

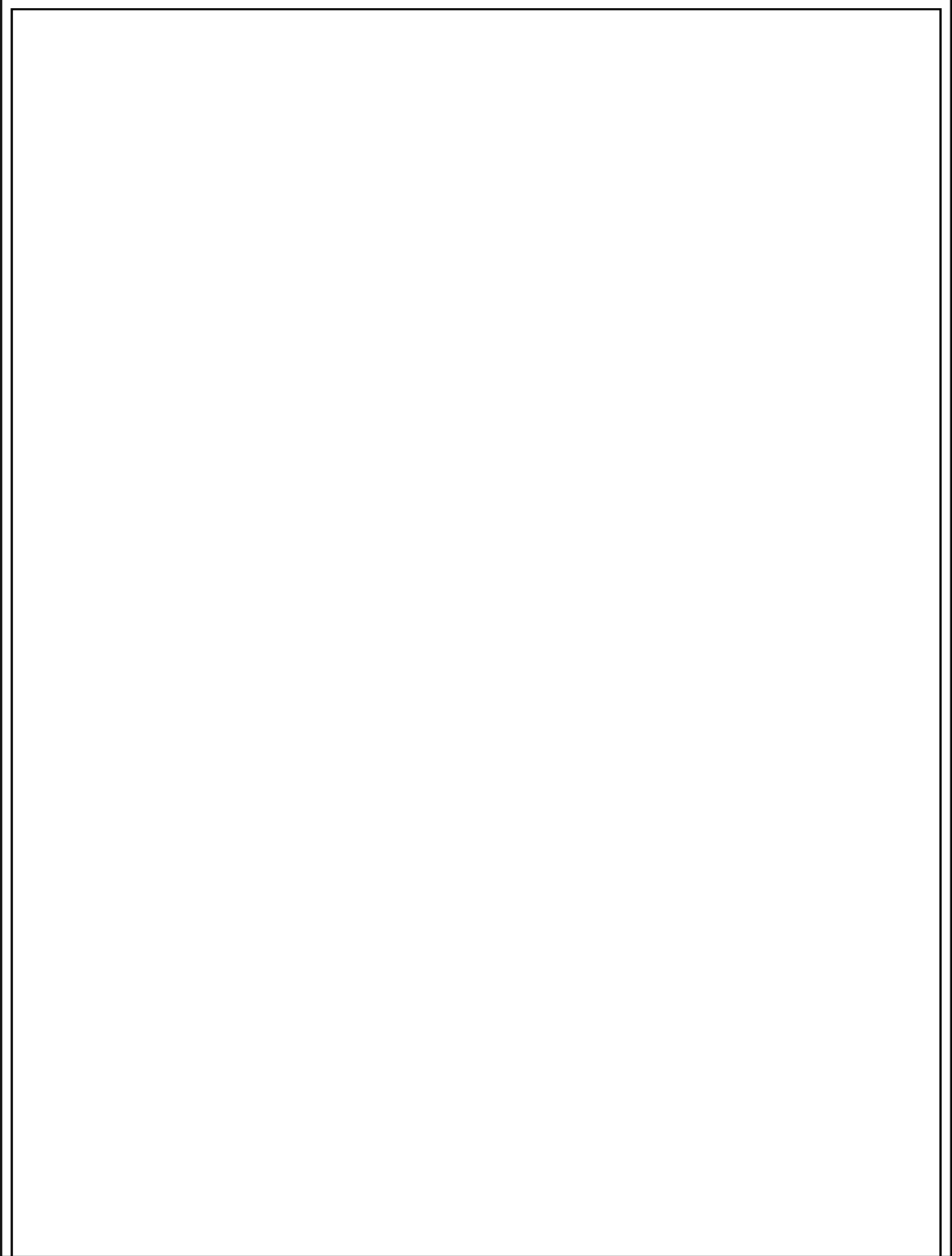
## Interview: Martin Landau Lends His Voice to ‘Frankenweenie’

