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Tim story tom and jerry

"These characters are 80-plus years old. And as I was watching them every afternoon [as a kid], I'm amazed at how… it's really great to be given the opportunity to bring these iconic characters to screen." Story recaps watching the reruns on television in the 80's, and how much joy it brought him as a kid. Yet as an adult, there is that word again… 'responsibility', so how do you take something that almost everyone experienced on the small screen originally and create a massive big-budget spectacle out of what is essentially a simple concept used for short animated vignettes? Story explains his process: "I went back and watch all the original shorts, you know, it's not often that you have a film that has so much, 'base material' that you can choose from, I went back and kind of study that. And once you feel like you got the spirit of it again, you kind of go out and you figure 'Hey, how do we expand their world, they always fall into and for the most part, a house?' And so we were also first thing you do is you give them a bigger stage. And then of course, you put that stage inside of them. The biggest city, the craziest city, you can find the city that gives you the most opportunity for mayhem. If you're going to have them destroy something, why not New York? So, you know, what's, what's more iconic than Tom and Jerry, and what's more iconic than New York?" "Tom and Jerry" are back! That classic cartoony cat and mouse rivalry that once graced the small screens of the '40s and '50s are now heading to the big screen for a new generation of audiences to enjoy and laugh at. Perhaps that was the large appeal for making a contemporary film featuring these two characters. Parents who recognize Tom and Jerry's antics can share laughter and joy with their kids who may not be overly familiar with the animated pair. Director Tim Story with Tom & Jerry actor Jordan Bolger ThatsItLA had a chance to sit down with their fellow journalists for a "Tom and Jerry" virtual press conference and talk to director Tim Story who addressed the film's inclusivity, themes of friendship, how the actors acted against animated characters, and more. What was the thought process of having an Indian wedding in the movie? Tim Story: We always thought- how do we make the movie itself culturally inclusive to everyone. When it came down to the wedding, I think it also came out of the idea where I've actually shot American weddings, and I just felt let's do something different. Indian weddings! There's so much color and it just kind of offered more of a canvas of a wedding, even though, American weddings can get pretty lavish. And for that matter any one is just so beautiful. And to be perfectly honest, there was more stuff to destroy! Since we were going to be recreating a lot of animals as animated characters, we also looked for a culture that might allow us to do that. But it was always just important to include everybody just because we wanted Tom and Jerry to be accessible to every every, you know, color, creed, everything. It's been a fun thing to recreate. How did you make the soundtrack fit with the location of New York? TS: We first went back to what the original music did, and the original music was all orchestral, which was really cool. We knew we were going to go with a big score. Interestingly enough, they used a lot of jazz, so we started there. But we always wanted to be sure that this "Tom and Jerry" movie was a calling card to every generation. So that's when we started to mix in everything from some hip-hop, and the Indian music, and we looked for every little facet of music that we could add just so we were inclusive of as many cultures to be specifically as many cultures as possible. So, we started there. And then of course, we did our we did a normal 100 piece orchestra that gave us the big act action sound, and that harkens back to the original cartoon. We kind of just had a fun time with it. Anytime we felt like an inspiration whether it was hip hop in the beginning or the Indian in the music in the wedding, we just wanted to always kind of find music that was true to what was happening on screen. What kind of challenges did you face with the actors interacting with animated animals. TS: The actors want to be able to have something to act against, and one thing we found in the preparation for the movie was to have puppeteers. Jerry was a little harder. Sometimes we have a little figure of Jerry on set so you can see how small he was. But with Tom, there was a greyscale, meaning a gray version of Tom. Since Tom did not speak, it made it really simple for them to literally act out what Tom was doing with the actors to the point where the actors would actually do maybe their first two or three takes with the puppeteer. That's one of the things that allowed us to get a lot out of Chole [Grace Mortez] and Michael [Pena]. Spike was another puppeteer who literally put on knee pads and had these foam things on his hands. And he would run around on the ground and bark and do whatever we need him to do so that Michael would have something pulling and give him something to act against. So that's a little fun fact that a lot of people don't know how we pull that off. Tom and Jerry have such a strong relationship throughout their history. They're basically frenemies! So what can we learn or take away from the complex relationship between Tom and Jerry? TS: I constantly look at Tom and Jerry as family. I have a twin sister. And what Tom and Jerry always kind of means to me- I must admit, I was the I was the one that always messed with her. One thing I noticed is that no matter how many fights we got into we were always there when we needed each other. And to have that kind of message kind of resonate in the movie, at some point they do need to team up and save the day. And then once they save the day, they can go back to fighting. I just think that the idea of families or good friendships