



An interview by Jake Friedman

Profile: Ila Abramson

Artists aren't the only hard-working creatives in the field of animation. Take Ila Abramson, who, for more than 10 years, has recruited animation artists and designers to help staff up projects around the country for various studios. Since nearly four years ago she has been operating independently as the founder and reigning cheese of I Spy Recruiting. There she personally works hands-on with all her clients between New York and LA, and assisted in staffing Australia's own Animal Logic studios [Happy Feet]. Abramson was nice enough to talk to me about her path, the industry, what she looks for in candidates, and her advice to starving artists.

What's your background?

I went to school for live-action film. After school I did freelance production on commercials and other live-action stuff, and I was really disenchanted with it in terms of the people and the pace and the lifestyle. I have a vivid memory of going shopping with my mother at Ann Taylor, putting on nylons and this crazy business suit, and I started crying in the dressing room. I said to my mom, "I can't have a job like this."

And then I just got lucky and got a production management job working on *Nightmare Before Christmas*, and as soon as I saw that, I said, "Oh, this is what I want to do!" It just sort of came together. I loved the lifestyle and working with animators.

Then I got a job recruiting at PDI-Dreamworks. I hired all the animators and artists for *Shrek* and *Antz*. Then I fell in love, so I moved to New York and I worked at MTV Animation as director of recruiting, and then went to Nick Digital studios and was in charge of east/west coast facilities for recruiting, and then I went out on my own and started my own company.

Why recruiting?

I respect the work that animators can do. I can't do it to save my life, but I think I have a really good eye for animation and design. So for me this is an artistic outlet, and I like helping people get work and realize their dreams in this fun industry.

Why build your own company?

I do love to do my own thing, so it just seems to make sense. I don't necessarily need to be part of a big stu-

dio system, especially the way things are set up these days. The industry in general was making a shift, moving less from big-studio systems to more of the mom-&-pop shops that were opening up, because the software was becoming more accessible to everybody. It was going towards a lot more freelance-based jobs and projects-based jobs, rather than people on staff and in-house for long periods of time.

And I felt that instead of working for just one large studio, I could just work for a bunch of smaller studios in addition to the large studios. I could be independent, and that way cover a lot more ground. Now I'm brought on for different projects, to staff freelance projects, to find staff people for a client, so that way I can work in all different areas. I get to cover broadcast design, features, series, 2-D.

What is unique about the animation community?

I think animation attracts a different type of person. There's a certain levity and a certain sense of humor, and I felt that working in animation I was really working very closely with the artists themselves. I like the pace and the projects that we work on - I think there's a real creativity there.

Is there more money for people who manage artists than for the artists themselves?

I wouldn't say that, I would say that every studio and project is very different, and everybody's able to

make a living doing what they love, so I don't think there's a huge discrepancy. I think it depends on the individuals and the projects and the different studio. I think overall, if you're good, and you're integral, and you contribute a lot to a project, you'll do fine.

How does someone catch your radar?

I just look for people who are good at what they do, who have a true passion for it, whatever that passion may be. Something I always tell students is that it's really easy to get bogged down in a lot of different details and to lose one's focus, but I think if you know what you want to do and have strength in one area, then just focus on that strength, and build your work accordingly.

What's in high demand right now?

Right now there's a real range to what's out there. I feel the industry has reached a real high that we haven't had in a while. New York, especially, is back. Flash animation



series are big, broadcast design, obviously CG features. There are highs and lows, but right now I feel it's been a really healthy industry, for both staff and freelance jobs. I know freelancers who have been working constantly for the past 5 years.

Do you ever move people from coast to coast?

There are people in the industry who always go back and forth. I actually just staffed a guy who's based in NY but I got him to work on a feature in LA for a few months, and then he's coming back.

What impresses you more, a reel or one film?

I think it goes back to: figure out what you do and just do it really well. I've seen a short, concise, clean reel that conveys what your strengths are as much as a film. I'd rather see a short reel that focuses on quality than a longer reel that's trying to throw stuff on to fill space.

What's the biggest reason why some people don't make it in the animation business?

Besides being talented and being good at one does, most projects are collaborations and most projects come down to teamwork. It's a small industry, and I find that if someone is too difficult to work with – is a prima donna and makes a lot of demands – people would rather find some one who isn't. Ultimately your reputation can go far. This is a small industry, and I don't think it ever pays to burn a bridge.

What's the hardest thing about your job?

Sometimes it might be hard to find the right person to the right job, and it can be time-consuming, but aside from the regular challenges of the job, I can't complain.

What's the biggest perk?

I like that I've been able to figure out what I like to do, to work in this industry and with people I like to work with. I guess I'm lucky like that.

Why did you choose to do what you're doing?

I don't want to tell people, but I just fell into it. I loved working in entertainment and film, but I just got really lucky with animation.

How do I get to be where you are now?

I could hire you as my junior recruiter. Again, if you love what you do, and you're passionate about it, chances are it's going to work out. Finding a job or a talent that you genuinely like to get up to do every day, and to spend your time doing, that's half the battle. And if those elements are there, then chances are you're going to end up being successful with it.

Jake Friedman is a NY-based animator and animation journalist. Read his interview with Andreas Deja for *AnimatorsUnite.com* at www.jakefriedman.net.