INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG BARTLETT

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Craig Bartlett (b. 1956) is an animator and director best known as the creator of *Hey Arnold!* (1996-2004) on Nickelodeon and *Dinosaur Train* (2009-present) on PBS.

DH: How did you get involved in animation?

CB: Oh, I loved cartoons as a kid, you know. When I was as a kid, I drew and everybody thought I was going to be an artist. That meant when [I was] very small [I was] kind of like the class artist and so people would ask me to draw various things. It was reinforced by not being very athletic and knowing that I would have to do something. I would sort of draw, and storytelling, and being funny also seemed like important survival skills for someone who is not very athletic. By the time I was a teenager I thought, "Well, I'll be an artist," but I didn't really know what that meant. I had thought of being an artist in a traditional nineteenth-century painter sense; that I would go to New York or Paris or something. So I really didn't have any idea of Hollywood or how cartoons were made until I came here. I went to art school in Portland, Oregon, and during those years that I was studying Fine Art, I would see animation. We really didn't have a TV all through those years. I wasn't a TV watcher. I was really poor. However, the Portland Art Museum School had a theater right in our campus, so we saw free movies. I went to the movies all the time. It was free entertainment and I saw this thing called the Tournée of Animation[1], which played annually, roughly. It was a feature length compendium of independent short films from around the world, including Portland. Will Vinton--whom I worked for later--his first Claymation films were in those tournées. [It was] mind blowing to watch the work of other artists from the United States... Sally Cruikshank[2],

[1] The International Tournée of Animation was an annual touring of animated films that frequented college campuses and art museums throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

who was down in the Bay Area, who else...well, there was lots of animation coming from New York and California, and all through Europe and Russia. I would see these films; they were kind of like fine art. They were paintings, a lot of them. They would have really beautiful art that somehow moved and told a story, and they were often funny. Their soundtracks were very experimental compared to anything that I was being exposed to. I kind of thought, "This is what I should be doing." So I segued from art school to animation and my fourth year of college I went to the Evergreen State College in Olympia. I kind of taught myself animation. There was somebody who came in and taught an animation course once a week. And they had an animation stand no one was using at the college. So I just tried to make some films. Then I graduated and was like, "Now what?" The only game in the whole northwest was Will Vinton. His studio was in Portland and he was doing Claymation. He did the "California Raisins" later in the time that I was there. When I first got there he was just about to embark on this feature length Claymation movie about Mark Twain[3] and needed to staff up. So when I joined, I was the eighth person on the staff. The eight of us, roughly, made a feature film in about two and a half years, so we're all responsible for ten minutes worth of that film.

DH: Tell me more about working at Will Vinton's Studio.

CB: Yes, so I got to Will Vinton's in the beginning of 1982. I was fresh out of college and Will had this tiny Victorian house in Northwest Portland with the studio that he built onto the back of it. I don't know how many square feet--not many. This was traditional stop motion animation where we had wire armature characters covered in clay on a set covered in clay and shot tabletop style with a 35mm camera on a stand. We lit it just like you would a real set in a miniature. The project was called *The Adventures of Mark Twain*, which was how I started, and by the time we finished that film, I felt I had become a bona fide animator. It was really kind of a whole filmmaking apprenticeship because we built the sets, we built the characters, we had soldering torches to make the wire armatures, and we had melted the clay. I basically started by just helping Barry Bruce[4], who was the lead animator, and then after I'd been with them for a while, they gave me a sequence in the film called "Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven," which is a very funny Mark Twain short story. That ended up, I don't know how many minutes, probably somewhere between five and ten minutes of the film is in Heaven. After I finished that, they put me on other scenes and we just sort of wrapped up the rest of that feature and I stayed for

[2] Sally Cruikshank is a cartoonist best known for her 1975 short film Quasi at the Quackadero.
[3] *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1985.)
[4] Barry Bruce is an animator best known for his work at Will Vinton Studio, as well as his direction of various Sesame Street segments.

