

Dream On Silly Dreamer

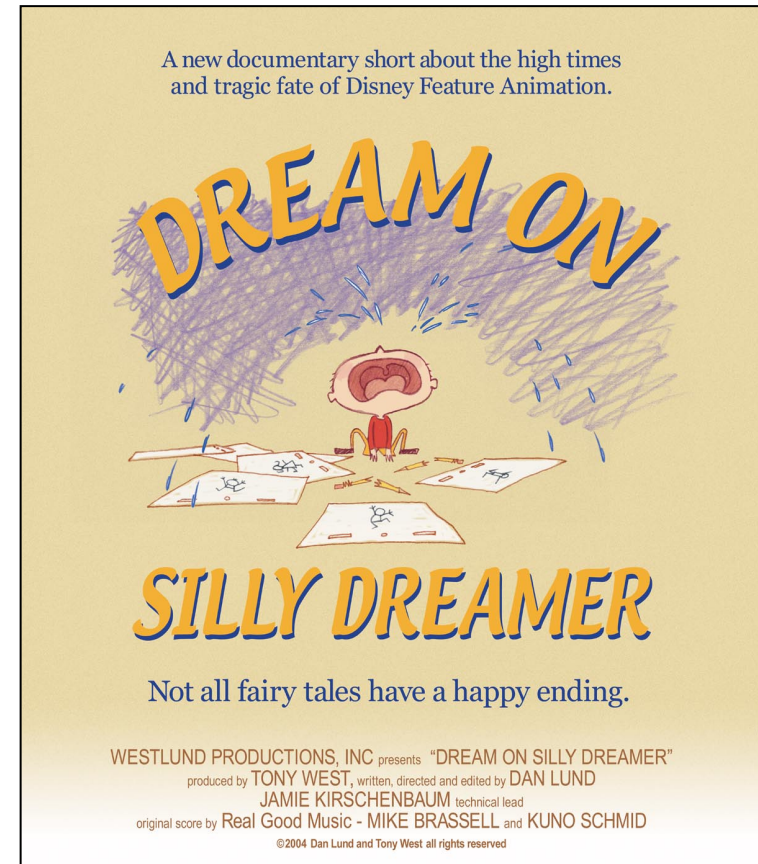
Written by **Jake Friedman**

In 2002, Walt Disney Feature Animation shut down its Burbank traditional animation studio in favour of focusing solely on a new CG department. This was the studio that Walt himself built and which had produced classics since 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Soon after the studio shut down, the studios in Orlando, Paris, Tokyo and Sydney all followed suit, laying off more than 1,300 people.

The funny thing is, there was very little commotion in the press about the layoffs, an issue that would surely have left a bad taste in the mouths of the public, who had grown up with the classic films. Then the animators noticed that the few blurbs to reach the papers were describing the halt in traditional animation as only temporary. The Disney PR department

appeared to be releasing false information, and Disney's era of drawn animation was deliberately being fizzled out quietly.

Enter Dan Lund. Lund started at Disney in 1989 as a production assistant and worked his way up as an effects animator through films like *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. Back at that time, there was still an air of the original magic at the studio with a common heartfelt investment in the projects that were being produced. It was to recall these glory days that Lund set out to document the stories of the recently laid-off Disney animators. Almost four years later, his videotaped interviews became the documentary *Dream On Silly Dreamer*, produced by fellow Disney animator Tony West, and focusing on the closing of Disney's traditional feature animation studios.

