

This is an interview I did recently with OCAD student Liz Adler (who is @sideshowleonardcohen on instagram). She asked a lot of interesting questions people don't usually get into, so I asked her permission to share the transcript here and she said yes.

LIZ:

You're known for your expressive movement style, especially with dancing characters, and the playfulness conveyed in your work. Where does that inspiration come from? How do you stay playful?

AARON:

I think part of it is that my style has evolved in a way where I'm not as worried about what's technically right, more about what feels fun to do for me and fun to watch hopefully. There are always projects where I have to do something a little more proper and restrained, but a lot of what I'm attracted to as a viewer is more abstract - not totally abstract, but taking reality as a reference, like a starting point and then jumping off from there to externalize how the characters are feeling.

I know I'm kind of known for dances, like those Tuca & Bertie dances, or Sublo and Tangy Mustard. Dancing is fun cause it's so non-verbal. It doesn't have to communicate anything, you know? A lot of stuff you have to animate is to tell the story, to make it clear that this character is picking this thing up and holding it up, or whatever it is. But there's not any technical requirements of what [dancing] has to communicate, other than how the character is feeling. So it can kind of be anything.

Also a lot of the dances I animate aren't real dances, they're just nonsensical movement which is fun and easy to animate... But then every once in a while somebody says "you're good at animating dances, have them animate this specific move" and I think "oh crap..."

Suddenly it's harder.

Yeah, you have to study it. It becomes as technical as any complicated movement where you're like "what are their feet doing? how did they get their arm from there to there?"

How do you start your dance animation? Do you just do a funny drawing and go from there?

Basically! I kind of have some rough idea of, is the main action going to be up-and-down, or some sort of arc? I'll start with a weird pose, and then think maybe the body's going in a circle and the head's going up and down... But a lot of it is just intuitive. Sometimes on twitter you see someone breaking down their own animation like "*here* I have the stretch and squash, *here* is the drag. *This* part is the overlapping action" and I don't think I could really do that with my stuff because it's so... You know, you internalize all those things and then they're all somewhere in the back of your mind and you're just reaching for them without looking, subconsciously.

I think that's mastery of the art.

Haha, what?! I don't know...

Well, the more you do it the less you have to think about it. Starting out, you have to be more deliberate.

But yeah, I think I mentioned I like trying to externalize the way the character is feeling in an abstract

way, along with how they might actually express that in a deliberate physical way. Like when my characters get drunk, the lines get extra-wobbly and the animation loosens up even more. And when they get excited, there's been a few times when they're sort of lifting themselves off the ground. In one of the Sublo and Tangy Mustards they're really proud of themselves because they passed this exam, so they're glowing and vibrating.

Yeah, I remember.

I like doing those. But again, it's not like I'm thinking that stuff out in a logical way, it's just sort of intuitive.

It's the emotion of the character.

Yeah, exactly. Kind of caricaturing how it feels to do something as opposed to how it actually mechanically happens. And so much of it is also just imitating the animators you tend to be drawn to. I really like, I think it was called "The Prairie School" of NFB [National Film Board of Canada] animators. Richard Condie, Cordell Barker... Big Snit, The Cat Came Back...

Yes! So good!

I love The Cat Came Back.

We were so blessed in Canada to have all these government-funded films. I take so much inspiration from them. I love the Blackfly short.

Yeah, that one's great!

Now I want to look up this Prairie School.

I'm just pulling that from this book that's out of print now, but I love - and I don't even know where it is, I've got it in a box somewhere in Toronto - but it's called Cartoon Capers, and it's a history of Canadian animation. They used to have it really cheap at BMV for like eight dollars, but now it's out of print and it's hard to find. Maybe there's a PDF. But anyway yeah, it had a section about NFB animators and they called that the "Prairie School" because they were all in the same part of Canada and influencing each other, working on each other's stuff.

Okay, I'm going to look it up at the OCAD library. It's so hard finding information on Canadian animation history!

Right?! There's one book and it's not even in print anymore! It was a pretty good one though, yeah.

I'll see if they have it, and if they do I'll let you know... For my capstone project, I'm exploring the theme of Soviet nostalgia & joy by responding to my mom's anecdotes about Soviet-era Moscow with various styles of animation. I'm toying with the idea of creating an animated sequence where Rasputin dances to Rasputin by Boney M, as seen in Just Dance 4.

Oh, such a good song choice. Perfect. I love that song.

Do you have any tips for making a dancing character feel dynamic and punchy?