years longer. I was in Portland from 1982 to 1988, so six years I was working for Will before *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* started in LA. They moved the show from its first season in New York to its second season in LA and needed to crew up again. [They needed to] get a bunch of indie animation crews to do the little bits on *Pee-Wee*. I did the Penny cartoon[5], and there was the dinosaur family that lived in the mouse hole in the Playhouse, and there was the ant farm on the wall of the Playhouse, which was little black paper cutouts. All these really cool different techniques of kind of weirdo, indie animation. Penny was my favorite of all of them. Penny had pennies for eyes, so that gives you an idea of her scale; she was a little clay girl about this big (gestures), and it was a revolutionary way of shooting Claymation. I had come from tabletop, wire, gravity-bound stop motion, and Penny had no armature because she laid flat on glass and the camera shot directly down onto her. Beneath her about a foot and a half was a flat space that we also had evenly lit so we could slide in and out cut out paper backgrounds or drawn backgrounds and it was a really cool technique. It was pure; it reminded me of a puppet show because you can think of Penny on the front of the stage proscenium, which was the frame, and the background being whatever background you could put in the puppet show. You could roll in another background or slide in and out. Penny couldn't come to walk right on past you and out because she was on that glass. If you were cool with that puppet show kind of format, you could do anything with Penny. I loved that she was basically weightless. When she talked and moved around, as long as she was going side to side like a puppet, you didn't need to worry about gravity. That was a wonderful thing. Also I have to give credit to the Aardman guys, the original Aardman people[6], because they really created Penny for *Pee-Wee*. The way I heard it in the lore of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is that when they were setting out to do the show in New York in the first season, he said we should have a girl character: "We've got Randy the bully, we've got the puppet characters in the puppet land, but those are animals. What if we had a girl? That would be cool." So the Aardman people apparently said, "How about this?" It was based on *Creature Comforts* [7] in those early films that were interviews with just anyone, and then disembodied voices put into clay characters. In the case of Creature Comforts, they were zoo animals, and in the case of Penny, they would interview a variety of girls and that's what we did. I continued to just try to do it exactly the way the Aardman people had done it. We studied those first season films, and made our own molds for Penny for her shapes to be consistent and then we just went straight ahead.

[5] Penny was a Claymation character featured in numerous *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* shorts.
[6] Aardman Animations is a studio known for their *Wallace and Gromit* films, as well as features *Flushed Away* (2006), *Arthur Christmas* (2011), and *The Pirates! Band of Misfits* (2012).
[7] *Creature Comforts* is a 1989 short film created by Nick Park and produced by Aardman Animations.

[We interviewed] LA girls, several of them, who all ended up becoming Penny. They're wonderful, impromptu interviews with little girls. We'd ask them what happened at school today, or what kind of food do you like and the girls go off and somewhere in an hour of talking to them you edit these little bits. I often liked to take the front half of one story and put on the back half of another one just so it would go south. There's this one about a mermaid that I did where, "Well one day I met a mermaid, and she asked me to come eat dinner and then she started talking about something else, and so finally for dinner she had to eat vacuum cleaners and chairs, and jewelry." That was the idea because Penny was like jazz; Penny was a girl telling you a story but you're just going to improvise visuals to go with "hear it, see it." So on the exposure sheets that we did work in the tradition of any animation, in 24 fps, we'd have the standard hundred frame exposure sheets with a lip sync broken down so you can see what her mouth was supposed to be saying. But every once in a while you'd have 40 frames of nothing, maybe I'll have this fly by. She is saying "chair" at this moment, maybe I should have a chair, and so that was a really cool job. I thought the Penny cartoons were an awesome gig. I was thrilled to come here and find out what Hollywood was really about. Ironically the Hollywood show I came down to work on was *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, which doesn't resemble any Hollywood show before or since. There is no model like it once they finished that show. They broke the mold and there's not been another *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*.

DH: What are your memories of moving to Los Angeles?

CB: We moved to LA in 1988. After the summer of 1987 I came down to work just for the summer. I stayed with a friend working on *Pee-Wee*. Then in 1988 there was another season and so my wife said, "Why don't we just come to LA?" Her brother, Matt Groening[8], was already here and so that was a good thing. It is hard to believe but Matt had just gotten *The Simpsons* cartoon going. I don't think that the very first episode of *The Simpsons*, which was the Christmas special[9], had been on air. It was another year or so [away], so believe it or not, Matt was still kind of unknown and *The Simpsons* were those little shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. But he said, "C'mon, just move here, it will be great. You'll love it." That first summer was tough for us. I immediately ran out of stuff to do and we would spend a lot of time walking around. We'd hike in Griffith Park, played a lot of tennis and I just basically thought, "Maybe this is crazy, maybe we shouldn't have come here." We said, "We have to stay

[8] Matt Groening is the creator and executive producer of *The Simpsons*, as well as the creator of the *Life in Hell* comic strip.
[9] "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" (1989.)

at least two years." If we go back to Portland immediately, our friends will all laugh at us and say, "Wow, you guys are lame. You couldn't take more than six months?" So I said we had to stay a minimum of a couple years. Luckily, by the time a couple years had gone by I met the people at Klasky Csupo[10] and at Nickelodeon, and I was working on *Rugrats*. Things got really interesting right away, especially when you put it in perspective of being here 23 years. That's like a minute that we were wandering around, broke and unemployed, and not knowing what was going to happen. So I was right, you should tough it out. I would also add that moving from the northwest where I was born and raised to Los Angeles was probably one of the most important things I ever learned because people in northwest are kind of inclined to think that Southern California is really horrible and that's that the myth of the Northwest. It's a kind of provincial thinking. Like, "Could there be anything cooler than Portland?" without ever leaving Portland! Yes, Portland is great, it is one my favorite cities in the world and *Portlandia* is one of my favorite shows, but it was really good that I came to LA where I got into this culture of cartoon making among all these other amazing cultures that I've looked in to since I got here. The different communities that are in this city [have] the most interesting people. There is probably hardly a city in the world with more interesting people.

