

Interview: Directors Mike Mitchell & Walt Dohrn of ‘Trolls’

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CHICAGO – The delightful new animated film “Trolls” takes the familiar doll to a new level of fun and heart. Behind this invention is the director team of Mike Mitchell and Walt Dohrn, who have worked together in various animation roles over the years before teaming up in their first collaboration for Dreamworks Studio.

“Trolls” has familiar voice talent – Anna Kendrick, Justin Timberlake, Zooey Deschanel, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Christine Baranski and Russell Brand among them, and adds a splash of colorful psychedelia and musical joy. Mitchell and Dohrn has also worked on familiar animated films like “Shrek Forever After,” “Mr. Peabody & Sherman,” “Alvin & the Chipmunks: Chipwrecked” and “Madagascar.”



The Animated Cast of ‘Trolls,’ Directed by Mike Mitchell & Walt Dohrn

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

Mike Mitchell and Walt Dohrn – in his directorial debut – sat down with HollywoodChicago.com to talk the craft, energy and inspiration it took to create their wonderfully entertaining new film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Strategically, putting together an animated film is like planning battle. What are the top three things the generals have to know before one part of the plan is executed?

Walt Dohrn: The number one thing is creating this world – what the world is going to look like, feel like and what technology will we need to use to get there.

Mike Mitchell: Yes, design. And then, what is the film about? For this particular film, the key word was 'happiness.' But it just couldn't be happiness plainly, we had to dig deeper as to what the concept involved. We started watching TED Talks about happiness, we asked questions to ourselves about happiness – how do you lose happiness? How do you get it?

The third thing is the cast, hiring the most amazing people you can get, and doing whatever it takes to get them. We needed the triple threat – great actors, great comic timing and great singing. With Justin Timberlake, it was about his voice number one, he just has a good voice for animation.

Dohrn: And of course, he portrays the one troll that doesn't sing or dance. [laughs] The tension for the audience was the wait for when he would finally do what he does. It pulls the audience in.

Mitchell: And when we showed him the songs, he wanted to be the music producer. Walt asked for his resume. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Trolls' are an iconic toy, invented in Denmark, and having runs in popularity at various times through the generations. How did you want to make sure you honored that legacy when constructing the film?

Mitchell: The hair was number one, so early on we knew the hair would be a super power. The could change the color, the shape, they could stretch it out and use it like a rope.

Dohrn: It was so complex that the technical team had to build a new program. It was about rendering and manipulating that weird hair. We also wanted to break the mold of what what we thought the princess was about...we wanted to keep her troll 'look' – the stumpy legs, an ugly/cute look, it was all inspired from the doll.

Mitchell: Plus plenty of naked butts. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Walt, this is your first time as a director on a major motion picture. What was your attitude regarding asserting yourself whenever you observed something going awry. Was it difficult because it was your first time?

Dohrn: Yeah, you're right, it was a bit difficult. Mike brought me on as co-director, and eventually we ended up sharing a brain. It was overwhelming initially when I was working with departments I hadn't had contact with before. I had to sit in front of all these people, and act like I knew what I was doing. [laughs] I faked my way through it pretty well. We'd all been together at Dreamworks for over ten years, so we all had the same goals.

Mitchell: It was long past due for Walt to get a director's assignment, and I'm lucky I got to work with him.

HollywoodChicago.com: Both of you have done work as cartoon voice actors. How does that help you direct the first time or not sure actors when they first step up to the mike?

Mitchell: Walt is a tremendous actor, and what we do that is different from other directors of animation during the voiceover process. We don't stay behind the 'glass.'

Dohrn: Where they lean in and say over the intercom, 'can you do that again'?

Mitchell: Walt and I barge into the voiceover room with the actor, and Walt portrays the character opposite to who the artist is portraying. He did voice the 'Cloud Guy,' and he was in the room with Justin, so we did get some energy and improvisation.