Hmm. Well at least for my own stuff, I used to do a lot more smears and that kind of thing, make it very flow-y, but lately I've gotten more into playing with the space in between the drawings and deliberately popping things around a bit.

Not connecting everything.

Yeah, you know if there's a hand here and then the next frame it's way over *here*, ten years ago I probably would have done a smear connecting those, but now I like having that gap there. And I think part of that's probably an anime influence, cause I've been looking at a lot of snappy old TV anime. Even early Miyazaki animation has a lot of that. Masaaki Yuasa... Tatsuyuki Tanaka's early stuff is really snappy and poppy. I really liked it. His later stuff got a lot more realistic and it's good too, but I love the early stuff that he did.

Almost so it's jarring, but in a good way.

Yeah, yeah. And I think obviously with *Into the Spider-Verse* and all that, there's a lot more mainstream acceptance of it as a valid decision, as opposed to just being like "hey how come you didn't bother doing all the in-betweens, on ones?!"

Haha yeah, I hear you.

I see that in other stuff too, it's becoming more 'accepted.' It's not just associated with cheap low-budget TV stuff or something.

Yeah, for sure. So I want to ask more about your creative process. First, you did the Tuca & Bertie intro. Where did the idea of the bouncing titty building and subway serpent come from?

The short answer is they're both from Lisa's comics - Lisa Hanawalt, the creator. I'm pretty sure they were both in there. I mean in her comics she draws everything with boobs. I guess the longer answer is that we'd done all the episodes, and all through the first season we weren't sure if there *was* going to be an intro. It was sort of a thing that we'd kept kicking down the road, like "maybe we'll see how long the episodes are turning out, and how much time we have to do it.."

So we actually did the intro last, after all the episodes were boarded and we were doing retakes. So we knew what was in the episodes, and one of the things was that there was this crazy surreal world with the snake subway train and stuff - that was a part of the show, and especially you see it in the first episode - but it wasn't always coming up that much in the scripts, you know obviously just because the scripts are about the characters, rather than whatever's going on in the world. I really felt strongly that one of the main jobs of a main title sequence is to solidify the baseline everyday reality, "what is this show about? what is the world of this show?" and clearly there are a few key things you'd want to communicate. So we decided through chatting about it, one thing was the main characters' friendship, but the other thing was reinforcing this surreal world. So I was really trying to put that into the intro a lot. I really like the snake train, the road has a loop-de-loop on it, there's that drawbridge with the giant turtle and all that...

I love the turtle.

That was all fun stuff to do, and then for season 2 we ended up cutting out that whole sequence!

Because for TV we had to make the intro shorter, and we didn't know if we could show the bouncing boobs on TV, so when we switched from Netflix to Adult Swim we had had to cut that stuff.

Aw, such a shame.

On the Simpsons, sometimes they would have longer versions of the intro if the episodes are running short. We kept thinking "maybe we could use that full version for one of the episodes," and then all the episodes were like three minutes over, and we were like "okay we're definitely not going to have time for the *extended* intro!"

That Simpsons intro is just so iconic.

Exactly, yeah! It's such an iconic TV show intro that shows you the world... That, and the Flintstones or Jetsons or something?

Yeah the Jetsons definitely has it, with them flying around going about their day. Can I ask you about DMX Meets David Bowie?

Oh yeah! I love talking about that.

I love it. I showed it to all my friends the first time I watched it.

That's awesome! I feel like that's the thing I've done that's the most viral, where somebody would go "I need to share this." But it was totally not planned like that. It was one of those things where you do it thinking "I don't know if anybody else is going to like this, or get what I'm doing with this" but it was just for fun.

Can you tell me more about the process of making this, like what were the steps? Which software did you use to create it?

I built the assets for the characters in Photoshop, and then all the animation was just Flash. I kind of started doing that one because I was obsessed with DMX, just as a person. He's so funny but also his life was so sad, so compelling. And a lot of his lyrics are really funny, and just the way he incorporates the dark side of his life into his lyrics... I was just obsessed with him. I could talk about DMX for a while.

But anyway, I was doing mash-ups with him and then I started doing some sentence-mixing, and I also love David Bowie. The whole thing started as a radio play, and I was showing it to my friends like "hey isn't this kind of funny?" and they were like "what are they saying? They're talking about cake, and monopoly? Sorry Aaron, I don't really understand what I'm listening to here." But in my head it was a little scene almost like in *Winnie-the-Pooh and the Blustery Day* where Tigger comes to visit him in the middle of the night. I thought "wouldn't it be funny if that was DMX and David Bowie?" and they were like "...I guess? I don't really understand what this is." So I decided I needed to animate it, to put some visuals to it

It's so off the wall. They're talking about cake.