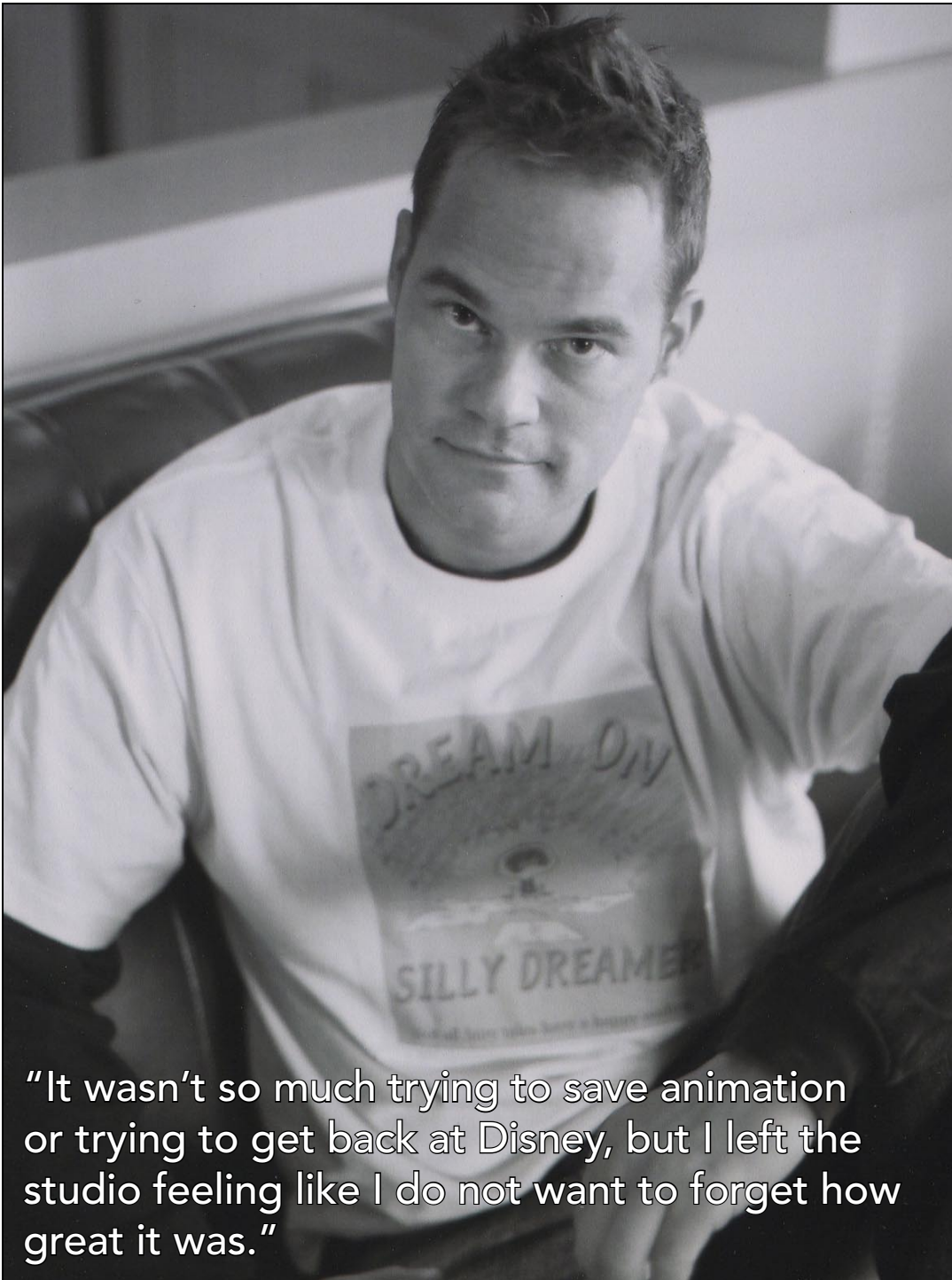


Told through interviews and animated vignettes, *Dream On Silly Dreamer's* position on the closing of Walt Disney's traditional animation unit is best summed up by its promotional poster.

"I actually didn't think anybody would care," says Lund. "Going through all the emotional crap, and

then making this movie, it all felt really self-indulgent. There were many, many times when I tried to stop

In chronicling the last days of Walt Disney Feature Animation's traditional animation studio, director Dan Lund created a time capsule of the Disney studio. Lund and producer Tony West tell how the documentary came to be.



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working on it. But it seemed like word had gotten out there that I was making it, so it became a sort of duty to everyone else."

Many festivals rejected the film due to its 40-minute running time, as well as its subject matter. Fortunately, the DVD is readily available [online](#) and is soul-stirring to the last minute. "It wasn't so much trying to save animation or trying to get back at Disney," says Lund, "But I left the studio feeling like I do not want to forget how great it was."

The film, told like a fairy tale, complete with a British narrator and an animated storybook—actually, an animator's sketchbook—is a valentine to bygone days. As the film discloses clips from the 1980s and early 1990s interspersed with original animation, the viewer begins to see deeper into the trenches of the Disney studio than any making-of promotional featurette has allowed. Hearing animators, directors, story developers and retired inkers talk about their devotion to their craft clearly displays how much continued faith there was in Walt's vision. These people were not out just to make a living, but to fulfill a legacy of great storytelling through the greatest medium available.

Interestingly, the film begins by complimenting the Disney management and the way the executives encouraged the artists with gifts, free catering and extravagant wrap parties. The pivotal point, however, is defined in no uncertain terms as the overwhelming financial success of *The Lion King*.

Because of *The Lion King*, top business people who saw animation as the next new way to make a billion dollars jumped onboard. Dozens of appointed vice-presidents wound up on the Disney payroll. Creative executives entirely replaced story development departments. Jeffrey Katzenberg being fired and co-founding DreamWorks as competition led Disney management to overflow the animators with obscenely large bonuses. The animation at the studio had lost its magic and greed was running rampant as more and more executives were brought in to figure out how to cut costs.