Dohrn: And since we've done that type of work, we know how isolating it can be, and we wanted to make the actors more comfortable.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who do you both admire as far as those first generation of cartoon voice artists?

Dohrn: I loved the Disney films, and Sterling Holloway was one of their chief talents. He never had to put on a voice, and that's what Mike and I encourage. I love the voices that have a unique texture, but it's their real voice.

Mitchell: Although counter to that, I have to mention Zooey Deschanel as Bridget. Nobody knows it's her, and she helped us create the voice. When she found it, she told us it was a combination of Cindy Brady mixed with old breathy Marilyn Monroe, hanging out at a heavy metal parking lot before the concert. Isn't that strange?

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, you began your director life in live action features. What was the specific circumstance that got you that first film gig?

Mitchell: After debuting with 'Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo,' I'm surprised they allowed me anywhere near children's animation afterward. [laughs] I got attention for a short film called 'Herd,' and it got some festival buzz. Adam Sandler then hired me for 'Deuce.'

Dohrn: We actually talked about Adam Sandler during the creation of 'Trolls,' because he does know how to time jokes.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Deuce' was a huge and unexpected hit. Since you were a first time director, what was your strategy in making sure that this film worked, and why do you think it appealed to audiences so much?

Mitchell: I just think it's funny that someone has to be a man whore that is not so attractive, that alone is a funny concept. It was a nice

comedy engine, and a silly, colorful world. It was a live action animation in a way, the performances and jokes were really broad.



Walt Dohrn, Justin Timberlake, Anna Kendrick and Mike Mitchell Discuss Voiceovers in "Trolls"

Photo credit: 20th Century Fox

HollywoodChicago.com: Walt, in the animation hierarchy, you were 'Head of Story' for 'Mr. Peabody & Sherman' and 'Shrek Forever After.' What are the duties of that title, especially in congress with the overall director?

Dohrn: The Head of Story is defined differently for each film. But I found that the role for me was to support the director's vision, and to be a conduit to the story team – and managing that team to realize the vision.

Mitchell: The reason that Walt is such a great director, is because when he was Head of Story he was an integral connection between the design and the writing teams. The storyboard artists were creating, the writers were writing, and Walt was the connection between those two entities.

Dohrn: I was trying to foster a great working relationship between those two departments, because classically in animation the two don't get along.

Mitchell: On 'Trolls' they got along famously. When you have a good union between the two, you get a good film.

HollywoodChicago.com: Mike, you directed James Gandolfini during the height of Soprano-mania. What was his strategy for taking a break from Tony when you were filming 'Surviving Christmas'?

Mitchell: It was in Chicago, by the way. James was one of the warmest guys in the world. It was freezing cold that winter, and both the actors and the equipment froze. But James had his fans, despite the cold, and he would always go over there and sign everything for them. He was the sweetest and one of the most talented dudes I ever worked with.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally for both of you, which cartoon film or short that you saw as a kid keeps coming back to you as you approach creating animated films as adults, and what keeps inspiring you about this particular piece of animation?

Mitchell: We both have the same answer, and we talk about this short a lot. It was Disney's 'The Three Caballeros.'

Dohrn: It's amazing, beautiful, educational and it has great music. I've always loved that film, and we were looking for a way to apply it to our own work, and 'Trolls' was it – psychedelic, musical and kinetic insanity.

Mitchell: It's a colorful, strange, weird and funny film. And Donald Duck is in it!

"Trolls" opens everywhere on November 4th, in 3D and regular screenings. See local listings for theaters and show times of 3D screenings. Featuring the voices of Anna Kendrick, Justin Timberlake, Zooey Deschanel, Christopher Mintz-Plasse, Christine Baranski, Russell Brand, Gwen Stefani, John Cleese, James Corden and Jeffrey Tambor. Screenplay by Jonathan Aibel and Glenn Berger, from a story by Erica Rivinoja. Directed by Mike Mitchell and Walt Dohrn. Rated "PG"

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