that you can you can have fights, but at the same time, you've got each other's back and ultimately, you take care of one another. Are you Team Tom or Team Jerry? TS: Team Jerry. I just think Jerry is so cool. And I've always wanted a little mousehole that had everything that you know so I'm team Jerry. Did you prepare for how Tom and Jerry would interact by watching old episodes? TS: The greatest thing about doing this movie was I knew the cartoons very well, because I grew up watching them every day of my life when I was young. Then I went back and I ended up watching every one of them just to try to pick up any ideas that we could use inside of the movie. That's literally what happened anytime we got stuck creatively or what Tom or Jerry might do. We just had pictures of almost every episode. You know, taped up around the production office. There's so many things that we picked up, literally straight from the cartoons. My preparation was just that it's kind of going back and re-familiarizing myself with everything they had done before. Once I did that, it made it real simple to come up with ideas. And then of course, you also get in a group where you can kind of make up your own little things. Things like the animal tornado, which was never a "Tom and Jerry" cartoon, but we felt it was a good extension. How did you find the balance between making a movie that hit the nostalgia factor for the parents watching, but also make it appealing to the younger generations? TS: I kind of knew that when I first started on this movie that we had to try to get everyone. One of the things that was really fun early on is I realized, I have a nine-year-old boy. He was seven when I started making this movie, and I just remember, when I got this, I hadn't watched Tom and Jerry cartoons for a very long time. But I remembered that he hadn't either. So I sat him in front of it. And he watched me watch seven episodes straight just and I wouldn't see him on the plane when he traveled with me, and he would be on the iPad, watching it on the airplane. So I just always wanted to make sure that we included every generation. It's funny because the adults are a little bit easier. But I just we would just love going back to our childhood. So, I would just do anything that I liked, or whatever I thought most around my age were felt as well. When it came to teenagers and kids, there's a lot of when you look at the old cartoons. They were made in the '40s and the '50s. So there was a lot, you know, music, other things like that. So, I just tried to bring in music. I tried to bringin technology, I tried to have "Tom and Jerry" kind of do things that that are the you know, the younger generations do today. Were the cast familiar with who "Tom and Jerry" are? TS: That's the fun thing about doing this. Everybody knew exactly what this movie is about. Everybody knew those characters. Even Chloe knew them well, like better than I thought she would have in our initial meeting. So that's what was great. Everybody was starting with a shared knowledge of these characters and kind of got what the movie should be, although we wanted to always keep it grounded. We also wanted to have fun and not make it too serious. That's what was fun about making the movie that everybody just kind of gave into what this concept is, and still made it real for them. So I was lucky, I had a cast that knew it. And there was a big shorthand of like a lot of people don't know how we pull that off. Tom and Jerry have such a strong relationship. By doing that, I think people would have a real nostalgia experience with the film, so that was important. And then of course, one of the other questions was going back and especially doing these characters and kind of got what the movie should be. But I was really interested in making sure that these characters look like the original material. By doing that, I think people would have a real nostalgia experience with the film, so that was important. And then of course, one of the other questions was going back and especially doing these characters and kind of got what they threw and destroyed and all this other stuff. I was concerned whether we were going to have to soften that too much, where it was unrecognizable. The great thing about it was that Warner Brothers said, "It's gotta be what Tom and Jerry is." We found other ways to make sure it wasn't too harsh in terms of sound, but in terms of the the action, we went for it. I mean, there's chainsaws, there's all kinds of things in this movie and we just wanted to have real fun with recreating that. Tim Story (R) with Chlöe Grace Moretz (Photo by Daniel Smith) BTL: I think the first time I interviewed Chlöe Moretz, she was maybe 12 or 13 years old and she was doing all these R-rated movies that she wasn't allowed to see, so it's funny to see her grown up now and doing PG movies, kind of reversed. Story: I was wanting her to do this really badly, because I kind of grew up on watching her movies. It was one of those things where you see all of these dramas she was always doing. I saw her in Neighbors 3, and thought, "This girl is really funny." I thought for her to come into this property and do her thing would be refreshing for her, but also a really good look for us to see. BTL: I really enjoyed seeing the Waldorf Astoria, because we've been in lockdown, and I haven't been in midtown that much. I remember they shut down for remodeling a few years ago, and I wasn't sure when they reopened. When did you get in there to make the movie? Story: Here's what warms my heart. That wasn't actually the Waldorf Astoria. We couldn't use any iconic place, because we were going to be destroying it, and they didn't want that to be associated with their name, but we used that as a template for what we were going for. We took a lot of inspiration from it, because it was very important for us to give it this historic kind of location thing. It's great that when we talked about hotels, that's the one we kind of looked at