

Rising Stars of Animation: The 2010 Edition

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Picking a handful of rising stars in animation gets more difficult every year, simply because there are so many more outstanding new shorts, TV series, web toons and movies coming our way. So please take this year's selected profiles as our way of highlighting a few cool patterns in the exciting patchwork that makes up our animation world in 2010. Judging from what they've come up with so far, these talented people are going to keep on rocking our world for a long, long time.

By Mercedes Milligan and Ramin Zahed

Noah Z. Jones

Creator/Co-Exec Producer, *Fish Hooks* (Disney Channel)

Noah Z. Jones knew at a very young age that he loved drawing monsters and dinosaurs. He couldn't get enough of Hanna-Barbera Saturday morning cartoons and children's books by Maurice Sendak and Richard Scarry. Now after years of doing freelance animation work and outstanding illustrations for books such as *Not Norman* and *The Monster in the Backpack*, he is getting ready to share his talents with a much wider audience.

"Disney Channel's [development VP] Mike Moon contacted me out of the blue, because he had seen some of my work on the Internet and liked my character designs," says the talented 36 year old. "He wanted me to pitch a show, so I came up with a bunch of ideas and one of them was *Fish Hooks!* That's one of the beauties of the Internet—that a big mucky-muck at Disney finds you across the country, and gives you the chance to pitch ideas for an animated show!"

Jones' original idea for the show centered on a punk rock band of fish, but since Disney Channel had a lot of music-themed shows, they asked him to tweak it a little. "So now the basic premise is a group of fish in high school ... in a pet store," he explains. "They have their share of normal high school problems and friendship, but they also have rival schools—The Geckos, and the big city is Hamster Wood—all different areas of the pet store."

Jones says he loves the fact that he was able to be part of the show that he had originally envisioned. "They never stand in the way of the humor," he adds. "The show is going to be very funny—and it also looks like nothing else on TV at the moment. The backgrounds and all the non-aquarium animals are collage-based, so visually, the show looks different from what's out there. The team at Canada's Mercury Filmworks use Toon Boom Harmony, and they've done a really amazing job." As fate would have it, another one of Jones' great concepts called *Almost Naked Animals* is also being produced as an animated show by Toronto-based studio 9 Story Entertainment this year.

"I guess I always knew that I wanted to be an artist, but never knew that I was going to make it in animation," says Jones, who studied illustration at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. He advises those who want to get into animation to keep polishing their drawing abilities. "If you have a love for what you're doing, and it shows, then opportunities will present themselves. It may sound corny, but if you want to get better, you just have to draw all the time!"



© Disney Channel

Tessa and Sascha Hartmann

Writer and Director, *Sir Billi* [Billi Productions]

Most parents of four would want nothing more on their plate at the end of the day than a hot shower and long sleep. But husband and wife team Sascha and Tessa Hartmann managed to craft Scotland's first fully animated feature film, thanks in part to their hectic parental roles. "We created *Sir Billi* after the kids went to bed, at the kitchen table over a glass of wine. That one evening was the inspiration," Tessa, who was born and raised in Glasgow, explains.

With their combined backgrounds in marketing and special effects, the couple founded Glasgow Animation in 2000 and created the U.K.'s first virtual pop icon, T-Babe. And a very successful one, at that! "We call her our guardian angel, because she gave us the opportunity to create the film company," says Tessa.

Sir Billi tells the tale of a super-active, skateboarding grandpa—the local veterinarian—who helps a hapless beaver escape her tormentors in the lush Scottish Highlands. One of the world's most recognizable Scots, Sir Sean Connery, has given an incredible boost to the film by voicing the lead. In fact, Tessa shares, it was Sir Sean's suggestion that the project be made into a feature!

Sascha, an artist and illustrator who was born in Switzerland ("An adopted Scot!" he jokes), believes that the secrets to their remarkable success are pure tenacity, creativity and having a firm plan from the get-go. "Our approach was very paranoid in the sense that we were so structured and systematic about the whole thing,"

he recalls. Tessa refers to herself as the "wall" that protects her creative husband from the nitty-gritty of fundraising and business dealings. "People must realize that it doesn't matter how many doors you knock on—because believe me, I've knocked on all of them!" she laughs. "It is water off a duck's back to me, I just keep going 'til I get the answer I want!"

The animation community will definitely be keeping an eye on this dynamic duo, who already have plans for *Sir Billi 2* and other projects on their docket. As for their first feature effort, it's like any other child: They just hope they've brought it up right and that other people love it as much as they do. "We hope that the passion and emotion, and blood, sweat and tears really show up in the film," says Sascha. "It's about heart—that heart beat that goes throughout the whole film. And we just hope that it translates." ■



Tessa Hartmann



Sascha Hartmann

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