Plus the audio is deliberately so jarring, a lot of the time. The sentences are like "WOULD-you-LET-ME-come-IN" so I could see how that would be extra-jarring without any visuals. Then I did the whole thing in a week, or maybe eight days.

So you already had the audio.

Yeah, I had the audio. And then I made a bunch of assets in Photoshop. I just grabbed as many pictures of them as I could, and I had to pick which era of them am I going for? For David Bowie it was the Let's Dance era, I think 1983-1984 specifically is when he was wearing those suits. And then I adjusted all the colour in Photoshop so it was exaggerated and cohesive, so you didn't really have to worry so much about lighting matching. His skin is just purple and DMX's skin is green, so it doesn't matter if the photos are inconsistent.

And how did you get the images, was it just Google?

It was all just Google, yeah. You know, you type "David Bowie Serious Moonlight tour" or whatever and you can find a lot of photos in the same outfit. And then you can cheat a lot too with that deliberately janky collage look, like if it's the back of DMX's head it's maybe not an actual photo of him. It's just some bald guy. The hands could be anybody's hands, you make them the same skin colour and it kind of works. But yeah, that was really fun. It's such an anomaly in all the stuff that I've done, it was so fast. I was just like "okay, it's going to be messy and broken!"

It's so funny. I like how David Bowie comes off has having this stiff upper lip, no-nonsense attitude.

Right, yeah. Compared to DMX!

So with regards to Sublo & Tangy Mustard, what's the process to create the backgrounds? Do you draw them in Flash?

Yeah, I draw them all in Flash. I basically start with whatever the storyboard scribbly layout for the shot is. And it's literally just scribbles, sometimes one of the characters will just be half a circle or something. Usually the background is a little more tied down, really figuring out what needs to be in this shot? Does there need to be a door here or something? and then I take that into a separate file and put perspective grids over it, I have all these symbols of different perspective lines... And then just onion-skin both of those and free-hand over it in a way that hopefully matches both. You're following the perspective, but you can see that there needs to be a tree here so I'll draw a tree in perspective. And then sometimes I can tweak the composition once the characters are in place over top of them to fix any really bad tangents or stuff like that.

So I draw them in Flash and then I colour them in Photoshop. Lots of photo elements. Just ripping off Mind Game and Kemonozume, these Masaaki Yuasa projects that have a lot of cool collage-y backgrounds. I just wanted to make it look like that... And I'm just attracted to collage, you know like the DMX and David Bowie thing. Collage is just fun. On my instagram every once in a while I post a bunch of these little physical collages I do. I just like things not really working together, on purpose.

Yeah, juxtaposition. So now I've got some career questions. Can you please tell me how you got your first industry job out of school?

Yeah. I might be repeating stuff from the [OCAD] talk, but while I was in school I was doing independent shorts and putting them on youtube, and a friend sent one of them to Cartoon Brew. They

used to post more shorts on there, I don't think they really do at this point. It's changed quite a bit. But they used to post a lot of independent shorts on there, and so they posted a few of mine and a bunch of people saw them, and I got a job offer from a producer in LA named Scout Raskin who was working at ShadowMachine, but writing and producing self-funded shorts on the side under the name Sonic Bunny Productions. Scout would hire freelance animators, and the style of my shorts seemed like a good fit for this short *Bakerman and the Bunnymen*. So I animated that as a part-time job, I think I was doing ten or fifteen seconds a week. Later once it was done, Scout and I traveled around going to festivals where it played, which was really fun. Scout's awesome.

Anyway right as I graduated, they were looking for people for this new show Triptank that they were starting at ShadowMachine in LA, where Scout was working - this studio that, up to that point had mostly done stop-motion. They were just starting to do 2D. And getting paid money for animation was still pretty novel to me, so I was like "wow, okay! I guess I could go to LA for six months!" I didn't really want to *move* to LA, but I thought I could stay there for a bit and then come back to Toronto. All my family and friends were telling me "do it, come on! Six months is nothing!"

And then a few months later, they were like "everybody who finishes on Triptank, you're immediately going to switch onto BoJack Horseman because we only have six months to do this whole season and we desperately need to get it done! We're *already* behind!" And the other part of it was the supervising director on BoJack, Mike Hollingsworth, was my director on Triptank. He had just finished the BoJack pilot when I started with him on Triptank. He liked working with me and we'd become friends so he said "I can get you a storyboard position."

And so you started storyboarding, and moved on to Supervising Director?

