

## SCREEN DIRECTORS GUILD OF IRELAND

PHOTO: *The Hound of Ulla* – Copyright © Paul Bolger 2008



# SDGI Director in Focus

**Film Is Film Is Film! – Animation director PAUL BOLGER gets animated.**

WHEN I WAS asked to write this, I wasn't sure if I should air grievances, pontificate about the hows and whys of cartoons, talk about how narrow the market has become for feature animation in the West or just tell you how I doodle my ideas along the edges of a script to get a sense of the acting and staging. So instead, I thought I'd write about this idea of being Irish and being an animator in the international film industry and why we need to categorise ourselves. I often think of something someone said once: 'It's better to use animation to make film than use film to make animation.' You have no idea how hard it is to make other people, particularly animators, see the sense in this statement. You could shoot two sticks talking and, with some imagination, make it entertaining. You don't have to be Irish or an animator to do that. Just pick up a camera, get two sticks (or draw two sticks) and shoot.

So am I an Irish director? Well I am Déise. A floury blaa-eating, blue and white flag-waving yoke from the banks of the river Suir (or the 'Kay River' as it's known in my native Waterford). I was lucky or arrogant enough to believe over the years that someone should let me spend their money making pictures move. I guess the real question is, is it more about doing what you want from the get-go and risking starvation or taking on a commission in the hope you can finance doing what you want at a later stage?

I recently delivered a cut of an American-scripted, European-financed and multinationally produced kids' animated feature film. We made it in seven countries with over five hundred people of all nationalities. It was a managerial nightmare.

Without old-fashioned systems of transferring information and direction to all its service studios it would never have been made. The final cut, however, is another story – literally. What started out as a meeting of minds to create a low-budget 2D film became a wet dream meal-ticket for some when it went 3D and the budget exploded. Others involved were not so fortunate and I felt I couldn't

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abandon either them or the concept of the charming film my (highly talented) mates and I designed. So I stuck it out and learned the hard way that directing any kind of movie really is about 99% perseverance, politics and perspiration and 1% creativity.

What is interesting in this new digital age is how planning, proven production methods and physical ways of getting stories on screen are constantly ignored, considered old hat and just plain denigrated – to the detriment of the projects and crew involved. I understand new technology and the usage of it requires a set of guidelines all its own, but what came first – the chicken or the egg? In the case of many animated projects I have been around it seems omelettes rule!

My ranting and raving about how to make

animated films or run studios probably wears out people who know me. I get uppity about 'how things should be done.' I guess that's why I always got hired over the years – or not (as the case may be!).

The wheel is as old as language itself and it works just fine. It may have taken a generation or two after its invention to perfect it but I'm pretty sure it has been a boring circle since the first day it was put on a wooden cart. And for a good reason! Try an oval tyre on your car or bike and see how far you get. I'm not trying to be funny. The amount of 'oval wheels' I have seen in animation production in recent years is frightening.

I want to see films. One-off narratives or well-made series that entertain. Big, short, fat, tall, horror, sci-fi, comedy, action, romance, murder-mystery, etc. Set them in Ireland, Africa, on the Moon, in 1500, 2008 or 2260 – wherever, whenever. Having this hang-up about how much Irish content a film should have or only working on one project at a time without another in the pipeline is disadvantageous. Film is film is film!

I believe Ireland has the potential to be the architect and not just a building site of film production. I believe in slates of projects. In the mass production of ideas, stories and visuals to support that – with minimal investment. Plant a hundred trees to get ten; plant one and chances are you get none!

I think CGI is presently doing to film what photography did to painting in the 19th Century. The camera forced the artists of that era to capture the feeling of the scene or emotion they were confronted with. The lens merely replicated reality, while art transformed it. I believe CGI will some day liberate the filmmaker in the same way and force us as 'visualists' to rediscover the truths that make fine and commercial art of worth, immortal. I would argue that Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and all the other 'isms' and 'ists' that came along between 1850 and 1950 and found their way into the mainstream through Pop Art and film are the result of artists defying the camera's ability to simply capture what it sees.

Which is why I want to bring about a live-action version of Cúchulainn that attempts to portray the myth as a dream of what might have been. I want to see how far I can push the marriage of animation and 'real' film to create a vision of ancient Ireland which may upset some but hopefully thrill and excite many, many more. I'm developing the film through my production company PillarStone Productions with London-based BreakThru Films, and generous assistance from the Irish Film Board. We're finalising the script and working towards production in the near future. Keep an eye out for it! ♦