



# mouth to mouse

Celebrity voices such as Michael J. Fox's breathe life into 'Stuart Little 2' and other animated films **PAGE 6**

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# no vocal YOKELS

By Evan Henerson | Staff Writer

**S**ome three sessions into her work for "Stuart Little 2," Melanie Griffith — future voice of Margalo the bird — called producer and longtime friend Lucy Fisher and begged to be fired.

Basically, the voice work wasn't happening, and Griffith was convinced her career in animation was over before it could even begin.

"You would think it would be so easy to be a voice, but it's not," Griffith says in that distinct little girl chirp, which, somewhat surprisingly, had never previously been tabbed for an animated movie.

"If you have your face on camera or your body, you know what you're doing, especially if you've been working for a long time. You can figure out how to get by. But, boy, when it's just your voice and you have a camera on you, with no makeup on. ...

"It freaked me out that I wasn't going to be a cartoon character. I figured if I couldn't do a cartoon character, I'd really have to hang up my career."

Although she acknowledged there was some studio concern over Margalo, Fisher recalls not being particularly worried. She gave Griffith a tough-love pep talk and sent her back to the sound booth.

"We just told her to shut up and go back and try it again because she was great," Fisher says.

## Sound and motion

No, it isn't easy being a voice — not for first-timers like Griffith or vocal old pros like Michael J. Fox and Nathan Lane, both of whom reprised their roles (as plucky mouse Stuart Little and bitchy feline Snowbell) from the first "Stuart Little."

You're in a room alone, with a camera trained on your face to get your mannerisms and gestures. You've got lines to deliver, but no scene partner, since your work will be dubbed in later. You don't even necessarily know what your character looks like.

If you're a voice rookie, your direction may seem both basic and maddeningly unattainable: "Do it bigger." "Be louder." "More energy."

"There was a real concern about getting the tone right on Margalo," agrees producer Douglas Wick, who is also Fisher's husband. "We're dealing with a character who does bad things. If she's too saccharine, you don't believe she's doing bad things, and that's a lot to get into a voice."

When animated characters need that extra dimension, stars step up to the mic

Top to bottom: Michael J. Fox reprises his role as mighty mouse Stuart Little and Melanie Griffith gives Margalo the bird her distinctive chirp in "Stuart Little 2."



And you can have the strongest, most distinctive vocal chords on the planet, but if it isn't working ... well, as Wick contends, "the voice doesn't lie."

Case in point: the actor originally cast to voice Snowbell in the first "Stuart Little" lasted up through early previews.

"He was a well-known comic who was going through some very tough things in his life," says Wick, who declines to give the actor's name. "Snowbell kept seeming depressed. It was a real energy hole in the movie, and we finally had to face it and add further to his depression by getting rid of him."

"Then almost from the beginning when Nathan Lane came in and did it, there was this kind of brilliance and energy. It's really tricky and if you get it wrong, boy do you know it."

### He produces results

Lane, of course, gets it deliciously right. The stage-trained actor, who film critic/animation expert Leonard Maltin labels a "one-man cartoon industry" — allows Snowbell to walk off with every scene he's in. And if it sounds like Lane might be improvising now and then, well, he is.

"Very often, it's about making it funnier," says Lane. "Sometimes you just have to say something neurotic to fit while the cat is walking from here to the food bowl."

**"Sometimes it's amusing to hear a big fat Persian cat walking across the screen saying, 'Oy, I try to eat right, but I still feel bloated.' It still feels human."**

— Nathan Lane, voice of Snowbell

Sometimes it's amusing to hear a big fat Persian cat walking across the screen saying, 'Oy, I try to eat right, but I still feel bloated.' It still feels human."

Rob Minkoff, the veteran Disney animator, directed Lane in both "Stuart Little" films and in Disney's "The Lion King." Possessed of a memory bank that can match voices for potential characters, Minkoff knows that an intriguing name on paper doesn't necessarily translate to animated splendor.

That's when you start auditioning voices. Pre-casting usually consists of a sketch of the character on the wall while casting directors play voices of actors from various movies.

Sometimes voices are spliced together so the casting crew can hear interaction between two or more characters. Click, Margalo is a Valley Girl. Click, now she sounds like the Duchess of Windsor. Either way, the "SL2" team needed someone who would blend well with Fox's Stuart.

In the early stages of "SL2" casting, the villainous Falcon spoke with a German accent, or with Tony Soprano's wise guy gruffness.

"You start out with the most arch kind of tough voice you can find," says Wick. "That's not that interesting. Then you start to hear different kinds of voices. Then we heard James Woods' voice, and we started to get the possibility of a performance. He's a hustler. The Falcon

## Sounds like ...

### Presenting the go-to pros of animation-voice work

Remember Robin Williams as the genie (in Disney's "Aladdin"), Woody Allen as the insect ("Antz") and Jeremy Irons as a prideful lion ("The Lion King")? Well, duh. They were all screen-burning wild cards in hit movies. And they were largely one-shot deals (although Williams spun off the "Aladdin" role into a franchise).

But if you're looking for the cartoon nine-to-fivers, look to folks like Eddie Murphy, John Ratzenberger and the ubiquitous David Ogden Stiers. Hey, even if you can't be everywhere, there's no saying your voice can't.

#### Eddie Murphy

He was Mushu the mini dragon in Disney's "Mulan," an ass with attitude in "Shrek" and its upcoming sequel and a whole bunch of "P.J.'s." Sign up those pipes, and you're all but guaranteed comic gold. Good luck getting someone — or some species — to share the screen with him.

#### Michael J. Fox

Many say that, owing to his battle with Parkinson's, animation has become an ideal medium for the former "Family Ties" star. Even before voicing the title character of the two "Stuart Little" flicks, Fox lent his voice to a bulldog in a pair of "Homeward Bound" movies. He's also Milo Thatch in Disney's "Atlantis."

#### David Ogden Stiers

Best known as "M\*A\*S\*H's" Maj.

Winchester, Stiers is the man without whom no Disney animated film is complete. He was Jumba in "Lilo & Stitch," Cogsworth the Clock in "Beauty and the Beast" (and all its sequels), Governor Ratcliffe in "Pocahontas" and the Archdeacon in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." We could go on. Stiers certainly will.

#### John Ratzenberger

"Cheers' " Clifford Clavin is a Pixar mainstay, twice voicing the piggy bank Hamm ("Toy Story" and "Toy Story 2"), P.T. Flea in "A Bug's Life" and the Abominable Snowman in "Monsters, Inc."

#### June Foray

The Valley's own animation immortal. From Rocky the Flying Squirrel in Jay Ward's "Rocky and Bullwinkle" franchise to Looney Tunes' Granny and Witch Hazel, her work has delighted cartoon fans for decades. Catch her reprising her role as the voice of Grandma Fa in the upcoming, direct-to-video "Mulan II."

— E.H.

# Voices

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is just doing what nature tells him to do which is take what you need in order to survive."

Minkoff, who hit pay dirt stirring the disparate voices of Jeremy Irons, Matthew Broderick, Lane and James Earl Jones into "The Lion King," uses musical analogies when he talks about animated voice work.

"I think it really is all about technique, but it's where the intersection of acting and singing sort of meets," he says. "There has to be a musicality to the delivery of a line of dia-

logue that gives it impact. Indeed young, and I think we accept from Michael J. Fox a kind of optimism and stick-to-it-iveness."

"SL2's" Fisher recalls trying noncelebrity voices at some of the characters and quickly coming to the realization that stars are stars for a reason.

"The voice guys would deliver the gags just fine, but they wouldn't have that extra depth," says Fisher. "I didn't really realize it until I worked on this movie when we taped the voices, and videotaped the performance. Even though the actor is just doing their voice, you could see Jimmy Woods moving into the microphone and doing the gestures of Falcon. Maybe a shuffle would

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— director Rob Minkoff

logue that gives it impact.

"Somebody like Nathan Lane understands that. It's in his bones really. He can deliver a line five different ways, and each one has incredible impact and intonation and rhythm."

"It's like radio acting," adds Lane. "Very often people will say, 'That seems like bad acting. That seems over the top.' But, as you know, I have a condo over the top. That's never bothered me."

## Get out the A-list

The recognition factor ("My God, that salamander sounds just like Charlton Heston!") is often a source of amusement, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee an animated home run. On the other hand, it's a rare big-budget animated film that won't contain one or more celebrity voices.

For the character of Stuart, Fox's star wattage was a bonus, but not necessarily the deciding factor. The producers knew they wanted to cast an adult as Stuart Little, even though the character is supposed to be a child. And they needed somebody who projects a "can do!" spirit.

"Youthfulness has been Michael J. Fox's stock in trade for many years," says Maltin, film critic for "Entertainment Tonight." "Stuart Little is

be something Stuart will do or the way Melanie would cock her head."

Now, of course, the animated character will frequently have several of the physical characteristics of the person supplying the voice. That practice goes back more than half a century, to the days of Disney actually filming actor Hans Conried before assembling the animated Captain Hook for "Peter Pan."

"The first time Disney really flaunted it was in 'Alice in Wonderland,' when they cast really well-known people," said Maltin, author of "Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons." "The moment that movie came out, everybody knew who they were. It was a deliberate blurring of the line."

Maltin recalls being singularly unimpressed by the voice work in Don Bluth's star-studded "Titan A.E." ("Those were the duller readings I've ever heard.") By contrast, he was blown away by John Leguizamo as Sid the Sloth in Fox's "Ice Age," a voice he didn't recognize as he was watching the film.

"He gets it," Maltin says of Leguizamo. "I didn't know it was him and I'm glad I didn't know. It was fun listening to a wonderful characterization."