



AWARDS SEASON

Embracing a Fantasy From Their Pixar Past

‘The Dam Keeper’ Delivers Oscar Nomination for Studio Alumni

By CHARLES SOLOMON JAN. 29, 2015

This year’s nominees for the Oscar for animated short film cover a variety of subjects and styles. But the film that has generated the most excitement among professional animators is “The Dam Keeper,” a painterly short by Daisuke Tsutsumi and Robert Kondo, former Pixar art directors who have started their own studio.

“There is a sameness to much animation, so when a film like ‘Dam Keeper’ comes along, it reminds us that the boundaries of animation have barely been explored,” said Don Hahn, producer of “The Lion King” and “Beauty and the Beast.”

Told entirely in mime, “The Dam Keeper” focuses on the withdrawn, dutiful Pig, who maintains a giant windmill that keeps toxic fumes away from his village. Pig is mocked and bullied at school until the impish Fox, who has a gift for caricature, arrives, and the two become fast friends. A misunderstanding leads to a crisis that ultimately reaffirms their friendship and the value of hard work.

“The Dam Keeper” has been screened at more than 75 festivals and won numerous honors, including prizes from the New York International

Children's Film Festival, Anima Mundi in Brazil and the Chicago International Children's Film Festival. The film begins a theatrical run on Jan. 30 as part of a program of Oscar-nominated shorts.

Although Mr. Tsutsumi and Mr. Kondo are highly respected for their work as art directors on the hit Pixar features "Toy Story 3" and "Monsters University," "The Dam Keeper" is their first film as writer-directors. It was conceived as a learning experience.

"While we were art-directing 'Monsters University,' I asked Robert if we could direct a film together, just to see how far we could go," Mr. Tsutsumi, known in the industry as Dice, said in a telephone interview from their studio in Berkeley, Calif.

The first problem they encountered was the story: What did they want to say, and what was the best way to say it? "We did four different stories before we got to 'The Dam Keeper,'" Mr. Tsutsumi said. "One inspiration was the folk tale about the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. This one small boy having the responsibility to protect his town — what if our main character had that responsibility, but every day?"

The idea of an unsung hero who tends not to interact with others stuck with the artists, perhaps because they identified with him. "We're somewhat introverted, although maybe not as much as Pig," Mr. Tsutsumi, 40, said. "A lot of artists are."

"People often ask if Dice is Fox and I'm Pig, but both us believe we're both characters," said Mr. Kondo, 34.

"I think Pig might be who we are, but Fox is who we want to be," countered Mr. Tsutsumi, echoing the Warner Brothers director Chuck Jones, who once said, "I can dream about being Bugs Bunny, but when I look in the mirror in the morning, I see Daffy Duck."

Animation artists praise the look of “The Dam Keeper,” which suggests a canvas in motion. “The film felt as though some beautiful development artwork — those magical pieces you see in ‘art of’ books — had been given life and poetry and movement,” said Dean DeBlois, a writer-director of “How to Train Your Dragon 2,” which is up for an Oscar this year in the animated feature category.

Creating that look for their 18-minute film proved an enormous task. Using Photoshop, Mr. Tsutsumi, Mr. Kondo and small crew of students they trained to work in their style added brush-stroke effects to each of the film’s 8,000 or so frames. As a result, the figures and settings have a looseness of texture that contrasts vividly with the hard-edge look of big-ticket features that rely on computer graphic imagery. “That was a time-consuming choice, but it paid off in the end,” Mr. Tsutsumi said.

Both directors are accomplished easel painters whose work emphasizes the play of light. “The look of the film is how we paint, because that’s what we know,” Mr. Tsutsumi said. “We were too busy struggling with the story to spend time” inventing a new style, he said. “It was easy to stick with what we could do.”

As they progressed on the film, Mr. Kondo and Mr. Tsutsumi realized they enjoyed working outside the big-studio environment. They had set out to experience something akin to the early days of Pixar, when it was the small upstart studio that the Walt Disney Animation and Pixar Animation president, Ed Catmull, describes in his book “Creativity, Inc.”

Mr. Tsutsumi, to whom Mr. Catmull was a mentor, recounts bringing him to the tiny, windowless studio that he and Mr. Kondo initially rented in Emeryville, Calif., just across the street from Pixar. “Ed looked around and said, ‘This is the moment you’ll remember no matter what it turns into, no matter how big it becomes,’ ” Mr. Tsutsumi recalled. “That first moment, when you create something from nothing, is the best time.”

“I’m not saying we’re going to become the next Pixar,” Mr. Tsutsumi went on, “but creating something from scratch is what ‘creating’ means. Pixar was wonderful, but we didn’t experience that beginning, and if we stayed at Pixar, we never would.”

To the dismay of many of their friends and relatives, Mr. Tsutsumi and Mr. Kondo resigned from Pixar and established their own studio, Tonko House. (They also left the windowless studio for more comfortable quarters in Berkeley.) “Pixar was super-supportive of us while we there, and the people are like our family,” Mr. Kondo said. “I feel like we’ve gone away to college: We’re experimenting and figuring out who we are as filmmakers.”

With the Oscar nomination in hand, the filmmakers are answering a flurry of calls and developing ideas for a feature film and a television series. “We’ve spent a lot of time talking about why are we doing this? Why did we leave Pixar?” Mr. Kondo said. “The reason is we have stories not just that we want to tell but that we need to tell. It’s all about finding the right ways to tell those stories and share them with audiences.”

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