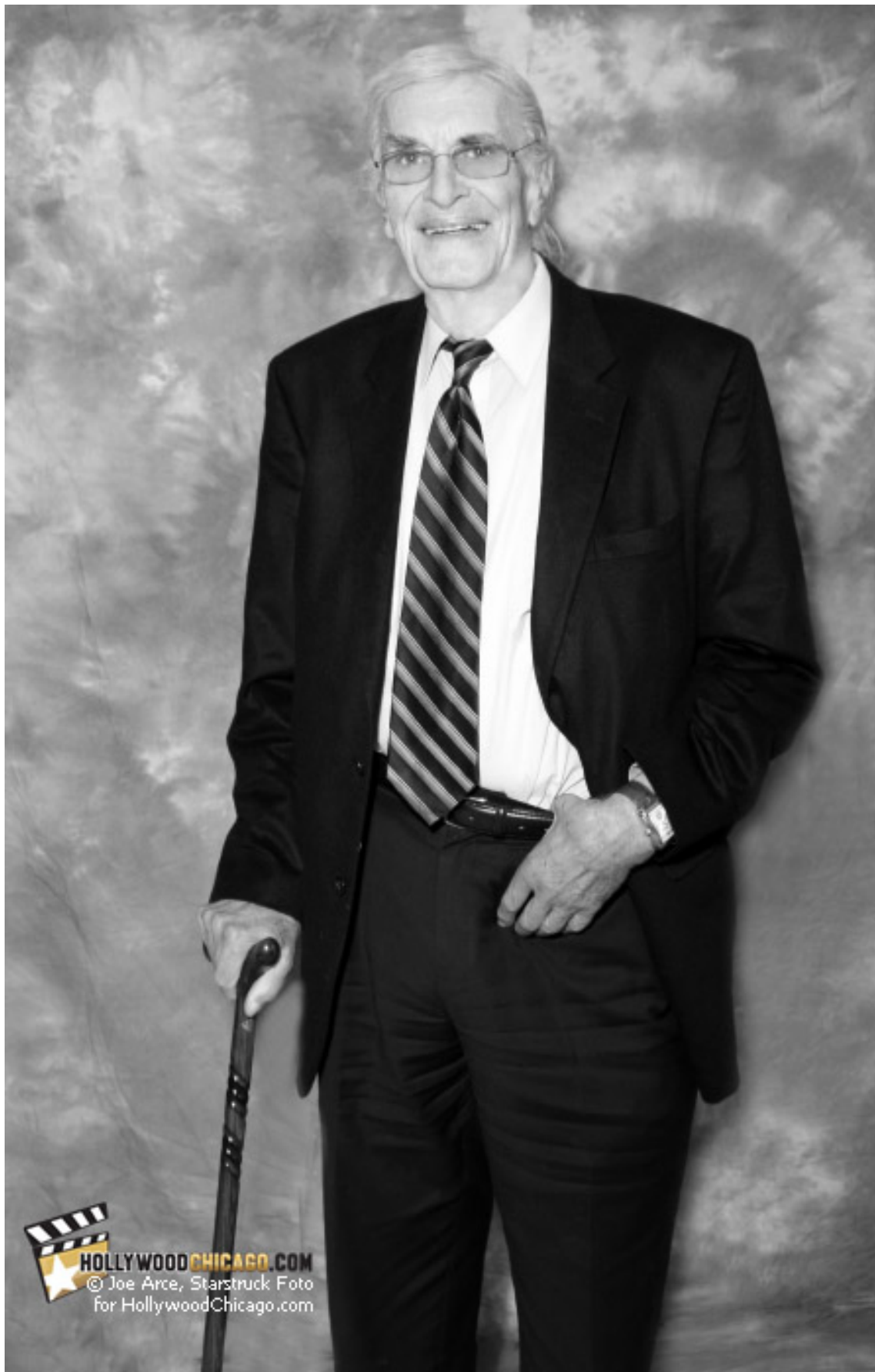
Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 15, 2013 - 11:40am

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CHICAGO – One of director Tim Burton’s great actor collaborators is the veteran performer Martin Landau. Landau voices Mr. Rsykruski, a science teacher who inspires young Victor Frankenstein in “Frankenweenie,” released on Blu-Ray on January 8th. This is part of Landau’s magnificent 60 year career in film, television, stage and acting instruction.

It’s difficult to sum up Landau’s career because of it’s depth and breadth. The 84 year old actor was born in Brooklyn, New York, and had an early interest in cartooning for newspapers. He worked as an illustrator for the New York Daily News for five years, before the acting bug bit him. He was in an exceptional era and place for the craft, as Lee Strasberg’s Actor’s Studio was being formulated, and out of the 2000 applicants for 1955 only two were selected – Martin Landau and Steve McQueen. From there he began a stage career in Manhattan, which morphed into his film debut in 1959, “Pork Chop Hill.” That same year he worked for the Master of Suspense, Alfred Hitchcock, in the classic film “North by Northwest.”





