

The animated feature
and the
making of



madagascar

by Kate McCallum

In March, 2002 the DreamWorks animated feature *Shrek* broke ground by receiving the first official Oscar® for the newly created Best Animated Feature Film category. Now, from DreamWorks Animation SKG comes the new, computer-animated comedy *Madagascar*.

Alex the Lion (voiced by Ben Stiller) is the king of the urban jungle as the main attraction at New York's Central Park Zoo. He and his best friends Marty the Zebra (Chris Rock), Melman the Giraffe (David Schwimmer) and Gloria the Hippo (Jada Pinkett Smith) have lived their entire lives in blissful captivity, complete with lavish meals and their own park views.

Marty allows his curiosity to get the better of him and, with the help of some prodigious penguins, escapes to explore the world he's been missing. Alex, Melman and Gloria are shocked to find their friend missing and break out of the zoo to get him back before anyone figures out they're gone. But even in New York, a lion, giraffe and hippopotamus wandering the streets and riding the subway are bound to attract some attention. Alex, Melman and Gloria track down Marty in Grand Central Station; but before they catch the train home, they are darted, captured, crated and put on a ship to Africa by well-meaning humans who think they should be

freed from the stress of New York life.

When those plotting penguins sabotage the ship, Alex, Marty, Melman and Gloria find themselves washed ashore on the exotic island of Madagascar. Now these native New Yorkers have to figure out how to survive in the wild and discover the true meaning of the phrase "It's a jungle out there."

Madagascar was directed by Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, who are also two of the writers on this film. Darnell joined PDI's (now PDI/DreamWorks Animation) Character Animation Group in 1991 and made his feature directorial debut with DreamWorks' first computer-animated comedy *Antz*. He has helmed numerous commercial and film projects, drawing upon his multi-faceted talents in animation, visual effects and art direction. His in-house animated short *Gas Planet* garnered international recognition, including the Ottawa International Animation Festival Special Jury Prize.

In addition to making his feature film directorial debut with *Madagascar*, co-director Tom McGrath also showcases his acting talent in the film, voicing the lead penguin, Skipper. McGrath previously worked in the areas of story and concept design for such features as *Cats & Dogs* and *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. He also worked as an animator and story artist on such ani-

mated films as *Space Jam* and *Cool World*. His television work includes directing on *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, as well as other projects for Nickelodeon. Adding their talents to the film were writers Mark Burton and Billy Frolick. Burton is a U.K.-based comedy writer with a varied TV and film career on both sides of the Atlantic. He has written extensively for many British comedy shows, including *Clive Anderson Talks Back*, *Jack Dee's Happy Hour*, *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*, *2DTV*, *Have I Got News For You* and *Spitting Image*. He co-wrote two series of the sitcom *The Peter Principle*, which piloted in the U.S., and provided additional dialogue for the animated feature *Chicken Run*. Frolick is a graduate of NYU film school and a former journalist. He made his directorial debut on the award-winning digital video feature *It Is What It Is*, which starred Jonathan Silverman and was based upon Frolick's original screenplay.

For this interview I arrived at the DreamWorks lot and was ushered into a conference room only to find myself in the midst of a first-time-ever experience—holding a "virtual interview." Frolick and McGrath sat on either side of me, and Darnell "sat across from me" mirror-projected on the wall in an identical conference room located at their Northern California facility. After a few minutes of adjust-

ing to this wonderful technology, which so exemplifies the creative spirit of the DreamWorks team, I had the pleasure of hearing from the minds behind the making of this great idea.

scr(i)pt: *Okay, so who wants to go first? Where did the idea come from?*

BILLY FROLICK: Coming off an earlier idea brewing at DreamWorks Animation for a movie that was basically *A Hard Day's Night* with penguins, Jeffrey Katzenberg had this idea for another “fish out of water story” that featured four zoo animals who were released into the wild and didn't know how to be themselves.

