

The homogenization of art and culture might be seen as one of the curses of our age, but there are distinct benefits to be had from the manner in which mindless or financially driven corporations buy up and repackage bits of our beloved past. Those 'greatest hits' albums that often frustratingly had a classic song or two missing, that DVD release that the lawyers said couldn't include the original theme tune – this sort of silly caper occasionally gets itself sorted once Sony or Disney or whoever picks up the rights to the whole caboodle and reissues it again. Profit might be uppermost in their minds, but the completist collector will forgive capitalism if it means he or she can finally snare that one particular rare song, elusive book, or full uncut version of a favourite movie.

Steven Spielberg seems to have been instrumental in pointing the way for the big business boys. It was largely his childlike enthusiasm and fannish desire to see much-loved cartoon characters brought together on screen that led to the production of 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit'. Disney had purchased the rights to Gary K. Wolf's novel 'Who Censored Roger Rabbit?' in the early 80s but budgetary headaches prevented a movie version from being greenlit. Spielberg's company Amblin Entertainment were approached as partners, and Steven took it upon himself to call around every relevant party in Hollywood in an attempt to secure the rights to use their most famous animated characters. Disney's Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and so on were givens, but Spielberg envisaged this as a dream of a chance to achieve the hitherto impossible, and bring on board Warner Bros. Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, plus the likes of Betty Boop, Felix the Cat, Droopy, and more from the various rival animation houses of the illustrious golden age.

So, what 'couldn't be done' was done. The result was a glorious tribute to the great era of the 6/7-minute programmer cartoon, and the conciliatory efforts of Spielberg were encapsulated to perfection in a mad, frantic scene that saw Donald Duck and Daffy Duck performing a crazy piano duet/duel. Fans of classic animation had to pinch themselves to believe it was really happening. I still have the bruises. Not every 'great' made it into the movie – not even Spielberg was sufficiently powerful to convince the owners of Tom & Jerry, Popeye, Casper the Friendly Ghost and one or two others that this would be a viable going concern, though I'm sure he took great satisfaction in knowing that these reluctant rights holders were all kicking themselves when the box office returns came rolling in.

Robert Zemeckis, fresh from success with 'Romancing the Stone' and 'Back to the Future', took the directorial reins, but only after Terry Gilliam had passed up the opportunity (a decision he later expressed regret over). Two huge, potentially insurmountable problems loomed – animated characters had joined live actors in filmed sets before, but usually in vignettes such as Jerry Mouse's joyous dance scene alongside Gene Kelly in 'Anchors Aweigh' (1944). Nothing on the proposed scale of 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' had been attempted previously. Add to this the issue of Roger himself, plus spouse Jessica – characters oozing with potential, and yet if Bugs, Daffy, Mickey and Donald were to take substantial roles, might these interloper newcomers pale in comparison? Three decades on, we know the answer – Roger, and especially Jessica, have taken on iconic status and sit deservedly alongside the cartoon gods.

Head of animation on the project was Richard Williams, a Canadian who had established a studio in England and had spent decades attempting to develop a feature production called 'The Thief and the Cobbler' (the troubled history of which would take up far more space than is available here!). Williams expressed a distrust of Disney executives and so 'Who Framed Roger Rabbit' shifted to the UK. Live action was lensed at Elstree, while animation was shared between Williams' facility and a specially set up, L.A.-based unit under the Disney aegis.

The completed movie became an instant classic, marrying the film noir parody of its live sections beautifully to the wild, imaginative animated material and dovetailing the two expertly. We're so used to viewing this type of mix today that it's easy to forget just how revolutionary Zemeckis' film appeared in the late 80s. Bob Hoskins acting on-screen alongside familiar cartoon favourites was topped by Kathleen Turner and Charles Fleischer voicing brand new fun figures, while Christopher Lloyd's portrayal of a villainous live/cartoon hybrid impressed yet further. This is marvellous stuff for family audiences, hitching itself to a standard noir 'femme fatale' plotline but bursting out into unexpected and unpredictable territory every few minutes, filled with gags, colour, excitement, 40s-era songs (Jessica's rendition of the old standard 'Why Don't You Do Right?' – vocal by Amy Irving – providing a highlight), and that unprecedented array of animated superstars, together at last.

For the true cartoon connoisseur, this was heaven. For not only did the major Disney and Warner A-list names like Mickey and Bugs show up, but a whole heap of secondary characters joined them. Spielberg's recent 'Ready Player One' (2018) repeats the trick with its flashy pixel parade of pop culture references, but hardcore animation buffs can take a trainspotter-like glee in picking out Hyacinth Hippo from 'Fantasia' (1940), Sam Sheepdog from Warners' 'Ralph Wolf' series, bulldog Marc Anthony from Chuck Jones' 'Feed the Kitty' (1952), and many more, some familiar, others perhaps forgotten over time. The climactic 'Smile, Darn Ya, Smile!' scene is crammed with cameos from dozens of vintage faves and obscure relics from cartoon history, some being used in a movie for the first occasion in decades. See how many you can spot, either via the expanse of a big cinema screen or by careful use of your Blu-ray player's pause control!

Darrell Buxton

Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969' (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and 'Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film Oujageist.