DH: How did *Hey Arnold!* come about?

CB: So I had been in LA a couple years. Actually, as soon as we got here I made the first *Arnold* short but I didn't really know what the consequences of that would be. It was just one of the things I did in the time while I was really trying to find work. I thought I had done Penny and I was really inspired by Penny because the Claymation without an armature that was on glass and with a down shooter camera I thought was a really cool technique. It immediately made me think I should make a little short film; I should make something while I'm waiting to find out what kind of work I can get. I thought I should make a character and I should make it autobiographical. Arnold isn't me, but Arnold is sort of the way I felt as a child. I started in the Penny style. Arnold was made of clay and shot on glass and I made three little Claymation shorts in 1988-1990. The first was called *Arnold Escapes From Church*. It was also inspired by Penny in that if you hear it, you see it. I thought, "What if it was like when I was really little?" What I remember about being little was going to things that were boring and spacing out, including school and also church. You sit there, and people would be going on and on and your mind would free associate into something

[10] Klasky Csupo is an animation production company known for several popular Nickelodeon cartoons including *The Rugrats, Aaahh!!! Real Monsters*, and *The Wild Thronberries*.

strange. In Arnold Escapes From Church, basically you see him [and] he never speaks a word. He's about five in the piece, and goes into church, he sits down and the whole congregation recites the twenty-third Psalm[11]. While he sits there, all the things they're talking about go by. That was the idea, Arnold was a kid that was kind of a day dreamer, and he would be kind of like free association spacing out and thinking about all kinds of stuff, and then he would stop and snap out of it back to reality. That was an idea that I had then. When I had been with Klasky Csupo and *Rugrats* for a couple seasons, we, the writers, felt like it was time to go try to pitch other shows; something that we came up with. We had this idea, there were six of us, and we decided that we would be "all for one, one for all." We would be this company of six writer-producers, and we would make cartoons. We got a couple of meetings with people. We would meet with them, and they would go, "What? There are six of you? Explain that to me." We would be like, "Yeah, one for all and all for one." They would respond, "Really? Who makes the decisions?" We'd be like, "All of us." Then they would go, "Oh god, I have a headache." To an executive that was really kind of ridiculous. We didn't know; we were young. We went to meet with Mary Harrington[12], of course because Mary was the head of the West Coast operations of Nickelodeon out here in Burbank doing animation. They first were setup out on Ventura then they moved to a studio, where we made *Arnold*, on Vineland and Ventura. Then they moved to the building where they are now, which is the studio on Olive with the orange foot. That was after we had done three seasons of *Arnold*. Anyway, before it all started, all six of us went in to Nick and had lunch with Mary. It was great; we talked for like an hour. Mary is very friendly and we chatted about everything, but she didn't like any of our ideas, and I don't think she liked the six of us. I think she thought it was ridiculous. So after we exhausted all of our ideas and were just eating, one other writer said, "Craig, show Mary your Penny Cartoons," so I got out the video sample reel, which I think you have a copy of, which had Penny cartoons, but on the front of it was *Arnold Escapes From Church*. She suddenly said, "This is great! What is this?" So I said, "Oh, Arnold is this character I created." She said, "I like that, let's do something about that." She said, "Do you have anything else about him?" I had these comics I'd done of Arnold for *Simpsons Illustrated*, an early Simpsons magazine, when *The Simpsons* was just getting going. Every issue I would do an Arnold comic. That way she could see Arnold as drawn. There was one particular drawing that was the punch line of a comic where he acts deadpan all through a day of riding roller coasters.

[11] "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want..."

[12] Mary Harrington is an executive producer who produced numerous programs at Nickelodeon, including *Doug, Rocko's Modern Life, Rugrats*, and *The Angry Beavers.*

Then he wakes up in the middle of the night screaming. She said, "That is hilarious. I want that. Let's do that." So the meeting ended and we all walked out, and she stopped me in the hall. She said, "I want you to come back in with that Arnold character." The other guys were all laughing in the parking lot. Paul Germain[13], who ended up creating *Recess* with Joe Ansolabehere[14], said, "Mark my words, that's going to be a cartoon show," and he was right.

DH: What was it like running your own show?

