

The Rise of Ramsey!

Written by The "Rise of the Guardians" Interview with Kam Williams



"Rise of the Guardians" is Peter Ramsey's first feature film after directing the hit DreamWorks Animation Halloween special, "Monsters vs. Aliens: Mutant Pumpkins from Outer Space." This project followed the feature film, "Monsters vs. Aliens" on which Ramsey served as Head of Story. While at DreamWorks Animation, Ramsey also served as a story artist on "Shrek the Third," and as a story board artist on "Shark Tale."

Before joining DreamWorks Animation in 2004, Ramsey's talent as a storyboard artist was on display while working on a notable number of live action feature films, including "Adaptation," "Minority Report," "A.I. Artificial Intelligence," "Cast Away", "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," "Fight Club," "Godzilla," "Men in Black," "Independence Day," "Batman Forever," "Far and Away," "Backdraft," and "Predator 2" amongst others.

Ramsey's directing skills were also honed early, as he served as Second Unit Director on live action feature films including "Godzilla," "Tank Girl," "Higher Learning," and "Poetic Justice." A lifelong resident of Los Angeles, California, Peter grew-up in Crenshaw, and graduated from Palisades High School before attending UCLA.

Here, he talks about his life and career, and about being the first African-American to direct a full-length, animated feature.

Kam Williams: Hi Peter, thanks for the interview. I'm honored to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Peter Ramsey: Oh, the pleasure's all mine, Kam. The pleasure's all mine.

KW: I really enjoyed Rise of the Guardians. Let me start by asking you what it meant to make history as the first African-American hired by a big studio to direct a full-length, animated feature?

PR: I thought about it a little bit when I first got the job, but then rapidly got lost in the work. It wasn't until later, when my mom and dad read that fact about me in the newspaper, and I saw how it affected them, that it came back to me. Since I talk to a lot of groups at schools, one good thing is that kids can look at me and have direct knowledge of someone who's doing something they might be dreaming of doing themselves.

KW: How did you get the gig? Judging from your bio, it seems like you've been a storyboard

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artist most of your career until now.

PR: Right. I got into film as a storyboard artist, but my dream was always to be a director. The way I was able to get into the industry was through drawing. As a storyboard artist, you basically pre-visualize the whole film through drawing. So, I spent a lot of my career doing that with many different directors. That was really film school for me, my training ground, because I got to work with so many great people.

KW: So, what was your academic background? Did you study art?

PR: I'm pretty much self-taught. I took a couple of art classes in high school, and I entered college with the intention of majoring in art. But I was a little too young when I started at UCLA at 17, and I wasn't ready for the concept of art that was being taught there. I was intimidated by Art History, and didn't get it. All I was interested in was drawing. I wish I had been able to hang tough, but I dropped out after a couple years. Of course, I did learn a bunch of that stuff later on.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier was wondering whether the film is faithful to the book series it's based upon.

PR: An interesting thing about the movie and the books is that they were both being developed at the same time. The books' author, Bill Joyce, in his talks with the studio, said, "It would be really cool, if I could do a series of books about the origins of these characters, how they came to be and their back stories while you guys were simultaneously developing a movie about the first time they all came together." So, they're all the same characters and they share the same mythology, but the movie and the books are pretty different.

KW: Patricia also asks: What message do you want children to take away from your movie?

PR: The main message of the film is that you have the power to create magic through your imagination and to bring it into the world, whether that's in the form of the Guardian characters who represent a lot of things we need, or whether it's just anybody creating something. That is the best way to fight fear. That's probably the central idea of the movie.

KW: Why did you tweak these familiar characters, like giving Santa a Russian accent and making him look a little different from what we've come to expect?

PR: The basic idea behind the books was to suggest that you grew up with a made-up version of all these characters, as if there's a secret world alongside our world, and we've never known the whole truth about it. What you see in the movie and the books is the real truth about what these guys are. And it's pretty cool, more like a Lord of the Rings kind of epic, fantasy world they all operate in as opposed to the cute, fluffy image you get from greeting cards. That was the central idea of the books. We thought that was pretty interesting and a really fresh way to get people to take another look at these characters.

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles asks: Where were some "Guardians" when the hunters shot Bambi's mother? I can still hear the shot ring out all those many years ago. How much trauma-less support can animation/fable offer young children without some need of a degree of reality check?

PR: Wow! I'm not sure what to do with that question. I can't answer for Bambi. We have a mom in our movie. Some form of reality check? Yeah, I don't know what to do with that one.

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KW: Film student Jamaal Green asks: What is your favorite film, and is there a filmmaker whose work inspired you to make the move to becoming a director?

PR: Omigosh, I literally have too many favorite movies to name them all. But I can throw a few out there: Kurosawa... Coppola... David Lean... I'm a huge fan of Ang Lee. And there are tons of French films I love. Like I said, way too many to mention.

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

PR: Of course! Are you kidding? [LOL] But you have to realize that fear is something that lives in your mind, just like all the positive things that reside there. The key is to try to find a balance or a way for the positive to at least cancel out what the fear is telling you. Most of the time, fear is taking something that sounds very rational and blowing it out of proportion, and letting your mind run away with it.

KW: Will your next film be live-action or animated?

PR: I don't know. So much depends on how this one is received and how well it does? I'd love to make another animated film, because I feel like I'm really just beginning to learn how to use all these tools. It's a real experience working in a big studio system. It's like learning how to command a battleship.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

PR: I'm very happy with the work and the spirit my crew brought to the movie. I couldn't be prouder of them.

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

PR: Today! I've been laughing a lot lately. [LOL] This is my first time directing, and it's been quite a roller coaster ride.

KW: What is your guiltiest pleasure?

PR: Playing the video game Halo 4.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

PR: What I'm reading a new book by Robert Greene called "Mastery."

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0670024961/ref%3dnosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

PR: I see a guy who always feels like he's a beginner. Sometimes it's a good thing, sometimes it's a bad thing, but I can't shake that image of myself.

KW: I can't recall who said it, but that makes me think of the saying, "The greatest freedom is the freedom to begin again."

PR: Very true. I think there's a Zen saying about a beginner's mind.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

PR: My earliest childhood memory is very abstract. I must have been about 3 years-old. It's just me in the backyard looking at a flower. I have another one from when I was just a little bit older of my parents taking me to see Snow White at a drive-in theater.

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KW: Thanks again for the time, Peter, and best of luck with the film.

PR: Thanks so much. I really appreciate it, Kam.

To see a trailer for "Rise of the Guardians", visit:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3OmoPtPp0I