and emulated to a certain degree, but we also took a lot of inspiration from some hotels in London as well. So we had a lot of fun with it. BTL: You definitely fooled me as someone who has spent a lot of time there. Story: I love that! BTL: I assumed that you got into the Waldorf before they reopened and just shot the hell out of the place while you could. Story: I'm so happy you said that. That made my day. BTL: Did you shoot any of the movie in New York? Story: No. Well, we did get a lot of plates, so we actually had people on the ground shooting a lot of stuff, but all of it was shot in London. I never rolled camera in New York, and it's kind of a testament to visual effects and what you can pull off. We took a backlot in London and converted it into New York — only about two stories up, but from there, we added on the rest of New York. As you say, when I'm fooling New Yorkers, I'm really happy. [laughs] BTL: It was a part of New York that I hadn't seen for over a year, so it's wild to see that. You worked with Alan Stewart as your DP, and I know he did Guy Ritchie's Aladdin, so I know he has a good handle on VFX-driven stuff. What were some of the considerations you were dealing with when dealing with the fact that two of the three stars were going to be animated? Story: We wanted to be sure we shot them like we would any actors. Even though Jerry is six inches high, or whatever it is, or Tom is three feet, we wanted to do things like over the shoulder shots. One thing about the original material is they were always on one plane, or they were always in profile. We wanted to be sure that we got down on the ground in what we would sometimes call "Jerry Cam". Get down on the ground and do it from his perspective. Or if someone is talking to Tom, do a shot over that actor towards Tom. We wanted to be sure that we treated them like actors. Then when it came to action, what's fun about it is Tom and Jerry was always kind of one way. They had to tell a lot of story in one big wide shot; we wanted to make it a point to be wide and tight and kind of give movement. Since we were going to be taking these characters into a 3D world — even though we were going to keep them 2D or 2D plus, we wanted to be sure [we had] other angles that you've never seen them in. We wanted to see them spin around and the camera go around them 180, and kind of just give you different looks on it. We sometimes found that in certain angles, Tom didn't look like Tom or Jerry didn't look like Jerry. With our software that recreated some of the hand drawn lines that we had from the old cartoons, we would have to go in there, and sometimes, the artist would have to actually sketch out and make the model that we had in the 3D computer world look more like the 2D animation. So there was a lot of these considerations given to making sure these characters looked familiar to so many fans out there that love the product. Tim Story on set (Photo by Kerry Brown) BTL: Were you able to have some sort of pre-visual or something similar you could use on set so that these characters would know what they were reacting to? Story: Whenever I've done action in my action-comedies or the Fan 4 movies, you have to do a lot of preparation. Here, we had to literally, not only do the action in storyboard and pre-vis, we also had to, in some ways, do everything the characters were going to do, so that once we got onto the set, we could actually show the actors, "Here's what we're thinking." But we were kind of fluid in the event somebody said, as we lined up the shot, "Hey, can Jerry be on the desk, as opposed to on the chair?" Then our animation supervisor was close and it's like, "Sure." "Great." So we would do things like that, and we found that we had a lot of freedom. Then of course, once you got into post, it started all over again. Even though we had ideas for Jerry and Tom to do a certain thing, now it became, "Okay, is that the best idea?" There are some scenes in the movie that we created from scratch. They weren't even in the script, and we just had an idea and started creating that idea. Tom flying in the sky and doing all of that stuff, none of that was scripted. We just got inspired one day and all these shots ended up being what they are. BTL: Can you generally do almost anything? You have a big chase scene on the streets of New York, so are you able to shoot things like that and know the animation and VFX departments can make it work? Story: The only thing that you sometimes have to be concerned about is if certain people are walking in front of objects that you actually don't have the information for, where they might cut off something or if you were going to ramp speed, you don't want people to look like they're walking fast or too slow, or this and that. Sometimes, whenever we could, you can obviously get that stuff out of your way, but for the most part, I had freedom to do anything I wanted. If I wanted the streets of New York to be empty, as long as I've got frames of each part of that street's and point, I could do it. The truck going around New York, many times that truck was CG, which allowed me to kind of move here. When we did the skateboard chase, anything I wanted to create, we did. We did do footage down the streets of New York, but in no part were we moving faster than 35 miles an hour or whatever it is. Here, we could, by having photography and a bunch of CG cars, we could kind of create everything we wanted to. We're just in a world now where the only limitation is your creativity. BTL: You had already done some big VFX movies with the Fantastic 4 movies, as you mentioned. Did you treat the animation department sort of like dealing with VFX, or did you have a separate animation and then VFX as well? Or were they combined? Story: I guess for the Fan 4 movies, we wouldn't really consider any of that animation, at the time, but it did go through the same workflow. But when we started creating the character of the Silver Surfer, those moments were obviously a completely