CB: Very intense. I was very interested to finally have my own show and I would say that everybody, somewhere in their heart of hearts, has the same thing. What if I had created my own characters and had my own show? Relatively, it happened pretty quickly. I got here in 1988 to 1994, so six years in. That was pretty good. Yet all that stuff seemed to take forever. I'm really glad that I waited that long. [It was good] just working in the trenches learning some fundamentals of filmmaking in Portland, then moving to LA, and working on other people's shows. *Rugrats* was definitely someone else's show, but Paul Germain, [Arlene] Klasky, and [Gabor] Csupo pulled me in even though I didn't have any experience being a story editor, they gave me the job. That kind of experience was invaluable to be able to do my own show a couple years after that. All I can say is, "Thanks." I'm really glad those guys gave me a chance. There's probably four or five of those kinds of events in my whole career. By the way, it's 2012. I started [my career] in January 1982 at Will Vinton's, that's 30 years of being an animator. That's a little embarrassing. My point is, in those 30 years there were probably four or five times where somebody took a shot with me and said, "Sure you seem like a nice guy. Why don't I let you have this chance?" Thank God for all those who did because everything else follows. If the first one hadn't happened, then the second one wouldn't. So first I should thank Will Vinton, who hired me out of college to be on his tiny little animation team in Portland. Then in LA, Bob Rogers[15] hired me to make a series of special venue World's Fair films that not only paid the bills, but also gave me tons of interesting, outside-of-my-comfort-zone experience. Then at Klasky Csupo, Gabor and Arlene said, "Sure, you could be our story editor." I don't even think they quite knew what a story editor was, or they wouldn't have hired me because I barely knew how to format a screenplay. But, I was working for Paul Germain. Paul was the show runner on the early episodes of *Rugrats*, and Paul and I sorted it out. The two of us wrote those first seasons. There were a lot of other people writing on the show, but the story editors were

[13] Paul Germain wrote and produced programs including *Rugrats*, *The Simpsons*, and *Pound Puppies*, and co-created *Recess* with Joe Ansolabehere.
[14] Joe Ansolabehere wrote and produced for *Hey Arnold!* and also co-created *Recess*.
[15] Bob Rogers is an Academy Award-nominated producer who founded BRC Imagination Arts.

supposed to conform them so they all sounded like a *Rugrats* show. That was just in its infancy, too. The *Rugrats* was just getting started and we figured out together what it would sound like. That gave me a tremendous amount of experience to get my own show. So when I finally got my own show it was 1995. We made the *Arnold* pilot in 1994, and in January 1995 we started up production. We crewed up; there must have been 50 of us. We then proceeded to make from episode 1 to episode 103. 103 half-hours of *Arnold* over the next six or seven years, making my grand total about eight years from pilot to finally finished with *Hey Arnold!* So it's a huge chunk of my life. Once we started, my work didn't finish until I was completely done. Even though some of the storyboard guys or some people might take a hiatus of a couple months, we were in continuous production. Generally on average, it was about a year and a half per order of 20 half-hours, but those all overlap so much that it was rendered meaningless. You're always working on part of something. The idea was, if we were doing 20 half-hours, that would be 40 stories, 40 11-minute stories. A couple of half-hour specials, but that really was somewhere between 35 and 40 stories you were making at a time. Those all overlapped. You'd start with 10 of them, you'd say these are the premises for 10 stories and you'd just get into it. You'd storyboard them, make an animatic, and ship it overseas and soon they'd be coming back. Every week another one was coming back from overseas, and we're into editing, cutting them down. It was continuous and amazing. The first year was the hardest because of startup. I would say that is a rule [that] startup is hardest. Once you've established a season or so, you can say, "Look, this is what it is." You can watch these episodes and now you can know this is how a show feels and how it goes. Before that it was all unknown and I found it to be very high pressure and pretty anxious. It got easier later.

DH: What were the differences between working in Claymation and hand drawn animation?

CB: I am sitting next to a setup from the third season or so, probably from about 1997, 1998, something like that. This is already kind of an antique because is it's hand-painted cels and a hand-painted paper background. There are many layers of cels on here. I can see the eyes and mouths are on their own layer, [so are] Arnold and Gerald's bodies and so on. That's why it's so wonderful for me to look at this. It's a wonderfully nostalgic little document from the past you can hold in your hand. We made 60 half hours hand drawn

on paper and then Xeroxed. Then overseas they would draw out themselves a lot more, and they would Xerox those. It ended up the Xeroxes became printed on cels that were painted on the back with the cel vinyl. The backgrounds are done with acrylic paint and some Prismacolor colored pencils; that was the *Arnold* look we had come up with. After 60 half hours we decided to go digital. They still drew it in pencil, they still Xeroxed it, and they still painted in a hand-painted background, but the whole thing was colored digitally, and the layers were compiled digitally and all photographed in the computer and we would start getting them on zip drives or something. We didn't have an original you could hold in your hand anymore, so that was the end of an era. It makes these rare and special to me. I'm very fond of these. I've got a ton of original *Arnold* art that I thought, "This is just too beautiful, if I don't hang on to some of this, it'll just go into some warehouse like *Indiana Jones* and never be seen again." I was sad when we went to digital, because it was the end of an era, and also there was a kind of a lumpy transition for about the first year of going digital. We had weird focus issues, and chattering, and pans would wiggle. It took a while. Now of course it's much better. But then, you know, basically things have gone towards either 2D flash or 3D and I was there. I watched that transition happen and luckily for me I didn't get my next TV series until about 2007, years after I finished *Arnold*, with my show which I'm doing now for PBS called *Dinosaur Train*. *Dinosaur Train* is all computer, though our production methods are very similar in the sense that we write episodes, we record them with actors, then we take that track and cut it down to length. Then once I've got it to a length that I like, I hand it out to the artists who draw it, not on paper, but they're still drawing on Cintiqs or some kind of a digital tablet. So even though we're trying to be paper-free, we're still drawing. That animatic still gets sent overseas to an animation studio, which then goes into 3D. It was particularly good timing. I'm really glad that *Dinosaur Train* is done in 3D because it's dinosaurs and trains which are both great for 3D and awful for 2D, unless you are doing something really high quality like the level of a Disney feature or something. If you remember, the project that was in between *Arnold* and *Dinosaur Train* was a TV movie I made for Cartoon Network called *Party Wagon*. That wagon train was hard to draw in 2D. The whole idea of a wheeled vehicle that turns corners and goes off in the distance is very hard to do in 2D, and snap in 3D. 3D is all building assets and modeling them in 3D. Once you've built a train, then you've got it. You can make that train come and go, and do a million things, and it's just this thing you have. It's the same thing

