

The Very Independent Hybrid Docu-Drama

and the making of *What The #\$*! Do We Know!?*

by Kate McCallum

The movie, *What The #\$*! Do We Know!?* takes us into a whole new way of storytelling by incorporating standard documentary-style, a narrative fictional plot line and animated computer graphics—all woven together to illustrate the concepts and the “story” the filmmakers were passionate about telling.

In this highly entertaining exposé on the nature of quantum mechanics, brain science and its effect on us, actress Marlee Matlin plays Amanda, a divorced photographer who becomes our dramatic “tour guide.” Depressed, medicated and “stuck,” Amanda transforms when she realizes that her thoughts and emotions create her reality.

William Arntz is the producer, director, screenwriter and president of the film’s production company, Captured Light Industries. Arntz graduated summa cum laude in 1972 from Penn State University with a degree in engineering science. He then accepted employment as a research physicist with Pratt & Whitney Aircraft where he worked on developing the optics simulator for high-energy gas dynamic laser weapons (a.k.a. Star Wars). After two years, Arntz “retired” and drove around the country. Eventually he ended up in Boston where he reunited with

a longtime friend enrolled in the master’s degree film program at Boston University. Together they created *Beat The Deva*, a one-hour animated film noir which won a Cine Eagle, the Kenyon Film Festival and received distribution on the art house circuit.

Arntz moved to California to pursue a film career but found the process of moving up through the ranks daunting. He then moved to San Francisco, “retired” again and became a Buddhist. By the late 80s, his Buddhist teacher at Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment assigned him a task to create a software product and company, which became a huge success. Lacking the sense to realize what he was up against, he took \$100,000 in savings and no business experience, sat down and in five months wrote AutoSys, a distributed job scheduler which went on to be one of the most widely used pieces of system management software ever written.

In 1995 Arntz sold his company and took a year off. He then devised a second successful software company, which he sold nine months after creating it. After “retiring” for the third time, he became interested in uniting his four great interests: leading-edge science, spiritual inquiry, filmmaking and computers. After realizing that with the

success of his two software companies he had bypassed the onerous task of rising through the ranks, he embarked upon the creation of *What The #\$*! Do We Know!?*

scr(i)pt: *I attended a Los Angeles screening of your film last night. What a great idea! From where did this idea come, and when?*

WILLIAM ARNTZ: I sometimes think I’ve been working on this film for 25 years. I have done hardly anything in film—at least nothing professional before this—but I was always interested in making movies. My friends and I made 8mm movies for fun. Eventually, my friend John Katchmer went to film school; and he and I made a 60-minute 16mm film called *Beat The Deva*, a combination of documentary and dramatic story incorporating animation. It was about the Russian composer, Alexander Scriabin, who created a work of art to change the consciousness of the planet.

I loved making movies; but when it came time to move to L.A. and do the whole Hollywood thing, I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. I couldn’t walk around on my knees for four years, kissing everyone’s butt, never being able to do what I really wanted. That’s the way Hollywood works, right?



ABOVE: The animated rock band singing Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" in William Arntz's (BELOW) *What The #\$*! Do We Know!?* PHOTOS: © 2004 Lord of the Wind Films, LLC - All rights reserved.

scr(i)pt: *No comment.*

WA: Exactly. You have studios, corporations, and that's just the way it is. I dropped that dream, became a hippie, moved to San Francisco and started meditating. Meanwhile, I'd always been interested in science. I got interested in metaphysics, meditating and spiritual stuff. When the *Tao of Physics* by Fritjof Capra came out, I thought, wow this is cool stuff! I started writing software, built a company, sold it and made a decent pile of money. Then, I did it again and made more money. At that point I started realizing that if I really wanted to make movies, I now had made enough money that I could, within reason, make what I wanted.

I started writing stories I was really interested in telling and ended up throwing all the scripts away because I was trying to make a basic movie and inject spirituality into it. That wasn't working. I always seemed to be trying to shoehorn the "filmmaker's message"



into the midst of a movie—like trying to put vitamins into a McDonald's® hamburger. I said, "Oh well, screw that." Meanwhile, I was studying with a teacher whose ideas contained many of the concepts in the movie. One day the teacher was talking about all these different sciences; and he made an offhand comment, like "Someone should write a book about all of this stuff." I was sort of in my wise-ass self and said, "Yeah, write a book—someone should make a movie." It was one of those things you say jokingly, but suddenly it's like, oh yes. The idea rattled around inside my brain for about a month. I was thinking it was just going to be a documentary about quantum physics, brain neurology, molecular biology and all that. I'm thinking of the project as a standard documentary that on a really good day PBS might show; or on a really, really good day maybe the Discovery Channel. I started thinking about how to do a documentary. Maybe I'll start doing something offbeat.

