

# Arts

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## MOVIES

**Why Pixar Is Better.** The studio that invented CGI stays on top with the tasty *Ratatouille*

BY RICHARD CORLISS/EMERYVILLE

REMY, A COMMON RAT WITH A GOURMET'S SOUL, HAS MADE HIS WAY TO THE KITCHEN OF THE ONCE-GREAT PARIS RESTAURANT GUSTEAU'S. HERE, THE NEW PIXAR MOVIE *Ratatouille* TELLS US, HE WILL BE ABLE TO CREATE SUPERB DISHES—if only he can find a human ally. His desperate choice: a callow scullery lad named Linguini. Remy, in the logic of animated features, understands the boy's words, but Linguini can't speak rat; so the two communicate through Remy's nods and brow furrowings. Somehow, the kid gets the message. "I can't cook..." Linguini says, and the rodent shakes his head no. "But *you can?*?" Remy answers with a Gallic shrug so eloquent it says many things. First, a modest "Eh, a little." Beneath that: "Well, not to brag, but I'm actually quite proficient." Most important: "Trust me. Together we'll cook up some magic."

Charlie Chaplin and the other great silent-movie clowns knew how to express the deepest, subtlest emotions through gesture. Remy, too, in the hands of director Brad Bird and his gifted animators, is a veritable



Shakespeare of shrugs. The suppleness with which Remy scoots through both human and rodent worlds lends *Ratatouille* the believability at the center of Pixar classics like John Lasseter's *Toy Story*, Andrew Stanton's *Finding Nemo* and Bird's own *The Incredibles*.

Bird, like the other Pixarians, is working from the Walt Disney playbook. "In a fantasy world where animals can talk, how do they talk? That's the secret of character animation. Even though it's a completely unbelievable thing, people invest in it," he says. "If we do our job on this one, audiences will empathize with, and invest in, a rat." That's because the creative children at Pixar's Lego-like headquarters in the San Francisco suburb of Emeryville realize that movies, and especially cartoons, are not just talking pictures. They are motion and emotion pictures. And if you don't have heart, ya ain't got art.

There's plenty of both in this rat-out-of-sewer story, which hits U.S. theaters June 29. For Remy (brightly voiced by comedian Patton Oswalt) is your basic outsider. Even with his family, he felt like a connoisseur among food philistines. They are tough and oafish, satisfied with garbage; he's a devotee of the late, famed chef Gusteau (Brad Garrett) and his mantra, "Anyone can cook." Having lost track of his teeming brood, he arrives at Gusteau's old restaurant, now run by the conniving Skinner (Ian Holm). But Remy's culinary imagination, put into effect by Linguini (Lou Romano) and the comely sous-chef Colette (Janeane Garofalo), will restore the reputation of the place... if only Remy can stay out of sight, and Linguini not be trapped by Skinner's vilest scheme.

From the moment Remy enters, crash-

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—DIRECTOR BRAD BIRD

ing, to the final happy fadeout, *Ratatouille* parades the brio and depth that set Pixar apart from and above other animation studios. The flood that separates Remy from his family is turbulent, terrifically choreographed, action-movie excitement. The budding Remy-Linguini friendship grows naturally, without clamor or shtick—quite a feat, considering how dense and gauche the young man can be. The tonal quality is pretty amazing for a CGI movie. The usual harsh plastic visuals are replaced by muted, luscious views of late-afternoon Paris.

*Ratatouille* began with a premise of the movie's original director, Jan Pinkava. "When I heard this idea about a rat that wants to be a fine chef," Lasseter says, "I thought, 'Wow, this is the most extreme fish-out-of-water story I've ever heard.' Following one's creative passion against everyone telling you, 'No, you can't do this'—that was such an amazing idea."

This was to have been the first feature assignment for Pinkava, the Czech-born director of Pixar's Oscar-winning short *Geri's Game*. But after a few years, says Lasseter regretfully, "it was just not working out. The leadership and vision in the story were not there." Bird, who had been away from the

*Ratatouille* meetings for a year, finishing *The Incredibles*, now inundated the group with appealing story ideas. Eventually, he took over the project, and Pinkava, who still receives story credit, left the company.

Wrenching decisions are what Pixarians have to make, just as the exigencies of the market are what they try to ignore. The title, for one thing: it's pronounced rat-a-tooeey and refers to a Mediterranean vegetable stew, which not everyone will know or, knowing, will care about. And then... well... rats. They are typically figures of fear and loathing, and the Bird team hasn't prettied them up. Though Remy's coat has a lovely bluish sheen, and he often walks on his two hind paws, he is recognizably a rat, much closer to his species than a certain Disney mouse—with red pants, white gloves and yellow shoes—is to his. Then there are the marketing tie-ins, which reap extra cash and free promotion. As *Ratatouille* producer Brad Lewis asks, with a rhetorical flourish, "What food-product company would want a tie-in with a movie about a rat?"

The burger franchises should rethink their reluctance, because the food in *Ratatouille* looks real enough to eat, and to savor. Credit this to Sharon Calahan, director of photography (lighting). "I knew we'd need a bigger toolkit to pull off food," says this artist-technician. "Wet grapes and dry grapes have different kinds of translucencies. Liquids and sauces are hard. Bread was a big challenge because of its porous nature."