Well, eventually. It was a long slow rise because people above me kept leaving, which I guess is always kind of how it works. I never supervised on BoJack, but I became Supervising Director on Tuca after Mike left.

So what was the highest position you had reached on BoJack?

Just episode director. And animation director, I guess. On BoJack they were really interested in retaining people from pre-production to post-production, because it means less separate people that you have to find and risk not working out. So a lot of people did multiple roles. I was storyboarding, and then they'd have me do animation retakes when the animation came back from Korea. Or there would be people who did background or prop design, and then switch over to comp afterward. So it basically kept you employed most of the year, like nine months or something. Which I guess is getting rarer and rarer, but it was nice stable full-time employment. You had a hiatus if you knew the show had been picked up again, like a summer break. There was usually a little other work at the studio if you wanted to fill the gap.

It sounds like you had a lot of opportunity around you.

Yeah. I know certain shows are more strict about "we hired you for *this*, you can't also do *that*" but especially in the beginning, BoJack was very fluid and messy. It wasn't union - I think on union shows they're a little more strict about people doing multiple roles. But on BoJack it was like "oh hey, we hired you for storyboards but do you want to design a couple of characters this weekend? ...Because we need a bunch of characters!" There was a lot of that sort of thing.

I'm just curious about how you got from storyboarding to a direction position. Would you say that you just kept accepting things?

That's part of it. Like I said, an assistant director would either leave or get promoted to director, so now they need an assistant director. That was kind of an intermediate director-training position. In season 3 I became an assistant director. Part of that, I think was because of my indie work, they'd seen that I was interested in filmmaking on the side. I don't really know how much of a chance you get to show your strengths on an adult animated sitcom, it's pretty limited visually, you know? But they were like "oh Aaron's doing little shorts and stuff, I guess he's interested in directing." And then also I'd been working with them since the beginning so they knew I was decent to work with, which is a big part of it too.

So it was partly your portfolio, like your independent work, that gave you a proven interest in direction as well as just building good relationships with the people you were working with.

Yeah, I think they all liked working with me enough that they wanted to keep me around. They were really good on that show about trying to promote people. I was lucky, it was nice. It wasn't union until the last season, so the *pay* wasn't so nice, but uh... You know, if you were storyboarding and you said you were really interested in directing, they'd say "hey, next season let's see if we can make that person an assistant director." And then after a season or whatever of that, maybe director.

I think the assistant director role probably varies on different shows, and some shows don't even have that position, but on *Bojack* and *Tuca* it was sort of a training position for directing. It can change depending on what each director needs their assistant to do. Sometimes you're just the 'lead storyboarder' where the director knows they can trust you to handle a hard sequence, they know they can give it to you. And sometimes you're more involved in helping to figure out the episode as a whole, breaking it down and stuff. So sometimes the AD is almost a co-director and sometimes they're just "number one storyboarder" like you get a little star sticker. So it kind of varied between that.

So I was assisting one director [Adam Parton] and then also assistant-directing Mike when he did the underwater episode in season 3, which was this tricky one that was a lot of work. I think it was a good proving ground for me because he was also supervising the whole show as well as that episode, so he was pretty busy.

Oh I just remembered, another thing that happened during season 3 was the director I was working for had to leave for a few weeks because of a death in the family, so I had to take over the episode for a little bit. Most of the creative work was already done, but I was sitting in review meetings and doing the work of the director for that time, supervising the cleanup. And I think between those two things they figured I could direct on the following season.

That's great. It sounds like a really rewarding experience.

Yeah, it was pretty good. really, that show was a lot of fun to do - Like I said, visually not the most exciting thing, you know, it was adult primetime-style... But the people I was working with were all really nice and good, and the writing was interesting.

Seems like you got to learn a lot and there were a lot of opportunities for growth.

Yeah, they were pretty generous. Again, not necessarily with money, but at a personal level they were generous! And then for season 2 of *Tuca* I became supervising director because Mike left to go work at Netflix, and they needed somebody to fill that spot. So they said, you've directed the opening titles and

a bunch of episodes in the first season so maybe you'd be a good person for this.

So [during your OCAD talk] you mentioned enjoying episode directing but not supervising?

So the supervising director has to oversee all the episodes, and make sure they're all fitting the same tone, the continuity's hooking up, the filmmaking is all similar... Just make sure that everything is unified. So they're like the director of the directors. And you also wind up being the main link between the executives and line producer and the art crew. So you're always being pulled in different directions in that role. On the one hand, you have the creators and writers and executives telling you "this is what we want the show to be," and then on the other side, you have the line producer saying "okay, well we only have the money to do half of that." And you're like "AAGH I gotta find some way of stretching everything and making it work!"

