

Interview: Roger Ross Williams Creates a 'Life, Animated'

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CHICAGO – The mystery of the particulars within an autistic mind is a theme in a new documentary, as a man named Owen Suskind is profiled through his personal breakthroughs using the animated films of the Walt Disney Studios. Director Roger Ross Williams introduces the unusual journey in the compelling “Life, Animated.”

Based on the book by main subject’s father, Ron Suskind, the story is about Owen’s struggle to understand the world around him, while his autistic condition prevents clear comprehension. Now a grown man, he must transition into a halfway house to live on his own. All the while, it has been the animated films of the Walt Disney studios that have been his guiding life force, from boyhood to manhood.



The Disney Life of Owen Suskind is Explored in 'Life, Animated'

Photo credit: The Orchard

Roger Ross Williams is a former broadcast journalist, and won an Oscar for his documentary short “Music by Prudence” (2010). He has continued to use filmmaking as activism, with long and short form docs include “God Loves Uganda,” “Gospel of Intolerance” and “Blackface” (a critique of a Dutch Christmas tradition which involves a character using blackface). HollywoodChicago.com spoke to director Williams via a phone interview regarding “Life, Animated.”

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the impetus for attaching yourself to this story...how were you approached to participate?

Roger Ross Williams: I’ve known Owen’s father Ron for years, and this was based on his best-selling book. We worked together as journalists at ABC-TV News, and I knew about the book since its inception. Before he finished it, he approached me and said he thought it would make a great documentary, and I agree with him, and moved forward from there.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your relationship with Owen? And what challenges did you have in following him around with a camera?

Williams: I both didn't know Owen beforehand and didn't have any connection to the autistic community. But Owen wasn't really a problem, because he participated in the writing of the book and wanted people to see him as he truly is. As far as the cameras, Owen lives in the moment and the cameras really didn't distract him. Once he got it, and understood what we were doing, he just ignored the cameras and went about his life.

The challenge and the goal was to get inside Owen's world, because I really wanted to see it through his point of view. To achieve that naturalism, I used a screen in front of a camera as I interviewed him. Owen had spent his life looking at a television screen, and he could look at me on screen, therefore looking into the camera, therefore looking at the audience. In that way, he could share the story directly with the audience, and it overcame the challenge of talking to someone with autism on camera.

HollywoodChicago.com: How did your opinion and perception of consciousness change after you met and worked with a mind like Owen's?

Williams: I realized that Owen is completely brilliant, because he embraced and memorized all these classic Disney films – these fables that chronicle the hero's journey, and have existed for thousands of years. Owen, in a sense, grew up on a diet of myth and fable, and has become an expert on their themes, which contain a moral guide that connects people.

It is our stories that make us human – so Owen has become an expert in what connects us and makes us human. That got to me, the power of these stories, and the lessons these tales give us to create the connection between us.



Owen Suskind in 'Life, Animated'

Photo credit: The Orchard

HollywoodChicago.com: How was working with the Disney folks in putting together their clips? Despite the nature of the subject, what were they most sensitive to in the use of their material?

Williams: They didn't restrict me in any way. I had full access to the material, and had a great relationship with Sean Bailey, the president of Disney productions. He really guided me through the licensing process of the footage. I made presentations to the various departments at the studio, and they were moved by Owen's story. The product they created actually changed a life, and that was significant to them. They didn't stand in my way at all.

HollywoodChicago.com: In your research and observation, what in your opinion does Disney do better than anyone else when it comes to animation and the way they weave their characters within those stories?

Williams: As I mentioned before, these are classic mythological tales, a hero's journey, and have been told for thousands of years. Disney has updated them, and made them accessible for us. It's about the power of their stories that transformed Owen, but really that power has transformed all who have experienced them.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the process of finding the right animators and animator producer for the life-of-Owen sequences. Did you have a specific look in mind or did the animators themselves bring you that look?

Williams: Well, toward the end of the film we see 'The Sidekicks Story,' and that is a story that Owen drew himself. We took that style, which is decidedly different from Disney animation, and used it as a basis. It's a 'two-dimensional' hand drawn animated form, so I went to this company in Paris called 'Mac Guff,' and they assembled an amazing group of young animators, and brought it to life.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your winning-the-Oscar moment like, and what do you think was within 'Music by Prudence' that brought it to the top?

Williams: It was presented to me by Zoe Saldana, and obviously it was an out of body experience to win an Academy Award. But I think what was special about 'Music by Prudence' was the classic story of the title subject's life path – from being an outcast in her society because she was disabled, to someone who picked herself from that despair and elevated herself within that community, and now that society accepting her as much as they formerly rejected her. People identified with that journey, overcoming an obstacle, but still triumphing.

HollywoodChicago.com: You explored the character of Dutch Christmas character Zwarte Piet in the film 'Blackface.' What is your opinion, in general, about older American films that depict blackface?



Roger Ross Williams and the Suskind Family
Photo credit: The Orchard

Williams: First, Zwarte Piet, or 'Black Pete,' is a relic from slavery. It is something that should have long been eliminated, and it's very insulting to black Dutch people. It's shocking to me that it still exists, but I think it's about the lack of knowledge and education regarding the roots of the character in the slave trade. It's unfortunate, and just like the early American blackface films, if it offends a segment of the population, it shouldn't be shown again.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are working on a virtual reality (VR) project called 'Traveling While Black,' which gives people an idea of what it is like to travel in America as a person of color. What will this experience explore that can provide some understanding to our racial relations in this country?

Williams: It's about empathy, what African Americans experience in traveling throughout America, and how it hasn't changed that much from the past. If it can be experienced in virtual reality, then perhaps some empathy can be gained.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you worked in the American media as a former broadcast reporter, what do you think the media owes to the current situation regarding our race issues?

Williams: I don't think we're getting the empathy, and identifying with the situations that many African Americans experience. That's the problem with how the story is being reported.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, which Disney character do you most want to be, and what attracts you to the personality or heroism of that character?

Williams: I wasn't that much of a Disney buff growing up, but I love the mystical and magical nature of Peter Pan, and I have connected with that character through Owen in making this film.

"Life, Animated" is currently in a limited run in theaters, including two theaters in Chicago. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Owen Suskind. Written by Ron Suskind. Directed by Roger Ross Williams. Rated "PG"



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