

Interview: Director Travis Knight Strums ‘Kubo and the Two Strings’

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CHICAGO – One of the great benefits of the new Golden Age of Animation has been the emergence of other studios...like Laika Entertainment, which has released “Coraline,” “ParaNorman” and “The Boxtrolls,” all nominated for Oscars. Travis Knight directs their latest stop-motion style animated film, “Kubo and the Two Strings.”

“Kubo” is rooted in Japanese samurai myth, but is a wholly new story. A baby loses an eye in a great battle, but his mother manages to save him. In exile, the two live near the ocean, and the baby grows to the boy Kubo, who supports his mother by going into the village with a magical string instrument. With it, he is able to conjure stories that use the style and look of paper folding origami. His magic is drawing attention, from both good and evil sorcery. Kubo ends up in a journey with a Monkey (voiced by Charlize Theron) and Beetle (Matthew McConaughey), to find his past and seal his fate.



Beetle, Kubo and Monkey Take a Journey in ‘Kubo and the Two Strings’

Photo credit: Focus Features

The director of the film, Travis Knight, is also the CEO and President of Laika Entertainment, but moved through the ranks by starting as an animator with Will Vinton Studios, the producers of TV’s “The PJs.” Travis’s father, Phil Knight (the founder of Nike), diversified by buying the Vinton Studios and co-founding Laika Entertainment (he remains as Chairman). “Kubo” is Laika’s fourth film, and it’s headed for the same

Oscar nomination territory as “Coraline,” “ParaNorman” and “The Boxtrolls,” with a glorious narrative and sumptuous style that no doubt will be a front runner for Best Animated Film.

With his pedigree, Travis Knight has had an adventurous life, dappling in rap music (as Chilly Tee), and eventually finding his niche as an animator. HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Knight, a week before the August 19th release of “Kubo and the Two Strings.”

HollywoodChicago.com: One of the most extraordinary elements of the film is that its an original story, that seems like it’s been around for a thousand years. In the development of that story, what care was taken to honor ancient legends?

Travis Knight: We definitely wanted it to feel like it was a folk tale. When I was a kid I was a huge fan of fantasy epics – like the ones authored by J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, L. Frank Baum and Lewis Carroll. My mother passed along the gifts of those books to me. Those stories seemed like they had been in existence for thousands of years.

When I was about eight years old, my Dad took me on one of his business trips to Japan. I was transported to an entirely different world. This was the Japan of the early 1980s, and I’d never seen anything like it. It was all a revelation to me – the art, the architecture, the food and the atmosphere. It was just a mind blowing experience, I came back with books of art and Manga comic books. Even though I couldn’t read the language, it was the clarity of art which drove the storytelling, so I could understand it.

HollywoodChicago.com: And how did that past experience inform ‘Kubo’?

Knight: It was the convergence of all those things, plus what my Mom and Dad gave me in my background. That’s appropriate, because fundamentally it is a movie about family. The great Asian filmmaker Zhang Yimou once said, ‘every boy either wants a train set or to make a martial arts movie.’ I guess this is my martial arts film. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: I want to tackle the elephant in the room. Why would a movie set in Japan have Anglo voices for the main characters?

Knight: It’s an important question, and an important issue, and I can appreciate that the casting process can be opaque. But there are well considered reasons behind every decision we make. It’s important to note that acting in live action films and animation are two different things. What an actor looks like in a live action film is a defining quality, but that is not the case in animation.

In performance, there is what you see and what you hear. Obviously in live action those two things are bound together, in animation those two things are totally separate. Ultimately, what matters most for us is the ability of the actor to capture the entire range of performance and emotions that we need for the role, independent of their genetic code.

HollywoodChicago.com: But isn’t it true to sell an animated film these days, you need a celebrity voice in the top roles?

Knight: Well, it doesn’t hurt, particularly for a small, independent animation house like we are. That’s how you get people aware of your movie. There are many dimensions in which we evaluate a role – ethnicity is one of them, but it’s not the only dimension. The interesting thing about the question of casting is that it’s a subset of a larger conversation regarding diversity within the whole industry. It’s hugely important, but I also think it’s been reduced to a hashtag, within a very narrow and binary way.

The way I see diversity in what we do, are in seen and unseen characteristics. What we see is obviously a physical presence, with genetics and ethnicity on display. But the unseen includes a worldview, faith or personal nationality. All those things combined make us who we are, and make us diverse. On the surface, yes, the industry as a whole has a diversity problem. But underlying that is a lack of diversity when it comes to thought, perspective and imagination.

HollywoodChicago.com: How you define that as an industry ‘problem’?

Knight: We see that in the type of film being made. It’s an era of franchises, reboots, brands, sequels and prequel, like an echo chamber. Those are great for the bottom line, but it does not showcase the diversity of the human experience. The medium is always not welcome to different genres or points of view.

What we do are diverse stories with diverse characters, brought to life by diverse artists. And the philosophy of that is in every one of our animated films...what you are is not necessarily who you are. We are all so much more than the circumstances of our birth. People can disagree with any number of choices we make, including casting. But we approach each of our projects with utter sincerity, and what we believe is in the best interest of the film itself, to bring it to life in what we feel is the best way.