with the characters. Once you've modeled the assets of the main characters, and you've rigged them and figured out how to make them move, then you're done. Then it's really matter of what they call keyframing, when they just take our characters and pose them through the walks they are going to do. I know it's complicated, but I don't have to worry about it, you know somebody else is doing that for me. I compare *Hey Arnold!* and how we drew them. This [setup] would be an example of great [work]. I love these guys, they are on model, I like the poses, and everything looks right. In 2D you're only as good as your storyboard. If you don't have that thing kind of dynamically framed, the animation isn't going to be much. They are going to just stand there and deliver their lines like The Simpsons. [They'll] just be there. Storytelling is on how you framed it and staged it, but *Dinosaur Train*--same thing. You still want to frame and stage it well for your story to be coherent. But, all the time that Buddy, the T-Rex character, is talking with his sister, Tiny the Pteranodon, they are kind of light on their feet. The algorithms that are built into animating these characters have them moving a little bit; they're kind of always a little bit alive. Their eyes are moving around and blinking and their tails are wagging. They have this aliveness and it is just a given; it's just built in. I find that really great and even though you know there's a trade. There is something wonderfully artistic about the old 2D days where you could cheat it. You could easily draw them in different scales and sizes to make your story telling effective. In 3D, those assets are what they are. You put the camera in there, and they're real, and you line it up. The Pteranodons have these really long heads, if you put four of them in a row; their beaks are all going to be knocking in to one another. It's another kind of story telling, but in some ways it's the same. It's easier and very effective. I would say also, *Dinosaur Train* is a preschool show. It's meant for kids two to six, and they are very small. At that age they think it's real. They're not old enough yet to really go, "*Dinosaur Train* is written by some people in LA and they get actors to do the voices, and then somebody draws them." We create this illusion of life. They just think they're real. A four-year-old thinks he can go to Pteranodon Terrace and meet Buddy. I like that, and therefore, that aliveness I was describing, it dovetails right into that. Our audience watches them and they seem to be alive. Animation is the illusion of life. It's also of the illusion of movement, but I also think really it's the illusion of life. I just feel like that medium is really effective and great. I'm a big fan of 3D.

DH: Would you please tell us more about the *Party Wagon* feature?

CB: I stayed with *Arnold* as long as I could. It reached its conclusion with a feature, which was released theatrically and called *Hey Arnold! The Movie* [16] very originally. So I got into some long form and I really liked it. Long form is great to me, making a three-act; movie-length story is cool because it's very self-contained. You can put the whole universe in that one story. TV series work is different because it's more like a starting on an epic that's going to be a bunch of chapters that will somehow always keep getting back to status quo. There is something kind of cyclical, yet it still had season by season so it can have a really long arc. Anyway, I did like the long form. I got to Cartoon Network, basically following Linda Simensky[17]. [She] had left Nickelodeon and was now doing great things at Cartoon Network. Linda had started *Dexter's Laboratory, Powerpuff Girls*; she had a lot of good stuff going there and a lot of talented people. I went to Cartoon Network, and I pitched Linda a show called *Party Wagon*, and I called it "That 1870's Show" but really it was set in the 1850s. It was in the age of the wagon train, when everybody was going west; they were going to Oregon, or they're going to California to dig for gold. I wanted it to be a coming-of-age story about a kid from Maine, who basically has to flee. He gets into a shotgun wedding and he runs away from his own shotgun wedding. He finds himself at the Missouri [River], trying to cross it, and hooks up with all these other losers. They get across the Missouri. Their little wagon is meant to be the one bad wagon in every wagon train. That's where the party is going on, where all the slackers and troublemakers all stay and it becomes known as the party wagon in the derogatory sense. Like, "Oh those guys, that's the party wagon." They are forever being kicked off wagon trains and never get west. It's like they are forever trying to get west, and that was the pitch. I made a pilot, which was a half-hour long, much like… wait actually, it was a whole half-hour, the *Arnold* pilot was 8 minutes, this was a half hour. The idea was they can run it once as a half-hour, or it could be an example of an episode that we could do as a series. That would've been interesting, I'm not really sure what that series would have been, but instead we got to the end of that first half hour, and Linda said, "We don't want to make a series but we will make a feature if you want to do two more half hours. If you want to do that we'll have a three-act feature." I said sure, but I was disappointed. I was still hoping it could be a series. But then we got to the three-act, kind of self-contained thing I'm talking about. I guess they would get west and somehow it could end in a

[16] *Hey Arnold! The Movie* was released in 2002.

