

The Main Feature

Season 33 - Issue 16 (screening 8.5.13)

Australia
Cert 12

UK release 22/10/2010
90 minutes

Directed and written by Adam Elliot
Produced by Melanie Coombs
Music by Dale Cornelius
Cinematography Gerald Thompson

Vocal Cast:

Barry Humphries as the Narrator
Bethany Whitmore / Toni Collette as Mary Daisy Dinkle
Philip Seymour Hoffman as Max Jerry Horowitz
Eric Bana as Damian Popodopoulos
Renée Geyer as Vera Dinkle
Ian "Molly" Meldrum as Homeless Man

The death on 7 May 2013 of Ray Harryhausen led to a number of items in the media highlighting the change in animation since his hay-day. However, while the world of mainstream, Hollywood animation is awash with lavishly produced, high-end CGI and visual effects, the world of stop-motion has become a niche one. Though a long way from being considered antiquated, the use of hand-sculpted/crafted puppets is considered a rarity within contemporary cinema.

Speaking of his work, the writer and director Adam Elliot stated: "I've just tried to tell stories that I'd want to hear, that are a little bit more edgy, the stories that push boundaries. You can do that with kids' animation, for sure, but I don't ever think about the audience too much. I just sit down and write stories that would appeal to me and *then* worry about who my demographic is. I'm not just the only person out there, which is great – films that have come out recently like 'Waltz With Bashir' and 'Persepolis', that type of animation is definitely evolving and shifting gear and there is more and more 'adult' animation. Although I didn't use that term until recently, because if I did then most people would think I was doing films like 'Fritz The Cat', or some sort of clay pornography! Whereas now people are understanding that animation is a preference, it's like a pencil or a paintbrush, it's just a vehicle for telling a story, so why has it traditionally been geared towards children? I blame Disney for that! We've definitely progressed since the days of 'The Lion King' and 'Aladdin', but when your budget is a hundred and seventy million dollars or somewhere around there, you can push the boundaries a *little* bit but you have to be pretty safe. That's a *lot* of money.

"I'm very thankful and grateful to companies like Aardman who've brought claymation to the masses, but I think I'd still be a stop-motion animator regardless of whether 'Wallace & Gromit' were invented. I can only talk from my personal experience, I suppose, but I do stop-motion animation for purely selfish reasons. I'm friends with Nick Park and Peter Lord and it's good to catch up with them, but really the only thing we have in common is plasticine. I get very frustrated sitting in front of a computer screen, I'd much rather be chopping up wood or painting and getting my hands dirty, making all these bits and pieces for the films. I love the tactile nature of stop-motion, it's just a personal choice."



"I always try to write funny films, unfortunately I can't help myself – they end up being quite tragic! No one has a perfectly happy life or a completely miserable one, I think it's all shades of light and dark. Comedy-tragedies have been around for centuries, and to tell stories which are authentic, empathetic and relatable to an audience you can't just do gags, you have to dig deeper. I try to create very authentic characters – which is ironic, 'cause they're plasticine – and while my aim is, of course, to make the audience laugh, I *really* feel like I've achieved something if I've caused them to cry. I know that's a strange ambition, to upset your audience, but I don't like them leaving the cinema indifferent or apathetic. I really want them to have experienced *something* – even if they've just laughed, at least I've pushed *some* buttons. I think 'Harvie Krumpet' (Elliot's previous film which won the Academy Award for Animated Short Film in 2003) opened the doors and really enlightened a lot of people, especially in my own country, as to what animation can be."

According to the opening credits, the film is based on a true story. In an interview given in April 2009, writer-director Elliot clarified that the character of Max was inspired by "a pen-friend in New York who I've been writing to for over twenty years."

In another mirror of Mary and Max's onscreen friendship, Elliot and his American correspondent have never met. "We were very transparent with the film when we were making it, so he knew all about it. He couldn't see what the fuss was about, and when he finally did see the film he sent me a list of things he thought could be better, in true Asperger's fashion (laughs). He's still confounded as to why anyone would want to make a film about him – he's much more into mainstream films. I'm looking forward to meeting him for the first time this Christmas, neither of us thought when we started writing letters to each other that I'd end up making an eight million dollar film about our letters! It's amazing how art can imitate life and vice versa."

Asked about working in Hollywood, Elliot answered: "I'm such a control freak I thought no – I really just want to make another one of my films and I'd really like to do it back in St Kilda in Melbourne. I'd really like to employ my friends. It took awhile for me to realise all that. It's all about creative control. Over there, yes, I'd get paid more money and all the rest but I would relinquish a lot of control."

We went to Pixar and Dreamworks and we pitched different ideas but they just looked at us blankly and thought 'they're too strange for us.' My ideas are really...not Hollywood. They're much more European, I suppose. More sophisticated. But then it was great to get into Sundance and go back there and sort of say 'well you should have invested in us, because we went and made it anyway and now we're opening night at your festival.'

I have a cupboard full of American Film Industry awards and trophies and things and I look at them and I think well that's great, but why am I as poor as I was 12 years ago when I started all this? I don't own my films and the investors get all their money before I do. What I really want for Mary and Max is plain and simple: I just want as many people as possible to see it. I couldn't care less if I never win another award. I am more than happy not to win another Oscar – one is enough – but I would just love people to go and see it and that's the toughest bit, getting people to pay \$15 to see it. We'll never have the success of Shrek or Nemo or those big blockbusters, but we'll see what happens.



In Mary and Max you presented New York in black and white and Australia in more earthy shades, using lots of brown. What was the logic behind the different use of colour?