A lot of it is helping the directors too, like if there's a new director you maybe have to give them a little more support, helping them solve issues in their episodes where "hey this script page doesn't really make sense, how can this character do *this* while doing *this*?"

And at least on this show that I was on, you had to approve all the designs and make sure that they work functionally with what the storyboards require them to. Because the art director, they're conscious of that, but their goal is to make good-looking art and you're the one who has to say "actually now we need this area to be bigger so the characters can walk through there." So it becomes a catch-all position where anything that's broken, you're responsible for it not being broken. And in some ways it's nice because you can sort of delegate anything, really... You don't *have* to do any one thing. If you're directing, there's a lot of specific things that fall on you. As supervising director, in theory you could tell everybody else to do everything... but if they don't do it right then it's still on you to do it right.

I hear you. So it sounds like that position was a lot less creative and more about problem-solving, and production, and managing the creative people.

Right... And that's sort of what I didn't like about it, I mean it was fun to be involved in everything, but it also felt like you weren't really getting to put much of yourself in. Occasionally you could, but it was always in the context of "what's here [in a scene] right now isn't working, and we need to send this tomorrow." So that would be a chance to have a little fun and do something yourself, but in such a stressful, short amount of time. And it's not a position where you're originating a lot of stuff, unless it's the first season, and then you're really involved in setting up what the show is. But I was doing it on season 2 where the show was already clearly established, and I just had to keep steering it in that direction. So yeah, it wasn't a bad job, I loved the show... But it was also right in the peak of the pandemic, 2020-2021, so it was ALL I was doing with my life for that year, and I wasn't seeing anybody outside of work meetings and stuff.

Bad timing, right? You had less opportunity to enjoy your personal life.

So my career right now, I'm trying to look at it less like "I always have to be going up the ladder." At least for the moment - you know, six months from now I might be in trouble.

So if I worked intensely on shows all last year and saved a bunch of money, maybe now this year I can work more on my own stuff. My priority is being happy rather than having the best-looking IMDB page or something.

I think that really resonates with people, based on my experience with film. It's very obvious and alarming when people are clearly very ambitious. It feels ingenuine, you know? It's not something that people around you really want to support, right? They'd rather give you an opportunity if they know you're somebody who pursues joy and has that common goal with the people you're working with.

Right. You know, I'm still taking the work seriously and doing the best job I can and stuff, but through my career I've gradually been less and less about "I just did this, so the next thing has to be the step above that" and more about what I can enjoy doing on a day-by-day basis. So right now I'm actually doing more smaller projects like I mentioned to you before. Animating a special sequence for one show, directing main titles for this other show, a sequence for a game... I'm not really excited about the idea of signing up for eight months on one thing where your *whole life* is that one thing for those eight months.

You're finding a balance there.

Yeah. At least for me personally, I'm trying to find more of a balance.

So my next question is about directing, I have a lot of experience directing teams and I love working with people... I'm sure you get it. So I was wondering if you have any advice for someone looking to find an assistant directing job in animation.

Yeah. So I feel like most of the time you wouldn't necessarily get an assistant directing, or directing spot, without working on the show as a storyboarder first for a season or something, or maybe not even a season... Actually there's two instances of somebody I know starting as a storyboarder on a show and then halfway through the season becoming a director! So it's not unheard of, but generally you wouldn't assume that it would happen.

But yeah, I'd say include that previous [non-animation supervision] experience on your resume, bring it up in job interviews... And honestly, just mention that "by the way, I'm interested in boards but want to become a director." Because somehow they don't necessarily assume that. Sometimes they go "oh, she's been storyboarding. She probably just wants to storyboard" and you're like "no, make me a director!"

Yeah. And based on what you've told me about your experience, it sounds like it's also really important to have some proof of concept, not only that you WANT to do it, but that you've proven that you CAN do it.

Yeah, that's a frustrating thing about the industry in general. I mean I understand why - everybody's risk-averse. So maybe they'll give somebody a chance who hasn't done something, but if there's somebody there next to them who's like "I've already done this, I know how to do it" they'll go "oh, we'll just go with *that* person!"

Yeah, it's unnecessary risk and they just want the project to succeed ultimately, right?

Yeah, they just want the project to go as smoothly as possible. But I actually think that whole side of directing, managing and being responsible for a team, I think it's a lot more important than people in animation seem to think. I think it's undervalued.