HollywoodChicago.com: As an animation fan, I was reminded of the work of 1950s animator George Pal and his Puppertoons. When the design team sat down to plan the look and feel of the film, what animation or artistic influences were tossed about the table, and which one do you think influenced the film the most?

Knight: One of the key parts of our process is using 3D printing and rapid prototyping technology to bring these images to life. We started this with ‘Coraline,’ and one of the key influences in shaping the look of that film was George Pal. Pal tried to capture physically what he conceived graphically, carving his characters out of clay or wood. They were all hand made and crude, but in that crudeness there was a beauty. When we started making ‘Coraline,’ we used the same principle, but added the computer technology into the mix. We would sculpt the characters on a computer screen, then print them out in a 3D model.



The Japanese Samurai Tradition Lives in ‘Kubo and the Two Strings’

Photo credit: Focus Features

HollywoodChicago.com: What other influences steered the look of ‘Kubo’?

Knight: On this specific film, the key influences come from Japanese forms of art – origami, ink wash paintings and doll making. The greatest influence on the look was ‘ukiyo-e,’ or the Japanese woodblock print art tradition. In creating those atmospheres, we had to simplify reality. The idea was to capture the spare poetry of Japanese art. I think it largely worked.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you have worked in the animation business what has been the most profound change beyond the computer? What techniques or approaches have revolutionized the form away from the keyboard?

Knight: We do stop-motion photography, which hasn’t fundamentally changed since filmmaker George Méliés sent a rocket to the moon in 1902, but it is the convergence of art and craft and science and technology which has evolved the form. With each film, new materials are utilized, and because we keep our ‘band together,’ for each new film we can do more by finding new solutions. It’s about building new worlds and solving problems.

The computer is still the most revolutionary tool in regards to animation, but what we’ve also seen in the last 15 years is an added level of narrative sophistication that have been brought to the best animated films. We can now tell all kinds of stories, in all kinds of genre, and the animation becomes a visual representation. That’s what is unusual historically, and that’s what Laika strives to do.

HollywoodChicago.com: How have the business techniques of your father influenced the way you approach the business of creating animated films. Where are the most challenging funding issues in building a budget for animation?

Knight: Because of the type of films we do, we have great freedom, but we are also burdened in a way. We have to make sure we achieve a threshold of success – but it doesn’t necessarily have to be a really high box office – we want to stay lean and responsible. We use more of a live action model for budgeting, rather than a high dollar animated film model.

Our last three films, budget wise, does not add up to a typical computer generated film. We work smarter and more efficiently, and that allows us to tell different kind of stories. Of course we want to reach the most people we can, but we also want to tell our story without having to worry about a really high threshold of box office return.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since your father sits on the board of Laika, and is a co-founder, how does his business acumen contribute to the company?

Knight: My old man has been a business leader for a couple generations. The great thing about that is he’s a wealth of knowledge. When something comes up that I don’t know how to deal with, I’ll give him a call. Inevitably, he’ll say, ‘that reminds me of something that happened in 1974.’ [laughs] I’ve been close to my Dad my entire life, but now when he can meaningfully weigh in regarding ways to help the business, it’s brought us closer.

HollywoodChicago.com: Your grandfather was a newspaperman, and your father grew up with that atmosphere in his own life. What is the your opinion – and your family’s – regarding the state of newspaper publishing, and what in your opinion do you think our culture will lose with the demise of the daily paper?



Director Travis Knight in Chicago

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Knight: I think it's tragic, and it breaks my heart. Reading the newspaper had been a ritual since I've been a kid. That started with my father, he'd bring in the papers daily, and I'd take certain sections that I was interested in, and gradually that became the whole paper. I still get the daily papers today.

It's not just a vestige of another era, we also lose the discipline of news bureaus and uncovering important issues. There is not that same degree of discipline in the online world. Democracy dies in darkness – unless we shine a light on the world as it is, horrible things can happen. I hope we find a way to keep newspapers hanging on...just like we've done with stop-motion animation.

HollywoodChicago.com: Beyond the films that you have personally worked on, what is your dream animated film double feature, and why do you think those films work together as a indicator of your taste and history?

Knight: I would pick an older one, the first animated feature to make an impact on me was the first major animated feature...Walt Disney's 'Snow White.' There was something so beautiful in what they were able to capture, that elusive thing animators try to chase, that artful balance of darkness and light, intensity and warmth. Walt understood that spending time in the shadows makes the light that much brighter.

The second one is more recent, Brad Bird's 'The Iron Giant.' I was moved to tears as a grown man, and even my son, who was a boy at the time, and he was so moved by it that I was moved by watching him. It gets to a core part of what it means to be human. Even though Brad Bird has done some amazing films, nothing tops 'The Iron Giant.'

"Kubo and the Two Strings" opens everywhere in 3D, IMAX 3D and regular screenings on August 19th. See local listings for 3D/IMAX theaters and show times. Featuring the voices of Charlize Theron, Matthew McConaughey, George Takei, Rooney Mara, Ralph Fiennes, Art Parkinson and Brenda Vaccaro. Screenplay by Marc Haimes and Chris Butler. Directed by Travis Knight. Rated "PG"



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