scr(i)pt: *So, is this Jeffrey Katzenberg's original concept?*

BF: Yes, and we thought it had great, clean lines. It really inspired Mark and me, who were not a team at the time. We knew each other socially because we had a friend in common, Karey Kirkpatrick, who wrote *Chicken Run* and is now directing *Over The Hedge* for the studio. Basically, what happens is that you hear about an idea and say, “Okay, I'd like to work on that,” yet there's nothing formalized. [What happens is] more like, I want to see if I want to write it, and they want to see if they want me to write it.

scr(i)pt: *Then the idea goes out to their talent pool, in a way?*

BF: That's really where it is until there's a meeting or someone submits a few pages. Long story short is that Mark and I were both [working on] this separately. Then, because they didn't know which of us to hire, Karey suggested, “Why not put these guys together? They know each other and they have very similar sensibilities.” So, that decision was made; and in the summer of 2000, I went to England for almost a month to work on the story with Mark. Jeffrey had an edict which was don't come back without a fleshed-out version of this thing. We worked really hard to get a lot of ideas down. I returned with a 40 or 50-page document. That got the studio



PAGE 32 (left to right): Melman the Giraffe (**David Schwimmer**), Marty the Zebra (**Chris Rock**), Alex the Lion (**Ben Stiller**) and Gloria the Hippo (**Jada Pinkett Smith**) learn the real meaning of the phrase “It's a jungle out there,” when they're shipwrecked on the island of Madagascar. ABOVE (left to right): Gloria, Melman, Alex and Marty in DreamWorks Animation's computer-animated comedy *Madagascar*, written by Mark Burton & Billy Frolick and Eric Darnell & Tom McGrath. PHOTOS: Courtesy of DreamWorks Animation.

excited because, while they weren't all great ideas, there was a beginning, middle and end and a lot of good stuff to react to and think about.

scr(i)pt: *Had you worked with a writing partner before?*

BF: No, and Mark has a much better work ethic than I do. I'm about wearing pajamas, not shaving, eating breakfast cereal, keeping a newspaper around, reclining a lot. I wanted Mark to get into that work ethic, but he is pretty diligent and has a great way of taking an idea and really circling it and looking at it from different angles. He's smart about not firing away and starting to write pages until he conceptually has his ducks in a row. I usually explore things earlier more through scene writing, dialogue and character.

scr(i)pt: *So, you were complementary in that way?*

BF: Yes, and I've learned a lot about discipline from Mark and about the smart approach to something, as opposed to the impulsive approach. Eric read some version of that document early on and had a great

thematic take on it that really helped. Do you remember that, you know what I'm talking about?

ERIC DARNELL: No, I don't.

BF: Maybe it wasn't you.

ED: But I'm glad to hear it. (LAUGH)

BF: Eric basically read the story and said, “You know, a lion and a zebra who are friends in the zoo are going to be natural enemies in the wild.” Believe it or not, that didn't really occur to us in that way, so it helped us know where the story was heading. Eric wrote a great document I hope someone has. I think it's in The Library of Congress; and, if it's not, it should be. (LAUGH) It got everybody jazzed because, usually, you never know what the third act is going to be about. This was now first act, they're in the zoo; second act, they get out; and then they try to assimilate in the wild. What's going to happen in the third act that's really going to amp up the stakes? It dealt with what, Eric? Nature versus instincts versus civility, right?

ED: Yes, we talked about those ideas, civility and savagery, nature versus nurture. A lot of other thematic ideas began to rise up. We considered the conflict that

might come as Alex the Lion, who has no idea where steak comes from, starts to smell something delicious—and it's his best friend, who's right next to him. Alex doesn't understand why he's having these strange urges. Finally, when Alex has gone completely savage, Marty must decide whether to escape the wild jungle or stay and help his friend—the lion whose instincts are telling him to eat the zebra. This idea ultimately led us to a more emotional theme, more related to friendship. We worked for probably a year and a half or two years with Billy and Mark on the script and got a good first pass at everything. Everything except this one scene on the boat where these characters are being shipped off. All we really had in the script was, "There's a disaster at sea and the animals' crates wash overboard." This is where Tom stepped in. Tom McGrath had actually come to DreamWorks to work on that earlier penguin film which I was developing with our producer Mireille Soria. Nothing ever came of it, but we all hit it off; and when this *Madagascar* project surfaced, Tom jumped back onboard with us. He looked at this unfinished portion of the script and said, "Oh, I have an idea." And the rest—we hope—is history.

