



BOTH SIDES NOW

ANIMATION OR LIVE ACTION,
BONNIE ARNOLD CAN PRODUCE IT

by Rae Contreras

“Sometimes the stars really do have to be in alignment for things to come together.” Producer Bonnie Arnold is talking about *The Last Station*, but learning of her journey, you might think the stars have been in her favor throughout her career. Really, it’s Arnold making her own luck. With her unwavering persistence and good instincts, her credits have come to include iconic films like *Dances With Wolves*, *The Addams Family* and *Toy Story*. And anyone who experiences her southern charm can see why she has such influential fans as Kevin Costner, David Picker, John Lasseter and Jeffrey Katzenberg. Over the past 12 months, two of Arnold’s labors of love were released to great acclaim — Sony Pictures Classics’ *The Last Station* and DreamWorks Animation’s *How to Train Your Dragon*. So how did she manage to create such an enviable and diverse career?



Opposite page, left: Bonnie Arnold (Photo: Allison Cane)

Top left: Arnold (seated right) hears a story pitch for *Over the Hedge* from story artist Alessandro Carloni. Seated, right: directors Tim Johnson and Karey Kirkpatrick.

Bottom left: Arnold (left) on location for *The Last Station* with 1st AD Barrie McCulloch. (Photo: Stephan Rabold)



From the start, Arnold was attracted to fascinating stories, but her interest initially led her to a different medium. A child of the Watergate era who loved history and politics, she studied journalism at the University of Georgia and Boston University, where she got her master’s. While in Boston, she interned on a radio documentary for National Public Radio. After graduation, that experience got her a job with producer David Horwatt in Atlanta, where they developed two films for the original drama series *American Playhouse*. She took on a range of tasks as she tried to find her place: fundraising, development, production and publicity. But she found her calling soon enough. “The very first day I walked into the production office,” she recalls, “I saw all the excitement and thought, ‘This is what I want to do with my life.’”

Being a bigger fish in a small pond in Atlanta proved to be fruitful for learning and networking. At the time, there was a lot of local production activity because Atlanta-based Coca-Cola had recently bought Columbia Pictures. The first

film to come out of the deal was *The Slugger’s Wife*. She remembers, “There were lots of big names on that film. Neil Simon was the screenwriter, Hal Ashby was directing, Caleb Deschanel was the cinematographer, Quincy Jones did the music and Ray Stark was the producer.” The studio hired locals and Arnold got a job in the production office, where she forged a relationship with Stark. Her next project was *The Mosquito Coast*, with Harrison Ford. “All that time, I watched the producers on those films — Jerry Hellman, Saul Zaentz and Ray Stark — and their jobs really interested me. I realized that I liked the process of making a movie and working with the artists. The cameramen, the editors, the writers, the makeup and hair, the costumes and the actors... I just loved being on set and watching what everyone did.”

Despite her success in Atlanta, she kept being told she had to move to Los Angeles if she really wanted to be a movie producer; nonetheless, events transpired to keep her in the south. Poised to move, Arnold got a call about a movie being filmed locally, *Leader of the Band*, to be produced by David Picker. Her gut told her to put the move on hold. Picker asked her about her ambitions, and in what would become a constant refrain, she responded, “I want to be a producer.” During production, Picker got the job as President of Columbia Pictures and offered her a place after the film wrapped. However, her move to Los Angeles was again halted when Picker suggested she stay to work on *Stars and Bars* in Georgia. The film starred a then-unknown Daniel Day-Lewis and she made a friend in producer Sandy Lieberman.

Finally, Arnold made the move to Hollywood where Picker made good on his word and put her to work as a production coordinator on a project called *Johnny Utah*, with Ridley Scott attached to direct. However, following Picker’s departure from Columbia, the picture was shut down after four months. (The film would be completed and released four years later as *Point Break*.) Luckily, the connections she had made on previous films kept her employed. Lieberman gave her a job on his film *The Mighty Quinn* with Denzel Washington, and Stark hired her for *Revenge*, directed by Tony Scott and starring Kevin Costner. “All the while, people kept asking me what I wanted to do, and I kept putting my goal out there, ‘I want to be a producer.’ With each of these projects, I just kept asking what kind of experience was I going to get? Who was I going to meet? And how is that going to help me get to where I want to go?”

It was the close relationships she developed on *Revenge* that would ultimately jump-start her producing career.

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Left: Arnold (left) on the set of *The Last Station* with fellow producer Chris Curling (center) and director Michael Hoffman (right) (Photo: Stephan Rabold)

Below: Arnold (bottom center) receives an impromptu drum lesson from Phil Collins during a scoring session for *Tarzan*. (Back) Kevin Lima, Chris Buck. (©Burroughs and Disney, Tarzan® Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc. All Rights Reserved.)