I think animators tend to be hermits and shut-ins, you know? We like to sit at home at our

computer and make the magic happen, and not so much talk to people and work with people. I totally agree... Which is reassuring, because that means I have something to offer that other animators maybe don't!

Oh yeah, I'd say it's like half of directing. At least on those shows that I've worked on. The people management side, making sure you're assigning people the right work for them, giving them feedback or guidance that they need, communicating with your bosses... Just being able to draw nice shots or whatever is only part of it. But that's the part that they seem to consider more, which is the frustrating part. Nobody really prepared me for the people management side of it when I started. Luckily I was doing it on sketch comedy, where it was a team of 2-3 people, so it wasn't that big a deal. Then when I started on BoJack I was more ready for it.

Coming back to what you said about the industry focus on beautiful drawings, I think that's just kind of one of those hard and soft skills things, you know? A hard skill, you can show anybody and prove it. A soft skill takes some time and investment and risk, and all those things...

I remember when I started directing I was pretty bad at giving bad news.

That's a hard one.

Like if I was running behind on an episode, *really* what they wanted was for me to just tell them "the deadline's on Friday but today's Monday and I can see we're not going to have it done on time." But I would always be like "if I work really hard, maybe I can get it done by Friday." And then Thursday night I'd be like "aah I don't have it done!" and they'd just go "why didn't you tell us sooner, we could have given you extra help, or rescheduled the meeting..."

It makes them look less professional.

Exactly. So that took a little understanding. You're not going to get fired for missing a deadline, they'll be more upset if you don't give them advance notice.

So you'd say advance notice is the most important thing?

Yeah. Over-communicating, definitely.

Oh, OVER-communicating! Okay!

Yeah, like if there's ever any doubt "do I need to tell this person this?" it's always better to tell them, I've found... And I also felt not great about giving negative feedback early on. If somebody on your team isn't really doing what you want, or their scenes need a lot of reworking... Early on I felt like I was being mean or a failure as a director by having that situation come up. I mean I'd give people notes and stuff, but if I got a scene that was really not what I wanted, I would probably do a lot of it myself or re-assign it to somebody else. And it's better to talk to the person. Even if you tell them "hey we need to re-assign it" at least they don't see the final episode and go "aw why did you change all the stuff I did? You didn't even tell me it was wrong!"

That's really insightful, thank you for sharing that. Cause I've been in that position too with independent projects where somebody will be like "I know how to do this! we're going to do all of this" early on, and then when we get there I'm like "you actually have no idea what the fuck

you're doing, I wish you had told me so now I'm not holding the bag!" So yeah, thanks. That's reassuring, too... So for this next question, maybe I can answer it and you can correct me. Which hard and soft skills of yours are the most valuable in this industry? I assume draftsmanship is the most important.

Yeah, that's probably the number one thing. If you can't draw at ALL, they're not going to look past that at "oh, but the compositions are cool!" if the drawings are stick figures.

But then like you were saying, the communication skills are number one priority, making sure everyone's on the same page, giving feedback like you were saying.

Honestly, by the time you get to directing... It's not like I was spending much time as a director doing really nice, properly constructed drawings. A lot of my drawings would become scribbly thumbnails [to show boarders what was required]. So the draftsmanship actually stops being quite as important at that point. The best artist isn't necessarily the best director, obviously. It becomes more about your filmmaking choices and communication skills.

So if we scroll back to your time as a storyboarder, can you add anything to the draftsmanship part?

Yeah. So each show has different requirements for what the art is like - being the best at Frank Frazetta-style illustration isn't necessarily going to directly translate. I found this even in college, there were a lot of people much better at figure drawing than me but I was pretty good at cartoon drawings. So I don't know. Universal drawing skills aren't always transferable. You don't have to be the best artist, honestly, for a lot of TV animation. You just have to be good at what the specifics of the show are.

I'm having a lot of trouble with the question of specialization, marketing yourself for employers, at the moment. I had another interview with an animator from Laika because I've done some stop-motion work in the past as well, and I'm just a bit all over the place, you know? It makes me very nervous because I don't know how to market my thesis film in a way that will land me a job. I'm kind of experimental and all over the place, but I still want industry work. So it's tricky.

That's kind of how I felt too. When I was graduating from Max the Mutt in 2013 they said "there's no 2D animation work in Toronto... or anywhere! It's all 3D, so don't expect to work in 2D!" but I just didn't care. I wanted to do 2D on my own stuff. I feel like if you're good at multiple things, it gives you more flexibility in your job-- or in what jobs you can go looking for. But there's almost too much emphasis placed on specialization in school. It's not like you don't know what job you're applying for, right? You're not just like "hey hire me, I do *everything!*" You'll probably see that there's a job opening where they're looking for background designers on this show, or storyboarders on that show, and you can tailor what you're showing them for those specific things.

