

Interview: The Other World of Animation With 'Coraline' Director Henry Selick

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- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Coraline](#) [3]
- [Dakota Fanning](#) [4]
- [Dawn French](#) [5]
- [Henry Selick](#) [6]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [7]
- [Ian McShane](#) [8]
- [Interview](#) [9]
- [James and the Giant Peach](#) [10]
- [Jennifer Saunders](#) [11]
- [John Hodgman](#) [12]
- [Teri Hatcher](#) [13]
- [The Nightmare Before Christmas](#) [14]

CHICAGO – The limitations of the medium of animation are defined by the people who make it. As [Henry Selick](#) [6], the director of the upcoming and ground-breaking "[Coraline](#) [3]" says, "Animation can be so much more than it is usually allowed to be." Selick recently sat down with HollywoodChicago.com to discuss his new movie, the world of 3D film, and the legacy of "[The Nightmare Before Christmas](#) [14]".

"Coraline," opening this Friday, February 6th, 2009. is a 3D, stop-motion, fantasy film based on a book by [Neil Gaiman](#) [15]. [Dakota Fanning](#) [4], [Teri Hatcher](#) [13], [John Hodgman](#) [12], [Ian McShane](#) [8], [Jennifer Saunders](#) [11], and [Dawn French](#) [5] provide the voices for this fascinating story about a girl who discovers a secret door to the "Other World".



Henry Selick, Director/Writer of the new stop-motion animated 3-D adventure Coraline, from LAIKA Entertainment for release by Focus Features.

Photo credit: LAIKA Entertainment/Focus Features

Like his work on "The Nightmare Before Christmas," "James and the Giant Peach," and "Monkeybone," "Coraline" is not your standard stop-motion animation. It's not for everyone with Selick himself noting that "We sort of figured 8 and up. It says PG, which means that the parents are supposed to know what works for their kids."





Other Father (voiced by John Hodgman) engineers an assist at his piano in the stop-motion animated 3-D adventure *Coraline*, from LAIKA Entertainment for release by Focus Features.
Photo credit: LAIKA Entertainment/Focus Features

But Selick is quick to point out that parents know what their kids can handle and notes that TV animation is far more adventurous than what we usually see in film. "And I am not just talking about stuff like *Robot Chicken* or *South Park*. The current version of *Batman* is dark—it is great and beautifully art-directed and that is what my 10-year-old loves the most. I think it is a strange thing, with movies in particular, that people want to pretend that it is 20 years ago and there is no Internet or adventurous animation on television—that is where we are being prevented from reaching kids."

And it's not just kids being held back by accepted limitations on cinematic animation. But Selick sees a changing tide in his medium.

"There has been a constant fear that it is different when I think that the world is screaming for something different as long as it is good and well-done and original. I haven't seen the film *Waltz with Bashir* yet but from what I have read and heard about it, regardless of how successful it is, I am just happy that someone in animation got the funding to take on that subject. *Persepolis*, *The Triplets of Belleville* - animation can be so much more than it is usually allowed to be. Obviously, if you are going to be more adventurous, you need to spend less money and we have - we can do a film like this for 1/3rd of the cost of a big CGI film."

Selick's love for "unusual and scary animation" started years ago with films like *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and *Fantasia*. As he says, "I think every kid like a good scare. It was magic. It was terrifying."

The early inspiration led Selick to the world of stop-motion animation when he was in college. He had been in the arts, doing a lot of drawing, painting, and sculpture, trying to combine different art forms. He saw a short film that combined a couple of different styles of animation and he was hooked. Even in his sculpture days, he was doing figures that could be constantly re-posed.



Coraline (voiced by Dakota Fanning) is eager to enter the doorway to another world in the stop-motion animated 3-D adventure *Coraline*, from LAIKA Entertainment for release by Focus Features.

Photo credit: LAIKA Entertainment/Focus Features

Selick went on to do 2-D work at Disney but it was challenging because he hadn't grown up on Disney animation like his colleagues and had other interests.

"I got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts while I was at Disney and I did a film where I did more stop-motion than I ever had - large figures sitting by a pool having discussions about the story. Finally, after leaving Disney, I moved to the Bay Area and I really started getting into stop-motion animation. I did a bunch of work for MTV doing station ID's during the late 1980s. That is where I found myself - I had low budgets but freedom as long as I put the logo on at the end. I was just finding myself engaged in stop-motion pretty much all of the time - I did some commercials as well - and then I reconnected with Tim Burton years after knowing him at Disney and then we did "The Nightmare Before Christmas"."



Wybie (voiced by Robert Bailey Jr.) goes exploring with his new neighbor Coraline Jones (voiced by Dakota Fanning) in the stop-motion animated 3-D adventure *Coraline*, from LAIKA Entertainment for release by Focus Features.

Photo credit: LAIKA Entertainment/Focus Features

Of course, "The Nightmare Before Christmas" has become a beloved film for an entire generation. Even Selick is unsure why the film has had such staying power. "There is no doubt that Tim Burton's original idea, inspired by *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, is wonderful—a collision of holidays and a well-intentioned but semi-insane Jack Skellington who thinks he is doing to world a great favor. Danny Elfman's songs are great."

"Even though that film is very different from "Coraline," I remember going through very similar things with that one. Disney was afraid of that movie and I still don't know why. Obviously, they aren't now but back then, they wouldn't put the Disney name on it—it was a Touchstone film—and they didn't spend a lot promoting it and were surprised that it did as well as it did. It took many years before it became a Disney film and now it is 'the beloved classic' and it still makes me smile that they didn't get it right away."

After "The Nightmare Before Christmas," Henry Selick made "James and the Giant Peach," which he revealed is getting a Blu-Ray release soon. As he says, "They aren't going to pull out all the stops in the same way [as "The Nightmare Before Christmas"], but it is in the works."

Which brought Selick to "Coraline". Selick worked with Neil Gaiman, who wrote the highly acclaimed book, but Gaiman was not a constant collaborator - "I made a deal with Neil for him to do regular check-ins but I wanted to do a lot of work first. With the artwork and character designs, I wanted to get Coraline to a very good place before showing him and not have him look at a lot of preliminaries. That is how it has been throughout—same with the storyboards and the story. We did a lot of work and Neil has almost always had a positive response with maybe two or three notes that were always right and always doable. You couldn't ask for a better association between an author and a filmmaker."

And "Coraline" presented a new challenge design-wise for Henry Selick. "Coraline was very hard to design. I worked with a lot of artists and there were a lot of very cartoony versions of Coraline. It took months and months and many different sculptures and trying to work out how she would be expressing things with her face took a very long time as well."

Finally, Henry Selick hinted that "Coraline" may not be the end for him and Neil Gaiman, saying, "I am also looking to collaborating with Neil again and we have talked about a couple of projects. The problem is that everything that he has done is already set up someplace because he has become so successful, but I would say there is a very good chance we will collaborate again."

'Coraline' features voice work by Dakota Fanning, Dawn French, Ian McShane, Jennifer Saunders, John Hodgman, and Teri Hatcher. 'Coraline,' was written and directed by Henry Selick, opens on February 6th, 2009.



[16]

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- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/coraline>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/dakota-fanning>
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