

Monkey Business

November 2009

Animated musings from
Emmy-winning screenwriter...

...Jeffrey Scott



Lessons From the Trenches of HOLLYWOOD

WHY DIDN'T "ASTRO BOY" FLY?

Yes, I know he flew on screen, just not at the box office. Exploring why is quite informative.

Astro Boy broke the three rules that, when applied correctly, make an animated feature a "keeper": **Keep it REAL, Keep it FRESH, and Keep it SIMPLE!**

Christy Lemire of *The Associated Press* said that *Astro Boy* "...isn't all that moving. There's a lot going on, but none of it ever really grabs you."

In order to grab the audience the story must be real to the viewer on a personal and emotional level. The rule of thumb is, if you don't grab the audience in the first 10 minutes you never will.

Rule #1, broken.

Glenn Whipp of *The Los Angeles Times* noted that kids "...will enjoy the big, climactic robot rumpuses, which owe a heavy debt to Brad Bird's *The Iron Giant*. Then again, there's very little that the filmmakers haven't borrowed here, making *Astro Boy* feel as copied as its title character."

The last thing you want to do in a big-budget movie is show the audience something they've already seen. *Been there, seen that!* is not the word of mouth you're looking for.

Rule #2, broken.

Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* felt *Astro Boy* "...has been designed to function on different levels and serve different audiences, but in this case these multiple meanings and points of address have created a confusion of tone."

Ergo, they didn't keep it simple, stupid.

Rule #3, broken.

Now, to put these errors in perspective, let's look at a movie that got them all right: *Kung Fu Panda*.

Rule #1: Keep it REAL. The moment Po fell out of bed and we saw his dream of being a master of Kung Fu shattered by the reality of his awkward obesity, we empathized with this poor guy. It took 3 minutes to grab me. How about you?

Rule #2: Keep it FRESH. The art direction was masterful, with brilliantly unique story/visual sequences from Po climbing the stairs to learning to master Kung Fu by chasing dumplings with chopsticks.

Rule #3: Keep it SIMPLE. A fat panda dreams of being a Kung Fu warrior and, despite everyone assuring him it's impossible, proves them all wrong. Can't get much simpler than that.

So next time you're sweating over your animated feature screenplay remember these three rules, and make sure it's a "keeper".

This month's excerpt from Jeffrey's highly acclaimed book

HOW TO WRITE FOR ANIMATION

There's one especially significant subject I always stress a writer should consider first before starting a screenplay. Wanna guess what it is?

That's right—money! Or in Hollywood parlance, budget. A budget is how much money a production company has decided it can afford to spend on a project and still have a chance of making some profit. If you ignore the budget on a project you're writing you can have your idea shot down in a "Hollywood second" (the time it takes the word "No" to get from a studio exec's lips to your ears).

It's likely you'll be pitching your idea to someone who is going to be thinking about how much it's going to cost. You don't want to be caught with a \$200 million idea when pitching to a company with \$20 million to spend. Of course, knowing what an animated feature is going to cost is like knowing how much a gray suit costs. Depends on who makes it, and whether it's sold in Frostbite, Alaska, or Beverly Hills.

Any scene can be animated inexpensively, but our audiences today are used to some pretty spectacular stuff. So if you call for something spectacular it's either going to cost a lot, or look like doo-doo. I'm not suggesting to have your animated feature budgeted before you pitch it, but if you're going to call for lots of amazing visual effects you must at least have an idea of what ballpark the studio is playing in.

You'll find the rest of this article in Chapter 11 of *How to Write for Animation*

