

# BEYOND THE (BEAST'S) CASTLE

with Don Hahn, Executive Producer of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*



Don Hahn is the producer behind the 1991 classic *Beauty and the Beast*, the first animated film nominated for a Best Picture Oscar.<sup>®</sup> In 1994, he followed that with *The Lion King*, the most successful traditionally-animated film ever until *Finding Nemo* swam into the scene in 2003. His most recent accomplishment is executive producing the live-action film *Beauty and the Beast*, which as of this interview has become the top grossing PG film of all time.

As if that wasn't enough, he's just an irresistibly lovable guy. A Midwesterner by birth, Don happened to be the drum major in the marching bands of his high school **and** one of the colleges he attended. This man knows how to get a large group marching to the same beat! Today, he leads gifted artists of all kinds in the magic-making that stirs the hearts of audiences worldwide. Don was kind enough to talk with us recently about his critically acclaimed work. See if you don't agree—he's a prince among men.

**DON, YOUR ABILITY TO VISUALIZE, AND THEN BRING THE CHARACTERS, STORIES, AND AMAZING SETTINGS TOGETHER SEEMS JUST MAGICAL. WHAT'S THE INGREDIENT THAT MAKES IT ALL WORK?**

*It's all about empathy. If we can understand a character and what he or she wants, and then understand the obstacles in the way, then we can empathize with that character. We had a tough story meeting once and Michael Eisner came in and said: "Just tell me this. Who is this story about? What does he want, and why can't he have it?" That's what story is all about.*

*Cinderella wants to go to the ball, but her stepmother has her trapped. Simba wants to be king, but his Uncle Scar has other ideas. Belle wants adventure, but is stuck in this poor provincial town. If you can boil a story down to that essential core, then you can build it out from there. Absolutely every decision about the movie from the sets to the songs has to all tell that same story and reflect that same theme.*

**HAVING PRODUCED BEAUTY AND THE BEAST IN 1991 AND NOW ALSO THE BOX-OFFICE PHENOMENON, LIVE-ACTION VERSION, WHAT CORE ELEMENTS REMAINED THE SAME? WHAT WAS THE GREATEST CHANGE OR CHALLENGE IN BRINGING THAT BELOVED ANIMATED FILM TO LIFE?**

*The biggest challenge was that the original story was really simple: Big hairy beast wants to marry pretty girl, and she doesn't want anything to do with him. In the original fairy tale, the beast would come down night after night and ask Belle to marry him and she'd say no. Then he'd sulk upstairs only to try again the next night. Not very entertaining. The key to that film was the idea that the entire castle and all the servants within it were under the same spell. Now you have a rooting interest and you can hope that the innocent objects can help play matchmaker and break the spell—not only for the beast but for themselves. Now you have a group of characters who want something and can't have it, so you can cheer for them when they get it.*

*The other challenge in that story is that Belle is a victim in the original fairy tale. Her father picks a rose and makes a deal with the beast to bring Belle back in his place. She's just a pretty pawn. So we made Belle more active. When her father's horse shows up with Maurice missing, she jumps on and rides to save her father. When she meets the beast, it seems utterly hopeless that love would grow between them. Then she runs away in despair and Beast saves her from the wolves. Now she owes him, and they have to come to a truce which, in turn, becomes the beginning of their feelings for each other.*

*The live film was so exciting to see because Emma brought a lot to the character of Belle and we got to establish more backstory about Belle and her mother. We can see her mother*

is sick, and that her father moves to a tiny town to escape the plague. Again, this gives us empathy for Belle and Maurice, who are outsiders in this place and seen as odd by the other townspeople. Still, we can see that there is so much more to her than a housebound, bookish girl who wants adventure. Before the movie is done, she gets her adventure in a big and unexpected way.

### **I LOVE WHAT YOU WROTE IN YOUR 2011 BOOK, *BRAIN STORM: UNLEASHING YOUR CREATIVE SELF*. IN IT YOU SAY:**

“ Making art is hard, so instead of sucking on your lip and wishing you had more talent, try this: take your passion, knowledge, and work ethic and throw yourself naked, with arms flailing, into something you love to do. ”

### **IS THAT HOW YOU ENCOURAGE THE BEST WORK FROM YOUR TEAMS?**

It **IS** hard to make something, especially a collaborative thing like a film. I wish I could tell you that it was a neat and clean process, but it isn't. Yes, we plan, and budget, and schedule, and prepare, but once you start in on a creative project, it's often full of chaos and disappointment.

The single thing I try to do is create a safe place for the team. That means a safe workplace to bring up any idea that might help “plus” the film. The idea of “plussing” is something that Walt loved...the thought that a good idea can be made great by pushing it higher and higher into its best possible form.

Next, we create a lot of junk in the creative process and that's not a bad thing. It's better to fill up notepads with ideas that you can then edit and sort out, than it is staring at a blank paper waiting for inspiration to come knocking. Inspiration ain't gonna knock. All you can do is show up and work. Put up the bad with the good. Share it with the team in a safe environment, debate it and “plus” it, and soon the idea will start to come together.

The other secret is that I try to hire the best possible people that I can find, and then stay out of their way. Nobody needs a helicopter boss hovering over the process. Yes, if you're Walt Disney or Steve Jobs, you are a once-in-a-generation talent who can hover and make great work, but even those two guys hired the best and brightest and let them run with ideas. So to recap: Great people, safe room, plussing it until it's great. There is no good...there is only great.

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**SO – THAT'S DON. SEE WHAT I MEAN? WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO BE ON HIS TEAM, TOO?**

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