Martin Landau at 'The Hollywood Show' in Chicago, September of 2012  
*Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com*

In the 1960s, Landau was best known for his television role as Rollin Hand, master of disguise, in the iconic series “Mission: Impossible.” After quitting the show due to a contract dispute, his choice of roles dried up in the 1970s, but he – with his former wife Barbara Bain – did participate in the cult TV show “Space:1999.” (1975-77). After enduring a series of “B” movies and television walk-ons, Landau appeared in the film “Tucker: The Man and His Dream” as Abe (complete story below), and was nominated for an Academy Award for the role. That began the third phase of his career, which culminated in his Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, portraying horror legend Bela Lugosi in “Ed Wood” (1994). Along the way he has worked in film for Woody Allen (“Crimes and Misdemeanors”) and Frank Darabont (“The Majestic”), and continues his fruitful career with voice work in animation (“9” and “Frankenweenie”), TV (“Entourage”) and three more films in post production for 2013-14.

HollywoodChicago.com got the fortunate opportunity to talk to Martin Landau in September of last year at “The Hollywood Show,” an annual event where admirers can meet, collect autographs and talk to the legends of TV and film. His insights into the acting craft is born of years of experience in all media.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In doing research on your biography, I had no idea you intended to be a cartoonist out of high school, is that correct?

**Martin Landau:** That is right. I actually started as a cartoonist before I graduated high school, I lied about my age. I was 17 years old, and I got a job on the New York Daily News. I would leave James Madison High School in Brooklyn at 4 o'clock, work until midnight, and do my homework on the train.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What was the atmosphere of cartooning and cartoonists back then, and how did your love for the art form come to fruition?

**Landau:** When I was five years old, my parents would go out on Saturday night, buy the Sunday papers, and put the color comics in my room

so they could sleep in. As you noted, New York City had several newspapers, The Daily News had Mickey Mouse on its comics cover, the Journal had 'Bringing Up Father' and 'Jiggs and Maggie' – so even before I could read I would be engrossed in these worlds, even though I didn't know what they were about, because all of them were different. And it allowed my parents to sleep an extra hour. [laughs] I then started to draw, and got better and better, so by the time I took the drawings to The Daily News, they hired me.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** There are so many stories about the early days of the Actors Studio, as far as the icons of movies that participated and graduated. What is the biggest myth about that training that no one will tell us?

**Landau:** There are no myths, the training is absolutely essential. The myths probably came from the sheer number of actors who succeeded coming out of that studio and training. Of course Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan and Harold Clurman changed the shape of acting in America, with the group theater, and the Actor's Studio was an extension of that. I still run the West Coast Actor's Studio, I'm artistic director with Mark Rydell. On the East Coast, Al Pacino, Harvey Keitel and Ellen Burstyn run that Actor's Studio.

I'm still critiquing young actors, teaching them and helping them, with all kind of activities going on at the studio. It's like paying my dues. The Actor's Studio is not a school, in an odd way it's an elitist club of talented actors. Dustin Hoffman will tell you he auditioned nine times before he got in. The truth is it was only six times, he exaggerates, and I don't know why. If I were he I'd tell everybody that I got in on my third try. [laughs]

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How many times did it take you to get in?

**Landau:** When I auditioned, there were 2000 people trying out. Out of all those people only two got in, myself and Steve McQueen, and we became life members. James Dean was my best friend in those days, and I watched Eli Wallach, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Monty Cliff and Karl Marden all come out of the studio. When I say it changed the shape of acting in the world, that form of group theater started with the attitude that there was more drama on the streets of New York than the stages of New York. They gave theater a more social context.



Science!: Martin Landau voices Mr Rzykusky in 'Frankenweenie'  
*Photo credit: Walt Disney Pictures*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Since you are an acting instructor, what skills sets do you think an actor has to access between being on stage and being in a film?

**Landau:** The talented actor needs craft. When you do a stage play, you do it once each night in chronological order. In a film you're going to wind up doing a scene 15-20 times, just by the nature of the process. If I tell you a joke once, it's funny. The more times I tell, the less funny it is. How do you get to the point where you can laugh again? You also may have to cry again and again.

Playing a drunk doesn't mean being a drunk, only bad actors try to be drunk. A real drunk tries to be sober, he wants another drink. How a character hides their feelings tells us who they are, no one shows their feelings except bad actors. People are in denial all the time, hiding things. If I tell you a racist or dirty joke and you laugh, you're telling me something about yourself, which you don't want to reveal. Accessing that hidden side is what good acting is all about. And there are only a handful of people in the entire United States who interest me as actors, who surprise me. Even people who write about it, don't know anything about good performance. At least when you work at General Motors, you know something about cars.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I've read that working on Cleopatra was one of the nicest vacations an actor could have, despite the notorious reputation the film has. Did you get a nice vacation out of it, and is there a good story about the film you haven't told?



