



## A Minute with Eric Goldberg

*A brief interview by Jake Friedman*

You might recognize his animation when you watch *Aladdin's* Genie, or Phil from *Hercules*, or Rhapsody in Blue from *Fantasia 2000*. But Eric Goldberg got his humble start on 1977's *Raggedy Ann and Andy* when he was barely out of high school. Since then he's animated and directed for Disney features, directed the Warner characters in their own feature, and bounced around in independent animation. For a guy who started out making cartoons with a super-8 he got for his bar mitzvah, this self-proclaimed "frustrated ham" has secured a place for himself on the animation map.

As far as inspirations, Goldberg says that "the list is endless," but he starts off with Chuck Jones and the other Warner directors like Freling, Tashlin and Avery. "Their work had to be very economical," notes Goldberg, "but they were able to bring a vitality to animation on a shoestring budget."

Goldberg also notes the influence of Disney animators Freddy Moore and Ward Kimball. "Freddy Moore's work had such a degree of confidence and subtleness; he could try anything and almost always make it work. Just looking at the variations on Mickey's legs while he's walking in 'Nifty Nineties' [you'll see] things that nobody else would attempt, because nobody else had the confidence to be that audacious with leg movement, among other things. And his work always looked like it had fun." Kimball, similarly, injected an element of fun in his animation, but Goldberg calls him the "studio Maverick. The guy would try anything ... I admire him for that. He always wanted to go in a different artistic direction from everyone else at the studio, very stylized." Goldberg also tips his hat to illustrator Al Hirschfeld, art director Mary Blair, layout artist Ken O'Conner and background artist Maurice Noble.

The work of artists like these has an appeal that has lived on for decades, and isn't it every creator's dream to come up with something that popular? I had to inquire about the appeal in Goldberg's big blue Genie. Goldberg coughs it up to the public's appetite for something "completely bombastic and off the wall," not to mention the fact that the character utilizes the animation medium as well as any character can, morphing into anything at the drop of a hat. Goldberg also credits Robin Williams as the inspiration for the character. "Being able to visualize Robin's delivery was something that was a huge delight," he notes.

From the start, Goldberg knew what Genie's personality should be. "We always picked takes, [directors] Ron Clements, John Musker and myself, that always had a bit of warmth to them. We always wanted to. Robin gave us enough variations of a very sarcastic Genie to *Aladdin*, but we didn't pick any of those takes." That friendship between Genie and *Aladdin* became a backbone of the film itself. "I always looked at it as one of Disney's first buddy pictures," he says.

While Goldberg did not work on the *Aladdin* sequels, he laughed contentedly when discussing the true-to-form Genie in *Aladdin and the King of Thieves*.

"It's very humbling to think that you had a hand in a character that can live without you, that the personality of the character and his initial appearance is so strong, everybody gets it and can carry on with it."

Speaking of working on other people's characters, I asked him about the utility of 2D and 3D with classic cartoon icons. After all, Goldberg directed the 2D Warner characters for the movie *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*, as well as the Disneyland spots in which the classic characters are CG.

"Joe Dante directed the movie, and he felt very, very, very strongly that the characters should be hand-drawn. I certainly wasn't going to argue, because I agree with him. And we certainly did our best to do those characters justice. As far as the Disneyland commercials go, the characters are CG. That's an assignment. Although many people will argue that the characters should never be taken from one [medium] to the other, I disagree. And actually I think it's the same issue with *Back in Action*, whether it's hand drawn or not. What you're really talking about is the integrity of the characters."

Goldberg cites the examples of the collectible maquettes that keep the feel of the original characters, as well as the Viewmaster reels he grew up with as a kid. Goldberg credits these 3D Viewmaster images to sculptor Martha Armstrong Hand. "She used to sculpt, in the 50's, these great versions of classic characters. She did the Bugs Bunny/Elmer Fudd sculpt, she did the Donald Duck and Chip & Dale sculpt, she did the Hanna Barbera characters, and I just thought, my god, those are beautiful! And they really felt like the characters." While he prefers hand-drawn animation, Goldberg says that these examples compel him to embrace the conversion of classic characters into CG. "I think [not doing so] is actually being a little too purist, myself."

On a side note, I asked Goldberg if there was anything on television today that inspires him. He responded with a laugh, "next question."

Finally, I was wondering, if he was stranded on a deserted island with only one piece of animation, what would it be? He couldn't think of one, but gave me an even tie: "A print of 'Rabbit of Seville,' a print of *Dumbo*. *Dumbo* is brilliant, my favorite Disney feature."

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