The management began comparing the success of digitally animated films like *Ice Age* and those of Pixar to the Disney bombs like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Brother Bear*. Then, on March 25, 2002, chief executive Tom Schumacher held meetings with each 2D animation department to tell them that their services would no longer be needed.

Most of the interviews in the documentary were taped in the few weeks after this day and are expressed with eloquence and heart, and merit several replays on your DVD player. The DVD includes a plethora of special features like original story art by Lund and footage from the film's Los Angeles premiere, where we watch the reaction of the Disney artists seeing the documentary for the first time. Perhaps the most engaging feature, however, is the collection of extended interview clips, in which many of the artists voice very bitter feelings toward the administration. "I definitely did

not want the film to be angry, but most of the interviews that I got were fairly angry because of the time frame they were taped in," says Lund. "It would have been easy to make an angry film, and it was very hard to stay on the right path." That path was one that took about two years from conception to the final film, which, at several points, almost didn't happen at all.

Lund had a few other independent films under his belt when he decided to take his MiniDV camera and casually started shooting interviews of his friends and coworkers. "I thought, 'Someone should collect stories about the good old days before people get bitter and stop remembering.'" Having to finish work on *Home on the Range* after the layoffs were announced was particularly difficult. "Knowing we were going to get laid off but still having to work on a really crappy movie was like a slow death," he says.

In July 2002, *Home on the Range* was completed and the Burbank studio closed. The following March, Lund went to the Orlando studio to help out with effects animation and rekindled a friendship with Tony West. West had built his career as an effects animator at the Orlando studio since 1989, at the same time that Lund was at the Burbank studio. During the production of *Mulan* in the mid-1990s, Lund came to work in the Orlando studio temporarily and he and West became friends. When Lund returned to Orlando in March 2003 with videotaped interviews and the intent to make a film, West was

one of the people who agreed to help make it happen.

"We had a covert production meeting away from the studio and issued scenes to a few of our animators," says West. "There was an air of rebellion and camaraderie that made the meeting all the more exciting." Attempting to spearhead the film by himself almost became too much for Lund. "I'm not a technical person," he says, "And as soon as you start getting technical, there are too many things that get in your way and almost convince you not to make your movie." Lund started to see West not only as part of his crew, but as someone who could kick up production and contribute to its creative force.

By early December, the Dreamer team knew they were in trouble. "We had very little to show for the five months *Dreamer* was in production," says West. "I was in the middle of making an important career decision. I had been offered a very good job with CORE Feature Animation in Toronto." It was then that Lund confronted West on the lanai of a local Virgin Megastore. "We both knew that *Dreamer* was in trouble, but in all the chaos and drama I had been ignoring the problems. I was being asked if my commitment to the project was still solid. Dan made no bones about the fact that unless we both made it our priority, the film was doomed and we should both start figuring out what our next move should be. At that moment I made the decision to forgo the job in Toronto, take a temporary vow of poverty

and devote all of my energy to making *Dreamer* happen."

As the film's new producer, West now found himself with the task of building a quasi-production house with his fellow

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Disney animators. "Imagine," says West, "Waking up one day only to find your car has been taken away. In its place is a giant box with all the pieces to make a car but no directions or tools to help you put these pieces together. ... Now imagine having to build that car from scratch every single day, and that's kind of what we were faced with." With the Orlando studio imminently closing its doors and scattering its employees, time was also a factor. "It was a ticking time bomb," says Lund, "To finish production in those few months at Disney before everyone had to leave."

In March 2004, the Orlando studio finally shut down. Lund returned to California to complete the film while West traveled back and forth between coasts to supervise post-production. It was an emotional challenge for Lund to spend all his time watching and re-watching the footage of his friends in the days of the layoffs. "While everyone else was moving

forward with their life, I spent two years wallowing in a depressed place."

The film finally reached completion by the end of the year, and in January 2005 it premiered at the Animex festival

in England to rave reviews. "Animex was the beginning of our film's life and it was a perfect send-off for the festivals that followed," says West. Its US premiere in Minneapolis, sponsored by the [Independent Film Project](#), was screened down the street from the Disney shareholders' meeting and played on rotation all day to one full house after another. Recently, the film received a Certificate of Merit at the [Annie Awards](#), solidifying the filmmakers' support from their animation peers.

Today, Lund and West are still animating on their respective coasts, taking pride in the effect their film has made on the public. "Neither of us thought of it as something we were going to make money on," says Lund, who is looking forward to breaking even with DVD sales. "Our rewards have been the crowds that show up to the movie. We've never not sold out a screening. Hopefully, the DVD can reach even more people who missed it the first time." ■