Arnold was the assistant to the producers and dealt with actors Anthony Quinn, Madeleine Stowe and Costner. At the time, Costner's star was rising. One day, he and his partner Jim Wilson asked Arnold what she wanted to do. Arnold proclaimed, "I want to be a producer!" They told her about their project, *Dances With Wolves*, which Costner would direct. If they got funding, they wanted Arnold on their producing team. Meanwhile, she bonded with actor Anthony Quinn, who also inquired about her ambitions. She continued to get the word out: *I want to be a producer*. Quinn told her about a book he wanted to option and within a few months, she received a letter from Quinn, along with a copy of *The Last Station*. To top it all off, Quinn wanted her to produce. She looks back, "For me, the *Revenge* project was a pivotal experience. It's interesting when you think about your career and debate taking something and not knowing if it's the right thing. Two things that changed my life in a big way came out of that film. One was my working relationship with Kevin and Jim. After that, I immediately went on to do *Dances With Wolves* as the associate producer. And secondly, it was the beginning of my working relationship with Anthony Quinn on *The Last Station*."

After *Dances With Wolves*, her producing career flourished but took an unexpected turn. After she produced *The Addams Family*, she was introduced to Peter Schneider,

head of the animation department at Disney. She was skeptical. Says Arnold, "I didn't know anything about animation and it felt completely off track from what I thought I wanted to be doing. But something my mother said came back to me, 'Always meet everyone, whether it be work or a date, because you never know.'"

Schneider told her about a movie they were producing in Northern California with a small company called Pixar. Initially, Arnold wasn't sure what she had to offer in terms of knowledge about animation but Schneider insisted that she meet director John Lasseter. But I met with John and we got along great. I started to realize that while Pixar knew computer animation, they had never made a feature film. I knew that's where my strength came in; I knew how to make features and deal with studios." Schneider offered her the producer role and she soon found herself making *Toy Story* and her career in animation was born. While making *Toy Story*, Arnold met Jeffrey Katzenberg, who she would follow to DreamWorks where she made *Over the Hedge* and *How to Train Your Dragon*.

Arnold was initially intimidated to make the leap into animation. She recalls, "My favorite story is about my first day at Pixar, when I noticed there was no typewriter in my office. 'How can I have an office with no typewriter?' They just laughed me out of the building. I didn't even know how to use a computer. But I quickly realized that produc-

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Bonnie Arnold with directors Chris Sanders (right) and Dean DeBlois at the *How to Train Your Dragon* premiere. (Photo: Alex Berliner)

ing is a transferable skill. I was very good at working with artists, as well as managing resources and budgets. If you have those skills, you can produce anything. I don't need to know the particulars of how the camera works or how the computer works. It's still about how much time, resources, money and people you have to make this movie, and creatively, how are you going to make that all come together?"

Bringing the elements together is the crux of her job. "On *How to Train Your Dragon*, [directors] Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders knew what kind of movie we wanted to make and we assembled a good crew. I feel that my job as a producer is supporting what the directors want to accomplish and protecting the film on a day-to-day basis," she says. Bringing together principals Helen Mirren, Christopher Plummer and director Michael Hoffman for *The Last Station* was a bit more of a challenge. "The film took many years and went through many permutations. It was rewarding to finally connect with filmmakers who all had the same movie in mind," she notes.

Making a connection with the crew is one thing — but there's also the audience. She observes, "The challenge in animation is making a movie for a broader audience. *The Last Station* is for a certain crowd but an animated movie needs to be for families, adults, the date crowd, your grandparents." Specifically, the novel *How to Train Your Dragon* didn't easily translate into a movie for a broad audience. As

much as Arnold loved the book and author Cressida Cowell, the first scripts felt too small and young. Arnold explains, "Chris and Dean came on board and know how to make this a bigger story. In the book, the dragons and Vikings have a master and beast relationship. But Chris and Dean decided to make them mortal enemies. Hiccup and Toothless' relationship is the first time they come together, so it was this forbidden friendship. Second, Toothless was a small dragon. Chris and Dean said that the expectation of people coming into a film about a boy and his dragon is to see the boy flying on the dragon. With Toothless being as little as he was in the book, that would never happen; he's more like a pet. Those adjustments clarified the storytelling for everyone working on the film." Luckily, Cowell understood why the changes were made and was on board.

For Arnold, the payoff to making films with mass appeal has been endless. She reflects, "It harkens back to when I saw films with my family like *Mary Poppins* or *The Sound of Music*. It makes me feel good that those experiences last. I still get responses. I was just at Boston University doing a talk to a screenwriting class and a student came up to me afterward. He was in his early 20s and just went on about how he loved the first *Toy Story* and how much it meant to him as a kid. So it's the gift that keeps on giving because different crowds and generations can enjoy the movie over and over again." 



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