You know, quantum world ideas, like if people were particles and you could be in two places at once, and you could basically go through walls, and all this other cool stuff, right?

scr(i)pt: *I'm with you.*

WA: I started writing all these little skits with a *Saturday Night Live*-type sense of humor. I wanted them to be funny because well, you can only take so much quantum physics, no matter how interesting it is. You gotta laugh. I created fictitious scientists; one was called Dr. Quantum, and there was Dr. Neuro. I wrote a script with what these people would say, thinking we'd hire actors to play them. Then, I started thinking, why not have some interviews with real scientists? About that time I realized that I had gotten out of my league a bit, so I brought in Mark Vicente, whom I had met at the Ramtha's School. He's into consciousness and what-not, had been a director of photography on a bunch of independent movies. He and I started working and realizing all these little skits should connect together with a throughline. About that time I got the bright idea, "Let's make this a theatrical movie." I got the sense that there was a huge audience out there hungry for this information.

scr(i)pt: *Agreed.*

WA: With a theatrical release, the film is much more in the culture. It's out in everyone's face—there's something magical about that experience. The content is interesting. We'll make it funny, intriguing—and we'll have animation in it. I'd always visualized using a lot of animation and F/X to help illustrate ideas and make it more fun—like the scene in the movie with the multiple basketballs.

scr(i)pt: *Loved it.*

WA: Mark realized that we needed help; and so he contacted a producer, Betsy Chasse, with whom he had worked before. She often says, "There wasn't a spiritual bone in my body, or so I thought." In fact, about a year and a half earlier, she had given up making movies. Mark called her up out of the blue and said, "There's a script I want you to read." She's like, "I don't do movies anymore." Mark tells her to read it anyway. Eventually she reads it, and she says, "Oh my God, this movie needs to be made." She came onboard, originally as just a technical producer.

scr(i)pt: *Line Producer?*

WA: Yes. Mark and I were the creative ones—or so we thought. Betsy wasn't there more than about two weeks when she said, "You know, you guys keep saying you want to do a theatrical picture, but let me tell you—this sucks. No one's going to see this in the theater. Are you kidding?" Back then the script had a host walking around doing a documentary host thing, explaining things and then illustrating. She said, "You can't have a host. Shoot the host in the head." She had to keep telling me that for about a month before I finally agreed, but she was right. Betsy got famous for doing what we call the "Betsy blow-up." She would just say, "This isn't going to work." By then we had written in a bunch of interviews with some of the authors whom we had read in our resource books.

scr(i)pt: *So, you had started interviewing some of your specialists at this time?*

WA: Not yet. I had sort of written in things that I thought they might say.

scr(i)pt: *Got it.*

WA: We didn't know how we were going to wire the film together yet, so we came up with an idea to interview all the scientists first. We started finding the scientists and the people we wanted to interview and set the whole schedule up. We spent about

three weeks interviewing everyone, and we ended up with about 60 hours of interviews. From that we digitized six hours worth of interviews. Then I cut [the material] down to about two and a half hours; and I cut it together so that it seemed as if the scientists were having this conversation throughout the whole story. We basically strung together six interviews and found a coherent thought. We still weren't sure how we were going to do the dramatic part.

scr(i)pt: *The narrative throughline?*

WA: Yes, and the difficult part was how do you do the [narrative throughline] so that it's not just basic show and tell. For example, the scientists say something; and then the exact same thing happens to Amanda. Or something happens to Amanda, and then someone comes along and explains it. We knew that just wasn't going to work; so we kept saying, "We've got to make [the structure] oblique." We, the audience, are going to have to work to really figure out how all the information fits together. We took a long time to figure that out. It was a very trying time for the three of us. At one point we brought in a fourth person, Matthew Hoffman, who had done some screenwriting in L.A. We thought maybe, since he was more of a professional, he would figure it out. He got in there and got in the mess, too. One of the great things he did was institute "bad idea sessions." Have you ever heard about those?

scr(i)pt: *No, but I totally get it and I like it.*

WA: As Mark would explain, "You're always trying to come up with a great idea. There's all this pressure, right?" This was like, no, no, let's come up with the worst ideas. What we found was every now and then someone would come out with an idea, and then you'd kind of stop and say, "You know, that's not so bad." The original idea for having the cells morph into these characters that looked like the emotions was an idea that I had thought of but, at first, was saying, "No, you're going to think it's too corny." Mark encouraged me to voice it. That's how a lot of times your bad ideas—when you're just goofy—are the good ideas.

scr(i)pt: *Oh, absolutely. That's wonderful. I thought that part of the film was so effective.*

WA: Yes, and at that point the audience has had about an hour of pretty intense information and visual stuff—time to sit back, take a break and laugh.

scr(i)pt: *Back to development ...*

WA: We put cards up on the wall. We would tell the throughline of the movie in 10 minutes. We tried everything and just kept throwing it out. After a while this idea started emerging; one person would have one piece of it, and another would have another. At one point Mark suggested making Amanda a photographer. We agreed she had to do something. By then, after all that work, our egos eventually got stripped away. We didn't care who came up with the great idea. We just wanted it great. Finally, we must've spent, like a year all together developing the script—a year and probably 20 drafts.

scr(i)pt: *When did you first start actually working on this?*

WA: About three and a half years ago.

scr(i)pt: *That's how it all came about? The creative process? You got the throughline, the narrative—you figured out the character?*

