



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Henry Selick in Conversation

STOP MOTION: CELEBRATING HANDMADE ANIMATION ON THE BIG SCREEN

Fantastic Mr Fox

Thu 1 Aug 12:30; Fri 2 Aug 20:30;
Sun 25 Aug 16:15

The Tale of the Fox Le Roman de Renard
Fri 2 Aug 18:15; Tue 13 Aug 20:30

Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

Sat 3 Aug 14:00; Thu 29 Aug 20:50

Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride*

Sat 3 Aug 15:50; Sun 25 Aug 14:30 BFI IMAX;
Fri 30 Aug 18:20

Frankenweenie

Sat 3 Aug 18:00; Sun 11 Aug 14:30 BFI IMAX;
Fri 30 Aug 20:30

Jason and the Argonauts

Sun 4 Aug 12:10 (+ intro by Alan Friswell, conservator
and restorer of Ray Harryhausen's models);
Wed 14 Aug 18:00

The Golden Voyage of Sinbad

Sun 4 Aug 14:50 (+ intro by Alan Friswell, conservator
and restorer of Ray Harryhausen's models);
Wed 14 Aug 20:30

Chicken Run

Sun 4 Aug 13:00; Sat 24 Aug 11:40

The Emperor's Nightingale

Cisaruv slavik
Sun 4 Aug 20:30; Tue 13 Aug 18:20

ParaNorman

Mon 5 Aug 12:20; Thu 15 Aug 12:10;
Wed 28 Aug 12:20

The Boxtrolls

Tue 6 Aug 12:20; Mon 12 Aug 14:10;
Sat 17 Aug 12:00

Journey to the Beginning of Time

Cesta do pravku
Tue 6 Aug 20:30; Thu 22 Aug 18:30

Isle of Dogs

Wed 7 Aug 12:10; Sat 10 Aug 20:30;
Sun 25 Aug 18:30

Kubo and the Two Strings

Thu 8 Aug 12:20; Sat 10 Aug 18:15 (+ Q&A with
Travis Knight, director and President & CEO of
LAIKA); Fri 30 Aug 12:20

Missing Link

Fri 9 Aug 12:30; Mon 26 Aug 15:20

Coraline

Fri 16 Aug 12:30; Sat 17 Aug 15:30;
Wed 21 Aug 12:15; Thu 22 Aug 14:20

Stop-Motion Shorts Scene – BFI Backed + Q&A

Fri 16 Aug 18:10

Funday: Stop-Motion Children's Favourites

Sun 18 Aug 12:20

Stopmotion + Q&A with director Robert Morgan

Wed 21 Aug 20:40

Aardman Shorts

Sat 24 Aug 14:30

Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio

Tue 27 Aug 20:40

At the California Institute of the Arts in the 1970s, Henry Selick was one of the few students who attended both the Disney-centric character animation course and the one for experimental animation. That duality presaged things to come. Selick has always had one foot in the big studios, directing his stop-motion features at the likes of Disney (*The Nightmare before Christmas*, 1993), Laika (*Coraline*, 2009) and Netflix (*Wendell & Wild*, 2022). Yet these films bristle with a strangeness, a streak of ghoulish surrealism that feels subversive in this world.

Selick has used stop-motion puppet animation in all five of his features, sometimes alongside live action. 'I love the physical nature,' he says. 'You're standing more – you're not just sitting doing animation on a screen or drawing on paper on a desktop. I like that environment: it's live action in miniature.' His devotion to the technique is itself rather radical. Stop motion seemed destined to decline as CG animation rose in the 1990s and it remains marginal at major studios. Yet recent decades have seen something of a revival. For Selick, the technique is a 'ritual magic' whose roots run down to the earliest trick films: it is too old to die.

Experimenter that he is, Selick has also embraced new magic along the way, adopting cutting-edge technology when it suits him. One example: 3D, used in *Coraline* to demarcate the uncanny parallel universe from the real world. A remastered version of the film hits cinemas in August to mark its 15th anniversary.

You've spoken about the 'imperfection' of stop motion. When directing, you have to decide how to balance preserving imperfections with not making it poor quality. How do you do that?

Henry Selick: It's a never-ending issue, when I'm working on films, of how perfect is too perfect, how rough is too rough, and why am I doing stop motion? I do try to embrace the idea that stop motion is going to have imperfections. [When you're animating] you can't go back – you don't have assistants to fill in, in between [frames]. It's a personal journey of the animator living through their puppet. The essence of the performance is there. If I believe in the character, then small bumps and missteps along the way shouldn't matter.

The history of stop motion as an effect was to make it as real as possible. But then CG replaced stop motion for the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* [1993]. To go for that kind of perfection became ludicrous. While some people continue to do it, I think that when you can't tell the difference between stop motion and CG, why are you doing it? That's the main thing: I still want to feel that this was touched by a real person. Jan Švankmajer's ideas are so strong that the execution of the animation didn't need to be perfect. It would have been hurt if it was too perfect.