**Landau:** During the shooting period, I learned Italian because I had time to learn Italian [gives a funny gibberish example]. I started in September of 1961 and was done one year later, and we still wasn't finished with the picture. Then we went to Egypt and Almeria [Spain] six months later, to add additional scenes, because Darryl Zanuck took over 20th Century Fox again and wanted to make the film shorter. It was an interesting time, to say the least. I was a young actor working with very good English actors, and in that sense it was a vacation. It was amazing the film was ever finished.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is the story behind landing the role in the film 'Tucker,' produced and directed by Francis Ford Coppola? What was your connection that got you the role?

**Landau:** Fred Roos, one of Francis Ford Coppola's producers on The Godfather films, was in my acting class. It was a showcase of my students scene work during the year, and he would come, and always ask me why my students were better than any others. I told him I brought talented people in, but he insisted it was something else. He said he really admired my work, and told me we'd work together someday. Well, The Godfather films came and went, and [affecting a mobster voice] 'I certainly could have played one of those guys.' I grew up in a place where everyone talked last that. [laughs]

Out of the blue came 'Tucker,' sent to me via messenger. Fred wrote 'check out the part of Abe and get back to me.' I read it and I loved it, so I called him back, and he told me to meet with Francis. The irony is that there were three lists the casting directors had given him. The 'A,' 'B' and 'C' lists. I wasn't on any of them. The casting directors told Francis, 'Martin Landau, are you out of your mind?'

**HollywoodChicago.com:** So what did you do to change that perception?

Fred Roos called me, and he asked me why I thought I'd be best to play the part. I don't brag that much, but I told him I thought I could act the part better than anybody in the country. I heard myself say it, and I knew it. Even when Francis told me he saw Abe as a little older. I said don't worry about it. When he also said he saw Abe as shorter, I said don't worry about it. So everyday in rehearsals I got a little older and a little shorter. [laughs] Of course, the casting directors took credit for it once I got the nomination.



Johnny Depp (left) with Martin Landau as Bela Lugosi in 'Ed Wood'  
Photo credit: Buena Vista Home Entertainment

**HollywoodChicago.com:** In your research, what did you find to be the biggest misconception of Bela Lugosi, and how did you strive to defeat that misconception in your portrayal of the legend?

**Landau:** I watched a lot of his films, and became an ardent fan of his work, even 'Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla' – that made Ed Wood's films look like 'Gone with the Wind.' [laughs] Within all of those awful films, he had a majesty. He came from Hungary, having done stage roles like 'Hamlet,' and thought of himself as a romantic actor. But he couldn't get rid of his accent, and even Boris Karloff had taken away his horror niche.

I basically wanted it to be an homage to him, and I even said to Tim Burton, 'after five minutes, if they're still saying Landau is doing a good job, we don't have a movie.' They had to believe it was Lugosi, and I had to convince them. It was complicated, I wasn't like him and I had to be him. I treated him like a character from Chekov. There was a lot of pathos in him. I worked hard to do that, and I think it was successful.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** I heard you're working with Tim Burton again?

**Landau:** Yes, I give voice to a character in his animated film 'Frankenweenie,' and I think it's the best film Tim ever made. After one of the early screenings, a critic from the Los Angeles Times told us that she thinks it will be nominated for Best Picture, not just Best Animated

Picture.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Finally, between working with directors Alfred Hitchcock, George Stevens, Francis Ford Coppola, Woody Allen and Tim Burton, which one gave you the best piece of performance advice and why?

**Landau:** None of them. Only because a good director creates a playground for actors, and lets them go. The trick for a good director is in casting properly, and creating the playroom, and then they'll get stuff that they don't expect, and can't even direct. All the audience wants to believe is that whatever is happening, it is happening for the first time. They want to see the people within the work exchanging dialogue and action in that moment. There are not a lot of actors that can do that, which is why I still relate to the methods taught by Actor's Studio and impart that upon my students.

*“Frankenweenie” was released on Blu-Ray DVD on January 8th. Featuring the voices of Martin Landau, Martin Short, Catherine O’Hara, Winona Ryder and Charlie Tahan. Screenplay by John August, story and characters by Tim Burton. Directed by Tim Burton. Rated “PG” The next Chicago edition of “The Hollywood Show” will be in September of 2013. [Click here](#) [17] for more information.*



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