So tailor your content to jobs.

Yeah. Different genres of shows have different requirements, like if you're talking about feature storyboards you probably want to be more loose and gestural and thinking more about the shots, different angles. But if you're on a board-driven kids' show, or an adult animated thing, obviously those kinds of boards look different, more about posing out the acting. Adult boards are very clean and on-model. And board-driven is almost more about the writing... But you can kind of send them everything and just say "look for this section of my site."

Okay yeah, that's a great point. You can just point out "I have some stuff in this style."

Yeah, I think so. But there's a bit of a lack of imagination. Cause I've seen it when I've been involved in hiring, you might say "wow this is a really good artist" but then somebody might say "well they haven't done any adult animation styles, so I don't know." And you're thinking "but clearly they're a great artist, look. They can do it!" So sometimes we'd be able to give them the job and other times they'd want somebody who's already done something closer.

So there are a lot of variables. Okay so, next question - how did you find the time to work on personal projects like Sublo and Tangy Mustard while supporting yourself as an animator and making time for a social life?

Oh. This is a hard one to answer, cause I kind of just do it, you know?

Let me frame it this way. What do you do if your friends want to hang out?

Usually hang out with them! But there are certain things that are maybe kind of obvious, but add up.

It's worth saying!

Okay. So one thing that was a big help but seems kind of silly is I lived really close to work, so I was able to walk there. It was about 25 minutes each way. So that was a lot of the exercise I was getting, it wasn't like "and then after work, I'm off to the gym!" (I also wasn't in great shape, I'm actually slightly better since the pandemic.) But that helped. I don't have kids, which obviously helps a lot...

Oh, this one seems so dumb to say, but I don't play a lot of video games, you know? Some people will say "I don't have any time" but then they play ten hours of games a week, and it's like "well you COULD be making a thing with that time." Which, no judgment if somebody does that.

Absolutely. And to that point, you're using those muscles in your hand, in your brain, that are specific to animation at work. Cause with video games, that's relaxing, you know? That's doing something else. How do you not get exhausted?

Well.. Yeah, this is a good question. I don't have a great answer for that.

Fair enough.

I guess I try to do different things from when I'm at work.

That's better!

Like, it's hard to be storyboarding at work and then go home and storyboard on my own stuff. But maybe I can animate a bit on my stuff while I'm storyboarding at work. Or I'll be drawing backgrounds, or writing on my stuff, during animation at work. It just usually works out that way because I'll often start a personal project in between jobs. In order to get something started, I feel like I need to have a little bit of time. So it's when I'm unemployed, usually. And then I can keep that momentum going while I'm working, but if you're just working all the time it's hard to go home and be like "I'm gonna start the big project." But once you've already got it going, you can maybe continue working on it, picking away at it.

And I also have gotten better at figuring out how I work personally. I've found that I can do more focused, creative thinking work in the morning before work, and then in the evenings you have more time, but you're all tired. So that's when I can zone out and listen to a podcast or music, and do in-betweens for like four hours.

I'm definitely trying to get on that early morning thing, because that's like a trademark of animators, isn't it?

I guess so? I don't know, I know a bunch who aren't.

I think I've heard Richard Williams talking about it, or something...

Oh, HE'S pretty intense.

Well, you know...

I mean, he's an extremely intense guy, yeah.

Just something about getting up, first thing in the morning, not talking to anybody, not doing anything, just sitting down and working. But that takes a tremendous amount of discipline. I don't know if I'm there yet.

Weekends and when you have time off are when you sort of get the ball rolling on stuff, and then try to just not lose the momentum too much while you're working full-time.

I totally see what you mean about having something started, because then you're just fiddling away at it, and there's not that pressure of starting something.

I don't know if you've ever read that book *Steal Like an Artist*, by Austin Kleon. He's got two or three books about creative processes of making art in different mediums... but one of the things he talks about, he calls it "chain-smoking" where you keep stuff going. So it's not like you finish your project and then you're just done everything, you lose all your momentum. Keep having something boiling in the background, so you're never fully stopped. Cause then it's really hard to get going again.

That's a really good tip. I definitely struggle with that inertia sometimes. That's another book to add to the OCAD library search!

It's a pretty quick read, there's a lot of pages that are like four words or something. It's one of *those* books.