There's a porous nature, too, to the company's power structure. Swapping ideas, stepping in, hanging out are at the root of what has to be called the Pixar culture. The studio has working methods more in common with the

## What's Next For Pixar?

The studio tries to keep its works-in-progress secret. But the directors of the next three Pixtures did give TIME a tantalizing preview of coming attractions



### Wall\*e 2008

The studio synopsis: "The year is 2700. Wall\*e, a robot, spends every day doing what he was made for. But soon, he will discover what he was *meant* for." Andrew Stanton, writer-director of *Finding Nemo* (still Pixar's biggest box-office hit), describes this metallic love story as "R2-D2 meets *City Lights*," with Wall\*e meeting a cute robot named Eve. Those who remember the 1931 Charlie Chaplin film, about a blind girl wooed by a tramp she mistakenly believes is a rich man, can transpose the story to a lonely planet and guess from there. The main roles will be "voiced" electronically by Ben Burtt, the wizardly sound designer behind *Star Wars*.



**Rat attack!** Remy the rodent hero breaks dishes, and makes delicious ones, in Gusteau's kitchen

dotcom companies in nearby Silicon Valley than with the movie industry down in Los Angeles. For a start, everyone who works there, from the executives to the cooks at Luxo Cafe (try the excellent sushi), is encouraged to take a filmmaking class and make a short film. This is part of Pixar president Ed Catmull's belief in "lifelong learning."

Most movie directors have individual contracts with their studios; the Pixar directors are employees of the company, contributing on all studio projects. The so-called Brain Trust—Lasseter, Bird and Stanton, along with directors Lee Unkrich, Bob Peterson, Brenda Chapman, Pete Docter and Gary Rydstrom and one recent recruit, *Little Miss Sunshine* writer Michael Arndt—convenes regularly to spitball ideas and, Lasseter says, "help one another make these films. We're very honest."

And no apparent wall between work and

fun; often, Lewis says, he must force people to go home. "This was the first and only job for a lot of people here," says Bird, who as director of the 1999 animated feature *The Iron Giant* and as one of the developers of *The Simpsons*, is the rare Pixar Pooh-Bah who came from the outside. "I think they're under the delusion that things are this nice everywhere."

The font of this friendly, funky vibe is Lasseter, the jolly round fellow (any cartoonist could draw him in two seconds and three circles) with a weakness for assaultively colorful Hawaiian shirts. In the mid-'80s, this Disney renegade began making computer-animated shorts, one of which, *Tin Toy*, won an Oscar six years before he finished Pixar's first feature, 1995's *Toy Story*. That movie changed animation history, as Walt Disney had in 1937 with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Like Walt in his early genius period, Lasseter saw

that the secret of an animated movie is story and characters—and the enemy of innovation is complacency. "We fear becoming a studio where we act like we know what we're doing when we don't," Bird agrees. "For better or for worse, Pixar is always gonna throw itself in the deep end and try to figure out a way to not drown. I love that about this place."

When he starts work on a movie, Bird looks for core thoughts. The core here: "Cooks are givers, and rats are takers. In the larger world there are people who are givers and people who are takers. Cooking, feeding people, is a giving act. All art at its best is a giving act that continues to give as long as the art is consumed. As with a cook, you're handing it over to someone to enjoy."

Toward the end of the movie, Remy whips up his specialty for Anton Ego (voiced by Peter O'Toole), a food critic so severe he is known to trembling chefs throughout Paris as the Grim Eater. Ego puts a forkful in his mouth, and in a flash, fond memories—of a loving mother giving him delicious food—play across his face. As Bird describes the moment, "His eyes drift down toward the dish, like, 'Is it *this*? It is this. I love food again. This is what I was missing.'" A taste of something wonderful can humanize almost any misanthrope, even a critic.

That's the effect a soupçon of *Ratatouille*, or almost any Pixar movie, can have on viewers. It returns us to animation's childlike wonders, and makes believers, gourmets, of us all. —REPORTED BY REBECCA WINTERS KEGAN/EMERYVILLE ■



## Up

2009  
Pete Docter, the Pixar lifer who made *Monsters, Inc.*, and co-director Bob Peterson are preparing this "coming-of-old-age story" about a seventysomething guy who lives in a house that "looks like your grandparents' house smelled." He befriends a clueless young Wilderness Ranger and gets into lots of alter kicker altercations. Says Pixar: "Our hero travels the globe, fights beasts and villains and eats dinner at 3:30 in the afternoon."

## Toy Story 3

2010  
Originality is a Pixar hallmark. None of the company's films have been based on fairy tales or novels, and only *Toy Story* has spawned sequels. Why a third adventure for Woody (Tom Hanks) and Buzz (Tim Allen)? "We got an idea we thought would be really great," says Lee Unkrich, who co-directed *Toy Story 2* and *Finding Nemo* and graduates to full director status here. "We're just starting to write the story," he confides, adding, "I wake up every morning hoping for a eureka moment." He and the Brain Trust have already had one inspiration: they've asked Randy Newman to write the score. Or was that a no-brainer?