It's sometimes hard for animators: they don't want to feel like they're doing purposely bad work. I want their work to be great and their performances to be believable. But I don't shoot everything on ones [i.e., one new image per frame, ensuring maximum fluidity]. A lot of people in feature-quality stop motion, that's all they do.

*There are different kinds of imperfection. You're talking about the fluidity of the animation, but then in *Wendell & Wild*, we see the seams in the characters' faces. Why did you make that choice?*

It's what I wanted to do back in *Coraline*. We came up with this way to expand the vocabulary of facial performance by putting the seam in faces, so that you

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Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*
+ intro by Henry Selick

Mon 12 Aug 20:15

**Guillermo del Toro's *Pinocchio* + Q&A with
writer-director Guillermo del Toro**

Sun 18 Aug 14:40

The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!
+ Q&A with director Peter Lord

Wed 21 Aug 15:30

Peter Lord in Conversation

Wed 21 Aug 18:30

**Preview: Kneecap + Q&A with director Rich
Peppiatt and actors Mo Chara, Móglaí Bap and
DJ Próvaí**

Thu 22 Aug 20:20

**Preview: *Starve Acre* + Q&A with director
Daniel Kokotajlo and further guests TBA**

Wed 28 Aug 18:10

**Doctor Who: The Happiness Patrol + Q&A with
actors Sylvester McCoy, Sophie Aldred, script
editor Andrew Cartmel and director Chris
Clough**

Sat 31 Aug 11:30

S.O.U.L. Fest Shorts and Awards

Sat 31 Aug 15:20

LAIKA: Frame x Frame

Embark on a journey behind the scenes of LAIKA, one of the world's foremost pioneers in stop-motion animation. This immersive new exhibition will transport you into the boundary-pushing art and science behind every one of the nearly one million meticulously constructed frames that bring each of LAIKA's five groundbreaking feature films to life. Opens Mon 12 Aug

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could mix different brow movements and so forth with [different expressions for] the lower face. And then you were left to do more with less, although we ended up making hundreds and hundreds of faces.

But I wanted to leave the seams in [for *Coraline*]. My feeling was – and I know it's true – that after just a few minutes, the audience doesn't see it anymore. It was a way to tell you that we're bringing art, puppets, to life. But [Nike co-founder] Phil Knight, who is the money behind the studio [Laika]... was afraid of that. It bothered him too much. So we digitally painted out all the seams. It was an unnecessary expense.

You use replacement animation for most of your characters' faces and heads [i.e., the parts in question are entirely replaced between frames, rather than being manipulated through internal mechanics]. What is it about the technique that you like?

Generally, I like to mix it up, depending on what kind of role the character has. If they're more cartoonish, broader characters, I tend to go with mechanical faces. In *Coraline*, the father and Other Father are mechanical, with a huge range of motion.

There are two reasons why I gravitated to replacement animation. Going back to the commercials I did a long time ago: there was a character – I don't know if he was international or not – called the Pillsbury Doughboy. He's selling these baked-good products and he's a cute little larva of a guy. When this company I was working with was awarded a series of commercials, we got the secret kit: you open it up and there's this smelly body made from toxic chemicals and like seven heads to do everything [with replacement animation]. We expanded the number of faces. He wasn't going to become a great actor – he was still going to be this very positive, fun little character – but I became fascinated by how much you can achieve with complete head replacements.

Coming on to Jack Skellington [from *The Nightmare before Christmas*]: he's basically like the Pillsbury Doughboy. The whole head gets replaced – it's a very simple design. I love that character. There are many more ranges of expressions and emotions, and he had to do a lot more, but still, in terms of total heads, it's in the hundreds, not thousands. I love the idea of: what can you convey with that limitation? With strong expressions and great designs, if they're in character, the audience will buy it. It evolved from splitting faces, or different types of replacement, where the face is like a mask, like Miss Spider in *James and the Giant Peach* [1996]: you're not replacing the entire head.

There are people like Guillermo del Toro, who completely disagrees. He wanted to go with clockwork mechanical faces for his *Pinocchio* [2022], and it works well for him. But it's not what I do.

In Coraline and Wendell & Wild, there are more human characters than in your earlier features. Are they easier or harder to design and animate than non-humans?

The more realistic humans... are always the hardest to design. You look at Disney films and there was an animator, Milt Kahl – he was perhaps the best animator and character designer of all time. But he always got stuck doing the straight characters. He really wanted to animate villains, because they're so much more fun. But they needed the very best to do the humans. *Coraline* took a very long time to design – to find the right balance of elements. And in [*Wendell & Wild*], the protagonist, Kat, also. They matter more, because that's what you want your audience to focus on. You end up trying more things out before you settle on something you think is going to work.

Interview by Alex Dudok de Wit, *Sight and Sound*, September 2024