TOM MCGRATH: There are all these zoo animals on the ship being relocated to their homeland in Africa, including these penguins. Why would these penguins want to go to Africa? From that idea it became these characters actually revolt and then rise up like a team of POWs and end up taking over the boat. After they knock out the captain, they do a 180° and turn the boat toward Antarctica, which inadvertently sends our heroes' crates overboard.

ED: The scene was very wacky and funny, and really ended up setting the tone for much of the film. Not only did the penguins end up getting woven into the rest of the story, our very own Tom McGrath provided the voice for the lead penguin, Skipper.

TM: Yeah. (LAUGH) A lot of times you're searching for tone. Of course, the premise was inherently comedic, and it was cast with comedians; but one of the things that was probably the biggest challenge in telling this story was the fact that the subject matter could potentially become very dark. After all, we've got two best friends who want to eat each other. The challenge was to find a way to tell that story in a manner that people can relate to.

BF: It was such a really solid idea, but whether it's appropriate for an animated movie was the issue. We all knew it was a really great idea; but, how can we get that in so adults will appreciate it, but the kids won't be alienated?

I just want to go back to the penguins for one second. What was really cool about what Tom was doing was, because there are so many cooks in animation, creatively, there's always a lot of left-brain thinking, a lot of figuring out. Tom really got a huge part of this movie done, kind of on his own. He would just walk into the storyboard meetings, blow us all away and put us on the floor with his brilliance. That's really hard to do when you have Jeffrey Katzenberg, the producers and all the story guys ... just the committee nature of the thing.

scr(i)pt: *Were you all working on the storyboard process and continuing to hone the writing as this went along?*

TM: The storyboards get inspired by the writing and the characters.

BF: In terms of how the storyboard artists get involved, I always say they can do what the writers do, but the writers can't do what they do. They bring incredible stuff to the process, in part because they think visually and sequentially.

TM: The script would inspire the boards, then the boards would go back to Mark and Billy and they would rewrite. When Ben Stiller and Chris Rock came aboard, these characters started to really take life. They begin to inform the whole process, between the writing and the boarding. In animation you have this kind of luxury. It's hard work, but you can actually try out a lot of different things before you even dedicate one frame to film. Our producer Mireille always compares the process to workshopping a play.

scr(i)pt: *And it's so collaborative.*

TM: The board artists take little sections within the script. When the boards are looking good, you bring them into the Avid, record the dialogue, cut it together with temp sound effects and music, and then you watch it all in continuity. You can analyze what's not working—this scene needs some finessing here or we could take this chunk of the film and put it over here. So, it's really a great way to work. You keep honing and refining. And you do it all before you even start recording the actors or doing any animation.

scr(i)pt: *Do you have a read-through with the actual actors before you lock in the dialogue?*

TM: Sometimes with scratch actors, you can get a sense of how the rhythm of the scenes and certain ideas are coming across.

ED: Over the course of the two and half years of production, we may go into the recording studio with any one of our leads up to 15 times to record their performance. Then we take the recordings back to our little animation cave and work with them, cut them into storyboards, see how things play and get new ideas. We try to get the sequences to work with each other and the actors to sound like they are in the same space together. Sometimes what one actor does at the recording in studio will inform the script and motivate us to write a new line for another actor. The final result really does feed off this unique process; something you just can't do in live-action.

TM: After a while Billy and Mark had moved on to other projects, so we were stuck without a writer. We were looking for writers but couldn't really find anyone who wanted to tell the same kind of story in the same way we did. Finally, Jeffrey came to Eric and me and said, "Why don't you guys take a crack at it?" So Eric and I did, and it was quite a learning experience because I've never really written, and I don't have the experience that Billy and Mark have; but it was really a nice process for Eric and I to write and work off each other. A lot of what we did was just taking these great ideas that Billy and Mark started with and conceptualizing out a new way to play a certain scene.

