On solving problems under pressure

Animator Rachel Larsen (of Tiny Chef) discusses dealing with frustration, collaborating with the right people, and being solution-oriented.

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As told to Cat Woods, 1256 words.

Tags: Animation, Collaboration, Failure, Inspiration, Focus, Independence.

By the time you and Ozi began making *Tiny Chef* episodes in 2018, you'd already established a career. Can you tell me what your background was and some of the projects you'd worked on?

I started in puppet fabrication, and my first entry-level job was on *Coraline*. I basically helped make Coraline's hands, which were really tiny, made out of wire, and they cast some silicone. So, I started in that sort of department because I had a background in sculpture, so I had the right kind of skill set to build things. I became friends with people in different departments and then I learned about animation and just became really fascinated with the animation part: moving the puppet and bringing the puppet to life.

I was never under the impression, as a kid, I could become an animator or it wasn't some sort of passion as a kid or anything.

All the animators on that project, that was sort of their story. They always wanted to do animation. They just felt like, oh, these are just different people and I don't fit into this group. But the more I was there and just sort of observing, I got really fascinated by it.

I just used the rest of my time on *Coraline* to obsessively practice animation. I went in on the weekends, went in after work. Any time I could, I went in and just got better at it and just loved it. And by the end of the movie, I got to basically work in the animation department, in the special effects.

And then from there I worked on *Robot Chicken* and a lot of different projects where I was just kind of honing my animation skills, then I worked on *ParaNorman*, and on *Tumble Leaf* I was an animation director. So, it was kind of overseeing a lot of animators and learning how, more, the process works.

Ozi is both your colleague and your friend–did you know immediately that you would both have such a strong relationship and has that been tested over the time you've known one another?

Stop motion is a really small, niche group of people. There's not a lot of people that do this, so you tend to get to know most of the people in the industry. And most of us are a similar breed of people and it's your little group of people, so we tend to get along. Ozi and I had a similar sense of humor, and just that whole group that worked on *Isle of Dogs* really bonded quickly on that project because most of us were coming from different countries or different cities and working on this thing for a limited amount of time.

There was just a lot of downtime on *Isle of Dogs*, and we were just like, "Man, we should just run our own studio.

We should just do our own thing.” It was sort of out of frustration of, you were just at the mercy of the project and how it’s run and who’s in charge.

So, that planted that seed, and then we just kept in touch. And then we kept talking about doing our own thing, but we just didn’t know quite what it was. She wanted to do a cooking show and she was actively developing it, you know what I mean? And I saw someone who doesn’t just talk about things, she does things. And I think that’s really important, because a lot of people talk a lot about a project, but Ozi actually does it.

Ozi and I both liked rock climbing, and if we made a plan to go rock climbing, we were both there. There was other things, not just a project, but she’s someone, if she says she’s going to do something, she does it. And I think, especially if we’re going to go into a really long-term project, that’s going to be hard, you just want to be there with people who just fulfill their commitments.

Your work has taken you to a bunch of places around the world, and I can only imagine that New Zealand offers a lot of brilliant rock climbing, but how much do you enjoy travel and do you adapt pretty easily to new environments?

I love it. I try to figure out what a place has to offer, where does this place really shine? And try to then get the most out of that thing because every place is different. I went to London and it was basically a year of pubs, and fun, and walking around this gorgeous city. Then I went to Oslo, Norway, and the vibes are so different, and it was like, you can’t try to recreate London in Oslo.

You have to shift gears, and I love that about traveling. And you kind of have to find what the soul of a city is and explore that. But now the thought of traveling is too much. I traveled a lot before *Tiny Chef* because, luckily, my career let me go to different places and I loved it. I just loved it. And now my whole focus is *Tiny Chef*, so traveling usually stresses me out because I want to just be working on this.

When Nickelodeon pulled the plug on further series of *Tiny Chef*, was there any doubt in your mind about keeping the series going and what ultimately swayed your decision?

Once there was a decision made, it was freedom and excitement that now if it’s going to fail, at least let it fail under our own missteps, not because it’s petered out on this network.

So yeah, I don’t know. It honestly just boosted us a lot. It really felt like now’s our chance to see what we can do, all the things we’ve wanted to do with *Chef* and really see if we can make it work. I don’t know if that makes sense.

What do you do when you’re under pressure and someone is really just not listening?

We just have to come up with creative solutions. And I always think about, “What’s the solve?” No matter what happens, and shit happens all the time, every day something happens, this deadline has changed and we have to change a storyline and you can just kill yourself over agonizing.

But I think the most useful thought is “What’s the solution? This was a bad interaction. Is this person not a good fit on the team, or did I play a role in that bad interaction, and I need to reach out to them?”

And a lot of times the solutions are more creative than the problem or what we thought.

Sometimes we have to pivot, we’re frustrated, and then we come up with a solution that’s better than what we had before anyway. So many good things have come out of bad situations, like the cancellation. We’re in a better spot with *Chef* now than we ever have been creatively, happiness-wise, our ability to build a team and tell stories. But it is hard. It’s very hard. I have to go run or surf, too, just to get things out of my body because that tension just stays in your body.

Rachel Larsen's favorite things:

My dog Lucy

Surfing in the morning

Below Deck any season

My family

Beach bike rides

Name
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Vocation
animator