(Picture shows Adam Elliot on set of the massive replica New York built for 'Mary & Max' (Image courtesy of Adam Elliot Pictures))

I really wanted to use colour as a device in this film a lot more than I had in my previous films. I quickly worked out that if there are these two worlds we should really separate them by colour and of course New York is a very concrete place, a gray world. Australia in the 70s to me was very brown...We wanted to make Australia dehydrated, like a nicotine stain – that was the colour palette we decided on. We used spot red as a device to make all those little objects that Mary and Max send each other more potent, more significant. A little bit

like what Spielberg did in Schindler's List with that little girl in the red dress. It might come across as a bit pretentious but I thought well, no one else is doing this in animation. Most animation is all colour and movement. Every colour of the rainbow, all vibrant, and again we wanted to do something a bit different. It really suits the characters' moods as well.

On Mary and Max I didn't actually do any of the animation. I employed six animators to do it for us. We had a huge crew: a support crew, a DOP and a huge lighting department. Each animator roughly did five seconds per day. So about 25 seconds a day was done; about two and a half minutes a week. That's why the shoot took 57 weeks. It was a huge logistic nightmare to make this film. They worked out if I had have animated it, it would have taken 225 years (laughing) so I didn't have a choice. And, to be honest, I don't enjoy actually animating. I much prefer to design all the characters and write the script and the actual moving of the puppet is something I find extremely tedious. I would be happy to never do it again.

Main photography lasted over 57 weeks, using 133 separate sets, 212 puppets, and 475 miniature props, "including a fully functioning Underwood typewriter which apparently took 9 weeks to design and build."

The bulk of the cast recordings were done in Melbourne, with Seymour Hoffman contributing from the UK via an internet feed, "Just because the cost of flying him here first class and putting him up in hotels and limousines – all those things that agents demand, not so much the actors – would have blown our budget completely. So we recorded him remotely, it was a very expensive hook-up with no delay that we had between the two proper sound recording studios. I was very sceptical at first. I thought "Oh no, look, as a director I really need to be there with him", but he enjoyed the process, I enjoyed the process, I could focus more on his voice and not have to worry about if he was being fed or getting cups of tea, that sort of stuff. So I highly recommend all directors direct their actors from the other side of the planet!"

Another crucial and sometimes overlooked cast member was Bethany Whitmore, whose solemn and endearingly naïve performance as the young Mary in the earlier parts of the film cemented the character's sense of loneliness. "With all these rules and regulations about working with kids, I think we ended up having at least six or so recording sessions with her – I think the end result was worth it. We'd auditioned forty or so little girls for the part by the time she came along. She just had this melancholy to her voice, this honesty, it was a very authentic sound."

Despite keeping 'Mary & Max' as an independent Australian feature, the move served to keep the story intact and unfiltered, with the film being tremendously well received on its release. After being picked as the opening film for the 2009 Sundance Film Festival (a first for both animated and Australian cinema), its ensuing festival tour and worldwide release garnered overwhelmingly positive reviews from critics and audiences. Yet despite the success and respect within the animation and filmmaking industry, it sadly didn't follow in its predecessor's footsteps and was passed on by the Academy Awards. More bizarre still, it was unable to pick up a significant theatrical run in the States.

"I learnt a lesson, which was that America's still quite conservative in many ways. I see it as a very uplifting film, Europe sees it similarly, but in America they see it as very dark and are obsessed by saying "Not for children!" Now that I've had some hindsight and can be objective I know why we didn't get a bigger release, I don't blame America at all for not putting us out at all the multiplexes.

"The irony is that we know 'Mary & Max' is thriving out there – on DVD, on airlines, as a pirated film – it's alive and kicking and seems to be growing more and more. Critically we've done really well, it has a very high average rating on sites like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDB, which is gonna help get the next film financed. We're getting more emails now than when the film was released two years ago, especially on Facebook. The comment we get the most is "This is not what I expected" and I think, "Well, what were you expecting, 'Finding Nemo'?" (laughs). We also get some very sad emails from people, especially parents of kids with Asperger's syndrome and people that are terribly alone, who relate to Max and to Mary, some of them are very hard to read. So we know that we've made a film that affects people quite deeply, yet why couldn't we convince distributors to get it into cinemas? At the time I didn't think we were creating another 'arthouse' film, but in the end we sort of did."

Iain McGlashan

*The printing of the notes by Repropoint
is undertaken free of charge*



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Reactions to **La Fille du Puisatier** – 9.5.13

Score **1** **2** **3** **4** **5** **6** **7** **8** **9** **10**
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Total received – 25

Average Score – 7.68

Your Comments

The best

Enjoyable, like an early last century film but in colour

Absolutely delightful

A wonderful film – even had a happy ending!

Nice to have a happy ending!

What a nice little film – good acting

A really enjoyable film with a happy ending!

Nice gentle film – very enjoyable

I'm suspicious of films where the sun always shines...

Wonderful acting – particularly the baby

Position	Film	Average Score
1 st	The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel	8.39
2 nd	The Artist	8.28
3 rd =	Hugo	7.84
3 rd =	Departures	7.84
5 th	La Fille du Puisatier	7.68
6 th	My Week With Marilyn	7.56
7 th	Le Ballon Rouge	7.33
8 th	Of Gods and Men	7.03
9 th	A Separation	6.97
10 th	Pal Joey	6.88
11 th	La Grande Illusion	6.67
12 th	Shadow of a Doubt	6.59
13 th	Of Time and the City	6.31
14 th	Rumba	6.25
15 th	Peepli Live!	6.17
16 th	Coriolanus	5.84
17 th	Crin Blanc (White Mane)	5.83
18 th	French shorts combined score	5.65
19 th	La Boulangère de Monceau	4.81
20 th	Wolke 9	4.56

The next film is our first for our 34th season:

8pm on Thursday 12 September 2013!