ED: Again, I don't think you can overestimate how much a storyboard artist really adds to the process. Many of them are talented writers themselves in their own right. Even though they may just be working on one sequence in the film, and not necessarily be connected with the big picture, they're so integral to the process.

TM: When you think about it, every animator is an actor interpreting the vocal performances as well. Great animation ideas can motivate a new or better story idea or vocal performance.

scr(i)pt: *What advice would you give to a writer who wants to break into animation? Who maybe hasn't written animation. Or, how does one break in?*

BF: I'm not a good example. I was brought into DreamWorks by Karey Kirkpatrick in the aftermath of a directing deal on a live-action picture that I was working on at Warner Bros., that

unfortunately didn't happen. So I'm not your classic animation junkie. I'm not really a compendium of the history of animation, and my cultural literacy is about average on this stuff.

scr(i)pt: *But, why do you think they picked you as one of the writers?*

BF: I think because I was on another project that was going pretty well. In terms of advice for others? I think animation is very tricky because it's very hard to pitch to studios.

scr(i)pt: *What do you have planned for the future?*

BF: Well, I'm kind of a loose cannon. I actually have a book coming out three days before the movie, which is a parody of *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*. I'm calling it *The Five People You Meet In Hell*.

scr(i)pt: *Soon to be an animated TV movie ... ?*

BF: (LAUGHS) And I'm writing for a company at Fox, an animated film called *Ollie*. That's all I can really say about it.

scr(i)pt: *And the rest of you?*

ED: Just trying to get through the rest of this film. It's going to keep us pretty busy for the next several months. Then, maybe a little rest will be in order. We'll see. There's a lot of back and forth at DreamWorks since we've got the two studios.

BF: By the way, we haven't talked about Jeffrey. What's his last name again? Jeffrey, Jeffrey? I've worked for a lot of studio executives, not that I would even call him a studio executive, but Jeffrey does the worst part of writing. I mean, I've known studio executives who didn't read drafts and sort of slept through meetings. Jeffrey is willing to take drafts and compare them to one another and do thorough analysis. He really rolls up his sleeves and is an incredible creative collaborator and a great manager of people.

scr(i)pt: *I've actually heard this before ...*

ED: Like while we're sleeping in on Sunday morning, enjoying our weekend away from work, he'll call up and say, "I was just looking over the script, and I had some ideas. I came up with such and such." He's just relentless, and I mean that in a good way.

TM: He's really conscientious about what's written, and I think everyone's gotten the "Ugh,"—which is kind of a famous quote from him—on a line of dialogue. Which is like saying, "This isn't so great"—in a roundabout way. He writes it in the margins of the script ... U-G-H.

BF: At best, he's saying it isn't so great.

TM: But it keeps challenging you, and then you end up with something far better.

scr(i)pt: *Tom, do you have anything on the drawing board? What's up next for you?*

TM: No. Eric and I are kind of in a similar boat. We're both dreaming of just being at home watching TV, I think. But, there are always new projects in development at DreamWorks. There are a lot of people, a lot of directors and producers, that are part of the development process and bring things to the table. If someone's got an idea here, we'll explore that. It's a nice opportunity.

ED: We actually are caught up in DreamWorks. We can't really talk about it.

scr(i)pt: *Kind of like the old studio system, of using the talent pool?*

ED: Yes, it's a labor of love for the people who do this kind of work because you do have to throw 100 ideas out and be prepared for 90 of them to fall by the wayside.

TM: Sometimes you just have to get rid of something completely. Get it out of the way and not think about it, and that's a hard thing to do because you love it.

BF: I'm particularly bad at that with Jeffrey. I'm like the kid who wants that big, red ball in K-Mart™. He's like, "No, that's not happening. Next." (i)

Madagascar opens nationwide on May 27, 2005.

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