-hour recording sessions during the course of three years; Baruchel did closer to two dozen. The actor says

the change of directors had been "nerve-racking" at first, but he was quickly won over by DeBlois and Sanders' "massive vision."

With the new directors, Baruchel had to "mature" his character's voice, which remained very un-Vikinglike in contrast to the two elder leads, played by Scotsmen Butler and Craig Ferguson, who voices Gobber, an adviser to father and son. "It was this great audible way of hammering home the generation gap," Baruchel says. "Those guys have this brogue, and the rest of the kids are, like, from the mall in Sherman Oaks."

Ferrera says the process of voice acting could be mind-numbing. "When you say the same lines 25 different ways, the words don't sound like English anymore," says the actress, whose originally marginal character became Hiccup's love interest.



At the same time, other teams of filmmakers were at work. Sound designer Randy Thom was putting in long days at the Skywalker Ranch in Northern California; one of his primary tasks was to create sounds for the dragons. “One of the earliest conversations we had was not to have dragons simply opening their mouths, fire coming out,” Thom says. “We wanted to make their bodies and cheeks vibrate.”

Thom manipulated the sounds of horses, whales, elephants and even his own low voice to create Toothless’ unique utterations.

Equally tuned in to the sounds of *Dragon* was composer John Powell. Working on the score, he immersed himself in the images and drawings being created by the art department and listened to the late Finnish composer Jean Sibelius for inspiration. Ultimately, he steered away from authentic Nordic influences and



toward Celtic melodies. “We fudged the lines a little bit,” says Powell, who wanted to complement the Scottish brogue of the cast elders.

An unlikely addition to the *Dragon* team was cinematographer Roger Deakins, an eight-time Oscar nominee best known for working with Joel and Ethan Coen on such films as *No Country for Old Men* and *Fargo* — a far cry from the world of animation. DeBlois and Sanders had asked Deakins to come in to talk about his “theories of light” in a couple of workshops in the hope that the *Dragon* animators could integrate dramatic realism into their work.

When Deakins and the animators clicked, DeBlois and Sanders decided to hire him as a full-time consultant, which helped create a unique look for the film, starting with the shadowy opening scene when the dragons invade Berk at night, with parts of the frame falling into total darkness. “Most of the time, when you see an animated film, an artist has created an original piece of art, and then they just match the light to the painting,” Sanders says. “So you get an illustrative vibe. In this movie, we lit it like you’d light a live-action set. We moved the lights. And that was Roger.”

The team effort behind *Dragon* included changes from the top. Despite Katzenberg’s mandate to make the release date, he threw the production its biggest curveball about six months before the film’s release, telling his directors that the conclusion of the third act needed to be changed.

“‘You really have to do something different,’” Sanders recalls him saying of the way Hiccup defeats the giant, evil dragon. “It

1. Hiccup shows his fellow students during dragon-fighting lessons that there’s a gentler way. 2. America Ferrera voices the spunky Astrid. 3. Hiccup meets the wounded Toothless up close for the first time. 4. (From left) Director Chris Sanders, Craig Ferguson, producer Bonnie Arnold and director Dean DeBlois.

felt pat with Hiccup defeating the goliath and everything being fine in the end.”

So again, DeBlois and Sanders went to their office to come up with a proposal. They recalled an idea that had been batted around about Hiccup getting hurt in a way that mirrors Toothless’ broken tail. They decided to have him wake up after the final battle, alone, missing a leg. Arnold acknowledges that there were concerns that young viewers might be disturbed, but test screenings allayed those fears.

Katzenberg wasn’t the only DreamWorks titan to put his fingerprint on *Dragon*. The directors were well into production on that third act when principal partner Steven Spielberg sat in on a special Glendale campus screening.

“He gave us one of the key notes,” DeBlois says. “He mentioned that because this relationship between Hiccup and Toothless begins in a private place, it should conclude in the same way. We had never thought about it that way.” Spielberg’s suggestion was that Hiccup should wake up with a prosthetic leg but with Toothless there by his side.

It was a significant addition, but even that was overshadowed by the benediction Spielberg delivered as he walked out of the theater. “He said, ‘I love that you didn’t make any compromises,’” DeBlois recalls. “‘This is the best piece of work we’ve done at this company.’” **THR**

FIRE BREATHERS

How films with dragon characters have fared

1. **HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON** 2010
\$217.6M
2. **MULAN** 1998
\$120.6M
3. **ERAGON** 2006
\$75M
4. **DRAGONHEART** 1996
\$51.4M
5. **REIGN OF FIRE** 2002
\$43.1M
6. **QUEST FOR CAMELOT** 1998
\$22.5M
7. **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** 2000
\$15.2M
8. **DRAGONSLAYER** 1981
\$14.1M
9. **DRAGON WARS: D-WAR** 2007
\$11M
10. **SPIRITED AWAY** 2002
\$10.1M

Domestic box office;
Source: Boxoffice Mojo.com