[17] Linda Simensky, current Vice President of Children's Programming at PBS, was employed in various production and executive roles at Nickelodeon from 1986-1995.

way with loose ends so they can keep going. I worked on the thing for a couple years. I made the half hour then I made the other two, so about two years to make the whole thing. I really loved it. It was very immersive, it was like a lot of projects I've done, where in the time of doing it you read, and read, and read, and gather images. I became a huge mid-nineteenth century history nut after that. I was probably really driving people crazy, referring to things that were happening in the 1850s. It was an amazing time. The United States was very young. James K. Polk basically grabbed the whole west, Jefferson got the middle in 1804, or whatever, with the Louisiana Purchase, but Polk grabbed the whole southwest by going to war with Mexico. While he was at it, he bought Oregon from England and snagged from sea to shining sea. Suddenly we had continental US that was just being blazed, man! It was a couple of trails, and people were still getting lost out there; the Donner Party, people were eating each other, and you know, it was wild times. There's a lot about that that I think is really interesting and rich. The United States as a sort of adolescent, just figuring itself out and that whole myth of the West. Where you could screw up in the East and then just reinvent yourself by going west. At the time when I did that movie, the great Eastwood movie, *Unforgiven*, had just come out. *Unforgiven* basically is that myth, straight up. He's an outlaw, he's killed a bunch of people, and now is just living in Kansas pretending to be somebody else with a little family, but he's broke and needs one more score. So he and Ned, his partner, go to kill those guys that cut up the whore. So now they are going to make some cash by killing the bad guys. That goes wrong, then he has to kill everyone in the saloon, all of the people who killed his partner. Then, at the end of the story it says, "Well as some say, he's a dry, good salesman in San Francisco now." And you are like, "What? He didn't get hanged? Now he's in San Francisco under ANOTHER name?" That's what I love about the myth of the West. We could get off the grid and reinvent ourselves. That's what everybody was doing in *Party Wagon*. Generally I thought that would be kind of funny, if they were all kind of failures, but they're in this kind of place where that doesn't matter because tomorrow's another day. We're going to go do this and have those kinds of ridiculous dreams. The American Dream of Manifest Destiny, to basically just take over the continent. "But there are already Indians here! Oh well, we'll do something about that." I just find that kind of amazing. We're living in the modern era where no one even seems to care about that anymore. I love history because it's the way we can actually understand why we are the way we are or at least try.

DH: So what happened after *Party Wagon*?

CB: Okay, so the middle part of, what do we call it? The 'aughts? That last decade that wasn't so hot. It did seem like it was hard times for real. All through the middle of the last decade where things...the way things had been done before didn't seem to be happening anymore. I think it's been increasingly hard for each of the networks that show cartoons to put out whatever and see what happens. I think it's more like people are trying harder and harder just to have some solid hits. All through the last decade I would be coming up with ideas for shows and pitching them. I teamed up with Joe Purdy[18], who was a writer on *Hey Arnold!* The two of us pitched things together. That helped. It was more comforting to be out there looking for work with a friend than doing it by myself. We had a bunch of ideas for shows, and we pitched to the Henson Company, to Halle Stanford[19] who was the exec at the Jim Henson Company. They are in a super cool little lot on LaBrea just below Sunset, which is the old Charlie Chaplin studio. It's where Charlie Chaplin made all his features before he fled the country in the Un-American Activities scandal at the end of the forties. It was then bought by the Hensons in the beginning of the 'aughts, and they've had it I think for a little more than ten years. So the Henson Company is in there and they are doing original programming. They were doing a show that they'd sold to PBS, a preschool show called *Sid the Science Kid*[20]. Halle asked Joe and I--we'd come in and pitched our own stuff--but she said, "Meanwhile, do you guys want to be story editors on *Sid the Science Kid*?" We both said absolutely. We were thrilled to have a job. It was kind of cool to have an office to go to after a stretch where we had I been working in my little studio in Glendale. It was kind of fun to go in there and we settled in at the Henson Company working away on *Sid*. I was back with Linda Simensky, who I worked with at Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. I was like, "Finally, Linda, we're back!" When I saw her I said, "Hey remember I had..." When she first told me she was quitting Cartoon Network, it was a bad day. I thought, "Now nothing I'm doing here is going to make it." She said she was going to PBS. I said, "Well, so you'll be doing preschool now. That's good because I've had an idea for a preschool show for about fifteen years." When my son Matt was three years old he had tons of dinosaurs we had tons of trains. I'd watch him in his play, and a three-year-old's play is so cool. You peek in quietly you know, and they've got a little train set on the sofa and a little dinosaur family, and I can hear him talking about these little dinosaur families and how they're

