

Interview: Riding the Animated Wave 'Up' With Pixar Director Pete Docter

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- [3D](#) [2]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [3]
- [Ed Asner](#) [4]
- [Finding Nemo](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Interview](#) [7]
- [Monsters Inc 2](#) [8]
- [Monsters Inc.](#) [9]
- [Pete Docter](#) [10]
- [Pixar](#) [11]
- [Ratatouille](#) [12]
- [Up](#) [13]
- [WALL-E](#) [14]

CHICAGO – Pixar's "[Up](#) [13]" recently became the first animated 3D film to open the Cannes Film Festival and the reviews were just as rapturous as those who had been tracking the latest Pixar offering expected them to be. Before he went to France, director Pete Docter sat down for an exclusive interview with HollywoodChicago.com.

Docter has been a part of the Pixar team since the beginning and remains one of the most prominent voices in the company along with John Lasseter ("Toy Story"), Brad Bird ("Ratatouille," "The Incredibles") and Andrew Stanton ("Finding Nemo," "[WALL-E](#) [14]"). Docter made a splash when he directed "Monsters Inc." and will make waves with "Up".

For someone who has made such vibrant, energetic, nearly-glowing films, Docter is a surprisingly humble and quiet man. It's not an accident that he's made a film about a man escaping the dangerous, depressing world on the ground by tying helium balloons to his house and fleeing for the jungle.



"UP" (L-R) Russell and Carl Fredricksen

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"I'm just not an extroverted person," says Docter. "I think a lot of us became animators because talking to people is kind of scary....especially girls. So it's easier to draw. It's easier to just communicate through drawing. It's a way to communicate with people. It was really hard becoming a director on Monsters, Inc because up until then I had a chance to withdraw to my office and animate. As a director, you're thrust out and you're talking to people all day. And at the end of the day, I just want to go hide under the bed or something and talk to nobody. This film was kind of born out of that."





Pete Docter

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"Up" features more human characters than most recent Pixar animation but the characters are highly stylized and more caricatured than any previous Pixar work. This was a challenge for Docter and his team. He told me, "We've always pushed caricature but in this one Carl is like three heads tall, which is quite stylized. Even his house - they seem like very realistic textures, but they're basically like a dry-brush. Even the leaves in the jungle, it looks like someone went through and very theatrically painted. It was finding the balance between theatre and believability. We designed Carl's house first. We built a miniature of the house interior and built all these little models and painted them. It really helped inform how we would build them in the computer. Then when you get to the wilderness, you can't have that looking like a craft project. It has to be believable. You have to feel the wind in your face and smell the jungle. It was finding the balance between those two extremes."

"Up" was partially born out of a surprising influence - Thomas McCarthy's "The Station Agent," another film about a man trying to escape the world and come out of his shell. Docter also cites "Casablanca," "Lady and the Tramp," and "101 Dalmatians" as influences. "Movies that had a beautiful simplicity to them and a focus on character."

"Up" is the first Pixar film in 3D but the story had been developed and worked on for awhile before the new technology entered into it. An entirely different group was set up to study previous 3D films for their "pitfalls and successes".



"UP" (L-R) Russell and Carl Fredricksen

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"We tried to learn from all the films that had come before us and what makes it work. The things that were important to me as a director was not distract people with 3D. You don't want to pop them out of the movie by going "ooga-booga". We basically said, "Okay, the screen is like

a window and you can see into it but let's not bring too many things out." That adds a certain sense of depth and I think, for a lot of people, they feel more transported into that world. Hopefully, it's not distracting to the point of popping you out of the film and it's a more immersive experience."

The immediate question to this animation aficionado is if the entire form has been forever altered. Will we see 2D animated films any more?

"I don't know," says Docter. "It kind of depends on what the audience wants to see. If people really embrace it and feel it's the way to go, then we'll do them all that way. This one, you can see either way, which I think is nice. Some people find it really engaging and interesting but other people are kind of put off by the glasses and whatever. I don't think you're losing anything by seeing it in 2D, it's just a different way to see it."

"WALL-E" and "Ratatouille" were accused by some critics as being more for the parents than for their children. I think kids will fall in love with the sense of adventure and the young protagonist in "Up". It's more traditional fun than most recent Pixar. But it's not a conscious goal. The creative voices at Pixar makes the movies they want to make.



Ed Asner and Pete Docter
Photo credit: Deborah Coleman

"It's tricky," says Docter. "We're always directing the films at an audience. You want to make sure it communicates to people and has something to say. But, at the same time, it's a real director-driven studio, so the films are kind of like where we are as people that end up in the movies. So, it was just kind of the expression of Bob and myself as we developed this one as it has a balance of comedy, action, adventure, and that emotion that hangs it together and supports the other."

What separates Pixar? Docter admits to keeping an eye on other animation and expresses admiration for Henry Selick's "Coraline," but almost shies away from the suggestion that there's something special going on at Pixar. He does admit that the system at Pixar is a little unique.

"We have a system where people are selfless about giving up their own time, their own energy, their own comments," says Docter. "Brad [Bird] will be off in the middle of directing something and we'll drag him in to watch this movie and he'll spew out all these great ideas that I get to use and then I'll do the same with whoever comes along next. Between that and the philosophy of "If you don't make mistakes, you're not taking enough risk." We're sort of expected to fail along the way. It's expected that we're going to falter and pull the emergency cord and get everybody on board to make this good."

Docter ends by refusing to confirm or deny the rumors about a planned "Monsters Inc. 2" but expresses excitement for what's to come from Pixar.

"Now more than ever there are more varied and diverse films in the pipeline than we've ever had. It seems like there's just a great variety and diversity of things that you're going to see stretching out into the future."

Up opens on May 29th, 2009.



[15]

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