I'd love to check that out. Okay, so have you ever thought about starting a family? What challenges do you think you might have, say you were a parent in this field?

I *have* thought about it, but I don't feel ready. I guess part of that is I'm so focused on doing other stuff, but I guess nobody ever feels ready really. At a certain point you're like "oh, I guess it's happening."

Although a lot of friends my age, since the pandemic has happened... (Hmm, that stopped being a useful marker of time at a certain point...) Anyway, in the last couple of years, a lot of my friends have

had kids. So in general I think it's pretty doable to be a parent with a full-time job in animation, especially working from home. But I imagine you then lose that free time and creative energy. I feel like it would be hard to do personal work. Your career could be fine, but for me a lot of the point of it is the personal work. So I don't know.

I think everybody has different priorities in terms of what they want out of their artistic practice, outside of just supporting yourself. So I get that. That's definitely reassuring.

Yeah, cause a lot of friends of mine who have kids - it sucks that there's even this dichotomy, but - the ones who have kids, a lot of the time, are the ones who just do their day job and aren't putting any side stuff out. They're not doing independent work, they're just happy with their job. But me, if I'm not doing independent stuff I tend to get grumpy about the day job, like "what am I even doing this for? why am I working in animation?"

Yeah, well it's that kind of sense of purpose, right? It's a broader goal that you're working towards rather than getting a paycheck and doing it all over again.

Yeah... But I don't mean it in a judge-y way, where I'm like "oh, they're not doing their own stuff!"

It's just how *you* feel.

Yeah, I just like doing my own stuff! I dunno.

I totally get it. that's a very comprehensive, satisfying answer. Thank you. It's interesting cause I'm gay, so the whole 'having kids' question is far more complex than "suddenly it's happening!"

Oh haha yeah, you're not just like "oh, what a surprise!"

Haha yeah, right. There's a lot of planning that goes into it. Me and my partner are both not in super high-paying careers, so it's always a question... How is this going to work? How are we going to make this work? And how am I not going to burden my children with my ego?

That's a good question.

It comes back to some of my family as well, because my family are all musicians from the USSR so there's definitely iterations of that creative parent/child relationship that I would like to not repeat.

Yeah, you don't ever want to say "you, as my child, are secondary to my work!"

Exactly, "my independent project that maybe never even be made, and isn't paying me!"

"This is the most important thing in my life!"

My grandfather was exactly like that. So it's one of those cautionary things. Okay, last question-- what do recruiters at ShadowMachine look for in a new hire?

It depends on the show, I guess. The first thing they would look at is your portfolio or demo reel. Probably for boards they'd want to see a demo reel, if you have any animatics you could show. Then

they would do a video call, which is usually just a friendly chat to make sure the person seems like a functional human who would be nice to work with. It's not so much about grilling you with hard questions necessarily. They might have you do a test, especially if you're new to the industry. That can actually be a good thing if you're new, because it's not like it costs them to give you a test, but it lets you prove to them that you can do it. Hopefully if you've worked on a similar show they wouldn't make you test.

In terms of portfolios or demo reels, they probably want to see a mix of general skill and work relevant to a specific show. Like I said, it's tough because they're never quite as imaginative as you'd hope they would be, just because the people doing that hiring are mostly from the production side rather than the artist side. So they're not always aware of what artistic skills are transferable. But also, if they see something in your personal work that might not even be a great match for the show, but just looks cool and shows that you have a distinctive voice, then that can also be a bit of a draw. Showing that you have something to bring other than "a set of hands that can execute something."

So style counts for something, is what you're saying.

It does, yeah. Especially like we were saying, if you're interested in going up to a director or art director role. I think that's where it comes in more useful to have stuff that represents your *own* artistic voice as opposed to just "I can draw in Adventure Time style, or Rick and Morty, or Simpsons or whatever." Cause I think if there's *none* of that [personal work/ideas] they'd still probably be happy to hire you, but...

That's how you can stand out.

Exactly, yeah. Like when I was graduating from school I always felt like I had an advantage because I'd been doing indie shorts. Everybody else in the class had a demo reel of obvious animation exercises, like a flour sack, a walk cycle, a lip sync exercise... and I had actual scenes from cartoons. So it helps to have personal work. I think even in your portfolio on your website, it's useful to show "this is stuff for work, to show what I *can* do" and then "this is what I *like* to do." It does count for something.

That's all our questions, now! Thanks again for all your time, this has been so insightful.

It was fun! I hope I gave useful answers.

Absolutely! It was wonderful talking to you, thank you Aaron.