[18] Joe Purdy wrote over 25 episodes of *Hey Arnold!* during its series run.
[19] Halle Stanford is the Executive Vice President of Children's Entertainment at the Jim Henson Company.
[20] *Sid the Science Kid* (2008-present) currently airs on PBS Kids Sprout.

going to go somewhere on the train. I said to my wife, “Wow, if I made a show where we put dinosaurs on a train, I would have all four-year-olds at hello.” I thought that had to be a show. That was something that I pitched to Nick and to Cartoon Network. They probably said, “Oh, we’ve got one of those,” or whatever people say when they don’t want to do your idea. So I had been sitting on that idea for all that time and I said, “Linda when you settle in there at PBS, let me bring you that show.” She said okay and a couple years later she literally called me back and said, “Hey, I’ve been here, I’m settled in now. I know the lay of the land, and you know now I am in charge. I’m starting my own original stuff. Remember that *Dinosaur Train* you wanted to do?” That in itself is an amazing thing, I just have to say. Development people tend to forget whatever your idea was the minute you leave, and they tend to forget that they said they’d call you back. So it’s really cool that Linda remembered, and called me back. It’s sort of a testimonial to the length and depth of our friendship. We’ve known each other for, I believe, for twenty years now... or more. We finally got to do that preschool show we wanted to do. *Dinosaur Train* was one of those things. It was an easy pitch. I don’t usually come up with high concepts. *Party Wagon* is hard to explain, and also people are like, “Okay, that’s weird.” I’m sure it’s not necessarily what the seven-year-olds are dying to see. *Hey Arnold!*, what’s the high concept in that? He’s a football-headed kid. Ok, and? I was like, “You know it’s a sort of a modern Charlie Brown for the ‘90s, where they are all sensitive.” Not a high concept. But, dinosaurs on a train, that’s like snakes on a plane, that’s like when peanut butter met chocolate, you know? People go, “Okay, I get it.” It was funny too; we’re doing this for PBS, which is an educational channel. PBS Kids has a curriculum. You have to be teaching something. They’re basically living in the Mesozoic era, which was a really interesting time. You can talk about all kinds of things that happened in nature. We’ve had hurricanes and floods, and droughts and forest fires. They’re living in the woods, but also it’s about paleontology. It’s about the Mesozoic era, which was hundreds of millions of years long and there was the Triassic, the Jurassic, and Cretaceous time periods. All these amazing, humongous monsters ruled the earth. It’s all in there, but they’re on a train as well. We worried at first that how we would justify that. If we’re supposedly a science show, how do we justify that these prehistoric monsters are on a train? We had this idea, “Well, the train is a metaphor. It’s a metaphor for time travel.” They basically can travel all over the Mesozoic magically through this thing. Then you know what? It didn’t matter. It went on the air and no one cared. Our audience

doesn't care. They are like, "Dinosaurs on a train? All right!" And that's all there is to it. That's kind of funny in itself. You prepare how you're going to have to explain what your thing's about, and it isn't even necessary. When something exists, that's all you had to do.

DH: Could you talk about the different techniques used at The Henson Company?

CB: Joe and I came to the Henson Company, and we were hired as story editors, the two of us, on the series *Sid the Science Kid*, which was very much a Henson property. They wanted to do something for PBS, which is a great fit with the Henson Company. It was really nice for them to come back to PBS after doing *Sesame Street* way back. Yet, the Henson family, who are all the five kids of Jim, and are in general my age or a bit younger or older, and they wanted to continue the Muppet tradition. But the Muppets had been sold to Disney. They don't really do anything with the Muppets now. They wanted to basically [figure out] what's the next evolution of modern puppetry, I think. So they had this idea of doing motion capture where the characters are on a motion capture stage, which is the old Chaplin Stage. It's where Chaplin shot his movies and where Superman was shot and A&M [Records] recorded bands. Now the Chaplin stage is a digital motion capture stage. The technique for *Sid the Science Kid* is: you've got actors in body suits with the little ping-pong balls moving around being the movement of the characters, and over on the side you've got the voice actors with their hands in these really elaborate rigs, basically doing the Muppet mouth and eye stuff. It's a two-person team playing every character, getting captured by motion capture equipment and being taken over to the animation department to be cleaned up and so on. It's complicated and really kind of amazing to watch. When we were shooting, we would bring guests in and show them. The guests were like, "I guess I think I understand what's happening." It was really cool and is basically like shooting a live show, in a way, because you go in and get your live takes. It went on for months. We shot 40 half-hours in the first order. So we were off in another building on the lot working on the scripts, but we had a live feed from the stage and so we watched them doing the motion capture. It was really cool. I was actually very glad, though...when I pitched *Dinosaur Train* with Hensons, the Hensons were going to be the production company and I'd be the show creator and show runner. I was glad that *Dinosaur Train* was considered too complex to be done in the motion capture technique. *Dinosaur Train* is about a huge cast of characters. They are constantly growing; the six members of