CGI character, and it was kind of like those types of freedoms. Me having that experience, it does give you the confidence that nobody in the room can tell you, "Hey, we can't do that." We don't even have those conversations anymore. It's just how much money and how much time do we have. It made it really fun that you can go into a film like this, and just think, "Hey, at some point, I want to be down on the deck of that skateboard going through," or "I want butterflies everywhere" or "I want elephants," and all we have to do is create on set where we're pulling over tables, and this and that. That interaction, you're able to do things that Jerry goes to Manhattan — I think it's called "Mouse in Manhattan" and the more we can do in camera, the better the animation characters were going to appear. On the set of Tom & Jerry (Photo by Kerry Brown) BTL: I really do like the choice to go 2D, because while Roger Rabbit is a great reference, so is the original Mary Poppins, and they did that in the '60s when they didn't have computers. Story: They literally drew on the cells. Incredible, incredible! BTL: If someone ever figures out how to revive Walt Disney, he would flip out. Story: He'd be freaking out, and he'd also probably be pissed off. He'd say, "Do you know how long it took me to do this?" BTL: I want to ask about some of the other people you worked with on this. Peter Elliot is an editor you've worked with for many years on many movies, so obviously, you're going to have a shorthand when you're working with him again. Is he someone you're sending stuff to as you're shooting to edit as you go along? Story: Yeah, with any editors I would work with, Peter Elliot, we have such a shorthand that as soon as I get a script that I'm thinking about making, I send it to him. We discuss early on ideas I have and just kind of anything that when I bounce it against him, he'll tell me, "Oh, have you thought about it this way or that way?" because later on, he's gonna have to take that material and put it together. Peter has always been a great collaborator of mine. He's also a great friend, but also a very creative and talented editor. I've found that by having him next to me doing these projects, we've never said, "We can't." He has just such an incredible way of solving problems, and so much of filmmaking is that at some point, you've gotta plan. You got something that you want to accomplish, and then how it just becomes, "How do we do it?" Peter, who has also worked on some of the biggest Marvel movies, he just knows this world. Now that I've gotten back into more of the visual effects space, he's such a confidante and somebody that I just depend on as I go forward. BTL: But also for comedy, timing is everything, and if one thing is off or you cut to something too slow it wouldn't work at all. Story: Just knowing the rules of reactions, you can make so many things funny just by cutting somebody looking crazy. Like, what the hell are they doing? It all of a sudden becomes funny, because in context, you go there. It's really fun when you have somebody that gets my style of comedy as well. Whenever I send him a bunch of material, he can just go for it, he doesn't have to ask me a lot of questions, especially when it comes to that first cut. BTL: Going back to what I thought was the Waldorf, how did you decide with your Production Designer how to create that hotel, especially considering all of the elements that have to come together later? Story: It was fun to walk into the production design offices and just kind of see what we had stuck up on all this. We put so many different pictures of so many different hotels, and it's fun to just really think in theory at first. "Would it be cool if this was ornate?" But then you also have to couple that back with… I wanted a lot of muted Browns at some point, but then I also found that Jerry is brown and is that going to clash with how he's gonna look. Any blue that we picked that was going to be on set, we had to also put that up against, "Okay, what is our color palette for Tom? How blue or gray is he gonna be in certain shots?" And kind of see, how do we make sure that our characters are going to pop onto the set. As we were talking before about design, there's a homage to the older short where Jerry goes to Manhattan — I think it's called "Mouse in Manhattan" and he goes to Manhattan, and he sees New York for the first time and the skyscrapers. We wanted to be sure that we were able to kind of recreate the sense of that. We really just did a lot of research, but at the same time making sure we're making a film that is up to date and will resonate with Millennials and young kids. I forget all the "Gens" we're on now — Gen Z — at some point we'll start over on Gen A, but it's really fun to do this process. BTL: Are you prepping something else to move on next? Obviously, COVID has sidelined a lot of projects, but I assume you did a lot of the post on Tom and Jerry during COVID. Story: We did a lot of post in COVID, and I must admit at some point, we were down for about two weeks, but once everybody got remotely into their zone, I found it quite fun actually that you could roll out of bed, go to work for how many hours, and roll back. What I'm looking at is I have a film over at Universal called "Terrible Twos," another quote-unquote hybrid movie, as well as I'm developing Corduroy. I don't know if you remember the little bear that was a big children's book, and I'm off to Atlanta now to go do a pilot for ABC. It's getting kind of kind of crazy here, but I'm having a good time. BTL: Have you started your prep for the COVID protocols, social distancing and all of that? Story: Tested today. I'll get tested on Friday before I leave, and it's just our new normal, man. You just gotta, ya know? Tom & Jerry will open in select theaters in North America and in other countries, but it will also be available on HBO Max for its first month. All photos courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures.