



Frank Gladstone

IDT Hits One Out of the Park

The resilient spirits of Christopher and Dana Reeve inspire the studio's first CG-animated feature, *Everyone's Hero*. by Jake Friedman

The spirited first feature enterprise from IDT Entertainment, *Everyone's Hero*, has a special secret weapon that may become the envy of many of this year's animated movies. While it compares to other adventure films in which a character goes on a journey of personal growth (accompanied by sarcastic sidekicks), this new release holds the unique distinction of being co-directed, with Daniel St. Pierre and Colin Brady, by the late Christopher Reeve. The much-loved actor and his wife, Dana, who passed away last March from lung cancer, served as exec producers on *Hero*. The couple's influence is clearly felt as an emotional core about resilience in the face of adversity and the power of the positive spirit.

The movie, which takes place in 1932 New York, is about Yankee Irving, a 10-year-old boy who wishes more than anything to play baseball like his heroes in the New York Yankees. Unintentionally, Yankee causes his father to get fired from his job when Babe Ruth's lucky bat is stolen, and our hero takes it upon himself to travel to Chicago and return the bat to the Babe himself.

The storyline originated when IDT

founder Howard Jonas approached writer Rob Kurtz with a bedtime story about Yankee Irving which he told his children at night. Kurtz had been a sitcom writer (*Grace Under Fire*, *Cosby*) and was tapped by IDT Entertainment as a writer for future animated television projects. He wrote the *Everyone's Hero* script with the intent of taking only a brief pause from television, which turned into almost two years.

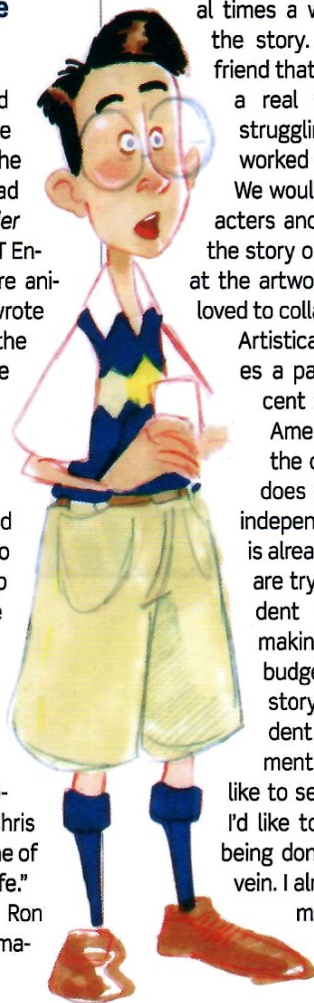
"Howard Jonas liked the script a lot and gave it to Chris Reeve," says Kurtz. "Chris really responded to the story about a little boy who just doesn't quit and doesn't stop swinging. When he first told me how much he liked it, I was deeply touched, and then on the next pass, he asked if I'd like to work with him on it. Writers on original drafts don't always get that opportunity. And to get that opportunity with someone like Chris was a tremendous experience—one of the greatest experiences of my life."

The film's creative producer Ron Tippe is a veteran of feature anima-

tion, having worked on *Space Jam* for Warner Bros. and *Shrek* at DreamWorks. For *Everyone's Hero*, he had the task of keeping the story focused on the direction set by Christopher and Dana Reeve. "One of the things that appealed to Chris and Dana so much," says Tippe, "was that this is a story of a little boy who is willing to go to the ends of the earth to help his father. What Chris loved about this was that it's a father-son story, and it's a direct reflection of Chris's relationship with his three children. It was my job to stay on point and stay true to that vision."

Throughout the making of the film, Kurtz would visit Reeve's home several times a week as they shaped the story. "He came to be a friend that I really loved. He had a real work ethic—he was struggling to breathe, but we worked four, five hours a day. We would talk about the characters and ideas for how to lay the story out, and we would look at the artwork together. He really loved to collaborate."

Artistically, the film showcases a painterly style, reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's Americana. Nonetheless, the overall feel of the film does have the stamp of an independent studio. "The film is already unique because we are trying a sort of independent filmmaker's way of making a movie, with a lower budget but with a great story," says IDT's vice president of artistic development Frank Gladstone. "I'd like to see it succeed because I'd like to see more animation being done in this independent vein. I already know it's a good movie, but I hope it works because it'll



help open up our industry to more types of pictures that don't have to be gag-oriented laugh riots. They can be pictures with heart."

"I hope that as we go forward, a hallmark of our style will be diversity," says exec producer Jerry Davis. "Costs are going down, in terms of hardware and productivity of off-the-shelf software, and also by virtue of production discipline. So there are opportunities to take bigger risks with animated movies and not be restricted to tried and true formulas. We're also building a studio that is very filmmaker-driven. Having really strong points of view among our directors will make each of our movies very unique. And if we allow filmmakers to take their first instinct and go with it, we can make movies for less money and still be successful."

Davis had come from supervising production at Blue Sky for seven years, and before that he worked at Warner Bros. "I worked on *Iron Giant*," he adds, "and I feel that *Everyone's Hero* has a lot of the heart and tone that *Iron Giant* has."

Almost 400 people worked on the film in total between the offices in Newark and the studios in Burbank, Toronto and Israel. The animation was done in Maya with Photoshop art. Rendering was done with Mental Ray, while Avid was used for editing. The total cost is reportedly far less than the usual \$100 million price tag of most CG films. Altogether, the film took less than two years to make, and about a year for production alone. "It wasn't simply because we wanted to rush the film," assures Glad-

stone. "It's because we have a different view of how these films could be made. We were very conscious about moving this movie through and sticking with our decisions. Because of this, we were able to make the movie very efficiently, still make it look great and tell a good story."

One of the biggest challenges of the production was the loss of the film's visionary. After Christopher Reeve's passing, the production took about six weeks to regroup. "When he passed away," says Kurtz, "it was very, very hard. But Chris wasn't a quitter, and I had to remind myself of that a lot. I found myself missing him, and even talking to him during story meetings. For a long time Dana was our bridge to Chris, and then when we lost her too, our bridge was the movie itself."

"All of a sudden people turn to you and you'd say to yourself, 'I have to make sure we do what Chris would have wanted,'" says Tippe. "I took my responsibility extremely seriously, and I'm so proud of the work that we made. If Chris and Dana were



here now, and I believe they are in some fashion or form, they would be overjoyed. Chris' whole thing was 'keep on swinging.' There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it. Go forward; don't let anything get in your way. That's a tremendous thing to exult, and that's why I think people will love the film." ■

Fox releases IDT Entertainment's *Everyone's Hero* in theaters on September 15.