the family, that's six already. Then the six members of the family are always getting on and off of the *Dinosaur Train*, riding and time-traveling all around the Mesozoic. [They are] meeting really every cool species of dinosaur that we could think of. There are a lot! There are already more than 100 dinosaurs that we've met. We started with the greatest hits; you know, stegosaurus, triceratops, and T-Rex, the biggies. By now we've gotten into the weirdest, I mean we've gotten into so many kinds of creatures. There are starfish, there's frogs, there are snakes, there are a lot of things that aren't even dinosaurs. Birds, small mammals...who knew there were little mammals running around 150 million years ago? As far as dinosaurs go, we get into really interesting, esoteric breeds. Therazinosaurus had a kind of pear-shaped body, big potbelly, and three-foot long fingernails or finger claws. What were they for? They were vegetarians. They would use their claws to flick fruit down out of a tree. It's really weird. So we've gone into some really strange stuff. We have a character called "The Old Spinosaurus" and it was a therapod dinosaur that walked on two legs and had a long tail. They have a huge sail on their backs and a horrible kind of crocodile mouth with a giant long mess of teeth. Their heads would have been from me to you long (gesture). I mean, they can just snap you up and eat you in one bite. They were probably twenty-five feet tall. They were amazing. The Spinosaurus, if you see an image of one, we don't really know what they looked like looking at their fossils, but you know, a lot of these we have pretty accurate reconstructions of what they looked like. They would be the size of this room, running very fast, and they would be snapping us up. I mean it's really lucky that they aren't around any more. You have to trust me on that.

DH: Any final thoughts on animation, the industry, and where it is all headed?

CB: This is a really good time for me to talk about this stuff because I'm unemployed. We are on hiatus between seasons of *Dinosaur Train* and I'm trying to launch another pilot, which it gives me something to do everyday. I have really gotten into my Cintiq, my digital drawing pad; it's like when I first discovered pen and ink, or when I first discovered Prismacolor pencils, or watercolors. It's the same kind of thing where it's like, "Wow! This is a fabulous way to draw. This is so exciting, you know I should just go and draw every day." So I'm in that mode right now, but I'm also doing a lot of interviews. Largely, they are about *Hey Arnold!* I would say because the people who were kids and grew up on *Arnold* are older adults and youths in college or out there in their first jobs.

So people are asking me to talk about it, and it's good for me to do it with all this perspective of at least a decade from that project. Just to look at it and know it for what it was. A couple of things, out of all this discussion, a couple of things are coming to light. One is that the medium changes constantly, and that the technology constantly changes, and even the industry itself. The economy of it. How are you going to get it out there? That stuff is being revolutionized all the time. It gets into places where you're not even sure how it's going to be five years from now. Will everything just be on people's computers, or will everything be on little handheld devices? Will everything be reduced to little bytes that are super short? We don't know, but for me the work doesn't change. It's really the same, I make cartoons the same way that I made them on Rugrats. Except I'm in charge; when I was on *Rugrats*, I was just a story editor and I directed a few episodes. It's the same kind of work. We think up ideas for episodes that have to be based on some kind of reality we all agreed on. The world of *Arnold* had to make sense and the world of *Dinosaur Train* has to make sense. The better you can define each character, the better your series will be because then they will behave in a way we've come to understand, like a friend. Even though my audience is different, like the kids for *Hey Arnold!* were supposed to be 6-11, maybe a little older than that; and *Dinosaur Train* is 2-6 or maybe a little older, it doesn't matter. It's the same thing. You still have to create a believable world that makes some kind of sense. The characters have to be believable and make some kind of sense so that you will like them, and they become your friends and you want to hang out with them. Working for PBS I have learned a lot about where things are now. Basically our audience [members] are called digital natives. They are kids who never knew a world where you didn't have high-speed internet, and you could multitask and flip around from thing to thing. You can have three things going at once. You're texting your friend, while you are supposedly watching the show, and you're listening to something else. In that world, they spend half the time that they are consuming *Dinosaur Train*, they're doing it online and through a website instead. Maybe they are playing games based on our characters, or maybe they are just playing a favorite song that is only a minute and a half long then they click on something else. You would say, "Oh it's all so fragmented now, that the show doesn't matter anymore." That's not true. You can't get them to want to go play a game about Buddy and Tiny doing some fishing game without them first watching the show and watching episodes that have a beginning a middle and end all the same time storytelling structure I've always

tried to follow. Three acts and getting back to the status quo at the end of the story so you can just continue. You can watch it anywhere in the series and you know, “Oh, they’re my friends and they do this thing they do.” So my job doesn’t change even though everything else around it does. I like that. There’s something very comforting about that. As long as the world works that way, then I have something to do.