WA: We figured out the character, and we figured out a couple of the scenes. I always had basketball scenes and had figured out the scene with Reggie on the basketball court. I think Betsy made some crack about there being a Polish wedding. She had married her husband a year before; and he was Polish, so we were always making jokes about that. Then we got the idea of having a rave polka in the film. We had certain chunks of it figured out, and then Betsy and I sat down and wrote the whole thing in 12 days. I say, two years and 12 days.

scr(i)pt: *What did your final script look like? Did you include a transcription of the interviews in the pages?*

WA: Yes, the script had all of the interviews transcribed because it was so important how things flowed from the interviews to the script.

scr(i)pt: *With all that creative freedom, how did you fund this project?*

WA: Remember the stories about the software companies? That's how I funded it all. I just wrote checks.

scr(i)pt: *What did the budget come to? Can you share that?*

WA: About \$5 million.

scr(i)pt: *There is a scene in the film where Marlee's character is looking at different images of water crystals and how they have been*

affected by thoughts, words and feelings. Is this based upon actual research?

WA: Yes, it came from a book called *The Hidden Messages in Water* by Dr. Masaru Emoto based upon his scientific findings.

scr(i)pt: *The movie is finally done, and it's time to get it to the screen. What about distribution? Can you talk about that?*

WA: After we finished the film, we hadn't been picked up by any distributors at that point. We had talked to a few companies, and they all felt there was no market for the movie. We got on our knees and begged a little theater close to where we all live in Yelm, Washington, to show it for us. They told us they would give us a week; and if we weren't in the bottom of the box-office, they would run it for another week. We hired a local publicist and did some grassroots marketing. We opened and the movie ended up running for seven weeks. We wanted to open it at the Baghdad Theatre in Portland, Oregon which was used as a location in the film; but they didn't think it would attract an audience either. Betsy was persistent and got the manager of the Yelm theater to contact the booker at the Baghdad to verify the numbers. He was impressed and offered to let it run for a week.

Again, we did grassroots marketing; yoga studios, The Science of Mind and Unity churches, bookstores, etc. An interesting thing happened: The first week 1,600 people saw it; the second, 4,500; then 5,000 the third; 6,000 the fourth; and it's been running for 14 weeks straight, two shows a night. Armed with those statistics, we started approaching theater bookers ourselves.

A booker in Tempe, Arizona, who had six other theaters booked us. The first and second night sold out. That had never happened before, so he booked us into his other theaters—and week after week attendance was solid. By now we're starting to pop on the radar screen, so other bookers started to contact us. Distributors started contacting us and said, "This is out of the box, and we're interested." A number of national theater chains contacted us because now, apparently, we've become the distributor. Four major theater chains turned around and opened up their Rolodexes®. The distributors all said, "You guys are doing great, but we don't know what to do with this." They didn't even know the market existed, so they didn't know how to sell it. We hired John Räätz at The Visioneering Group, to work with the media and the grassroots marketing. We go into a city, do special screenings for the head of groups or organizations who would be open to it and they spread the word. We call them "seeding" screenings. Once we get people the first week, it's all word of mouth.

scr(i)pt: *You're picking up the costs for the film duplication?*

WA: Yes, and because we're releasing it slowly, it's not as if I have to go out and make 200 prints. We're now using the receipts we're getting from the theater to fund our distribution. It's a bootstrap method, the same model I used for my software company. We're still open to distributors; now we're questioning why we need one. It was our rookie season as filmmakers. Now it's our rookie season as distributors. Assuming we do end up distributing

it, we'll have taken it from the very beginning to the very end, a complete end run of the entire system. What's fueling it is when we get into these theaters week after week, we do stellar numbers.

scr(i)pt: *What's next for *Captured Light*?*

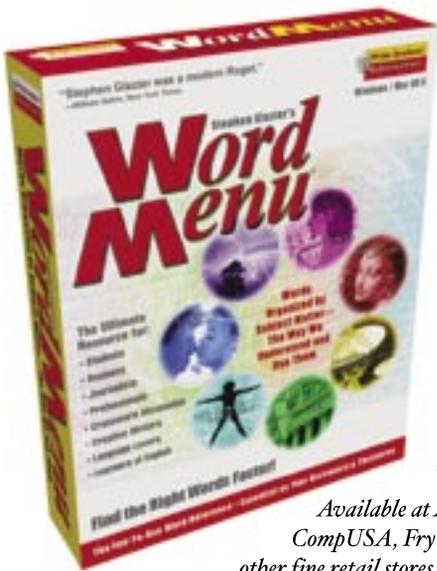
WA: Not sure. We are all focused on this, and we don't want to get distracted. One of the reasons we made this film was the idea that we wanted to get more "enlightened" entertainment; if we kicked open the door, then we plan on holding the door open so lots of other people can come through. We're proving that there's a huge market for this kind of content.

scr(i)pt: *And you'll distribute them?*

WA: Assuming all goes as planned, we will have a distribution company, much to our surprise. We have all the contacts, and we're all starting to feel a responsibility to the people who are really hungry for more enlightened information/entertainment. That's what we say is a "quantum potential." (i)

Visit Whatthebleep.com for information about screenings of this film in your area.

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