

Please see the *The Making of Bottle* video on the 'The Stop Motion Animator' page of the Companion Website

***Bottle*: An Interview with Kirsten Lepore**

Animated on location at a beach, in snow, and underwater, this stop-motion short details a transoceanic conversation between two characters via objects in a bottle.

Kirsten Lepore is an animator and director based in the Los Angeles area currently working toward an MFA at California Institute of the Arts. Her 2010 stop-motion short, *Bottle*, received the first-ever Student Annie Award, as well as taking top prizes at Slamdance, the Stuttgart Animation festival, Bill Plympton's Anecny+ program, BAFTA LA Student Film Awards, Florida Film Fest, Arizona Film Fest, the Vimeo Awards and several others. Her 2008 animated film *Sweet Dreams* won the Special Jury Award at SXSW in 2009 and LACMA's Young Director award in 2010. She was also recently featured as a rising talent by *Animation* magazine and Focus Features. With a client list including MTV, Whole Foods, Toyota, Facebook, Nickelodeon, Nestle, Heinz, and *Glamour* magazine, her work has been featured on TV, the web, and at various international film festivals.



Where did the idea for *Bottle* come from?

Kirsten: I had the initial spark about two winters ago while I was home in New Jersey. I was just watching a snowfall and thinking how interesting it might be to animate a snowman. I'd never seen it done, and it was definitely something I knew I had to try at some point. So basically the idea for *Bottle* was born out of a material challenge; I knew I wanted to make a film using snow and sand in their natural locations. With this in mind, I formulated a story that would utilize the materials in a way that was meaningful and integral to the piece. It took a few months to really distill the story to its simplest form, so that it would be manageable to create within a five- to six-month timeframe.



This piece seems to reference pen pals, or social networking through elements of nature. What made you think of this particular relationship?

Kirsten: After I had made the decision to animate snow, I brainstormed about which other naturally occurring materials might be fun to animate. Sand came to mind as a fitting counterpart, and the fact that sand and snow usually exist in opposite climates opened the floor to many different story possibilities. It's difficult for me to pin down exactly when or how I come up with an idea, but I always know it is right when it "clicks" in my mind. This gut feeling of an idea being "right" is very tangible for me—it feels like pieces of a puzzle locking together seamlessly. When I feel that, I know I can move forward with the piece.



How did your story develop?

Kirsten: I remember just building it piece by piece like a house. The foundation was built on decisions that I knew wouldn't change, such as the ideas of using sand and snow and having them communicate to each other over a body of water. I slowly built up from there, imagining how they might correspond. I knew I didn't want to use any text or dialogue between them, and thought that telling a story through objects would be much more poetic. I slowly put the rest of the pieces together until the story felt cohesive.



What type of planning did you have to do prior to production? Did you start with a script or treatment?

Kirsten: After my initial sketches, and a basic idea of the story in my head, I drew very simple boards. The board stage always forces me to work out the kinks of staging and finalizing the small details and moments in the film. From there, I scan the boards and time them out into a rough animatic.

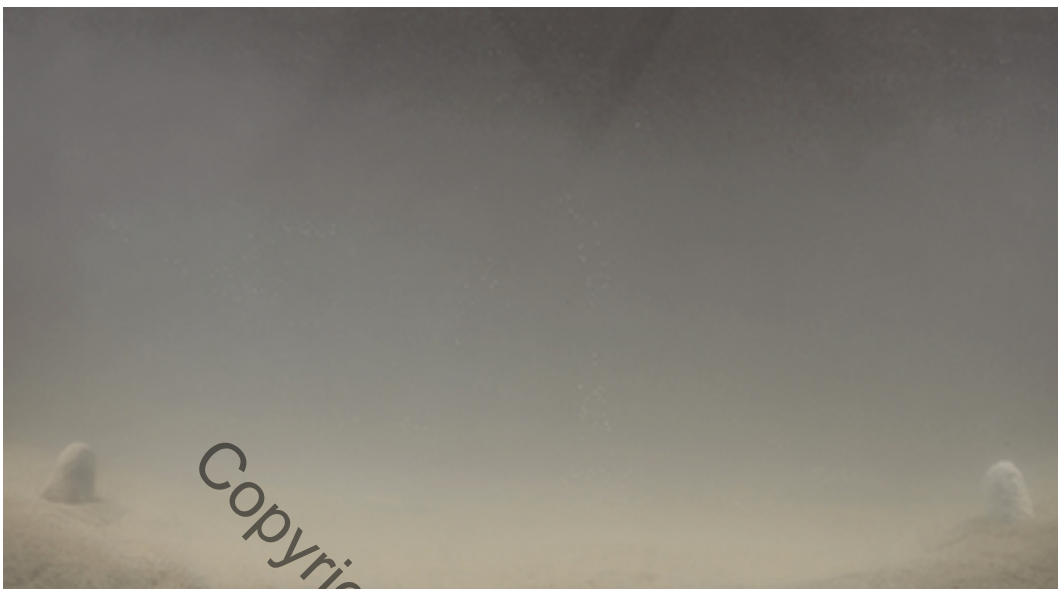
Please see the *Bottle Animatic* video on the 'The Stop Motion Animator' page of the Companion Website

When the characters send objects to each other, it is pure anticipation to see how they interpret what they have received. One of my favorite exchanges is when the snowman receives the shells from the sandman. Can you talk a little bit about how you came up with these fun ideas?

Kirsten: I just came up with a list of objects that might be hanging around in each of their "lands" and then tried to come up with interesting ways of using each one of those that would serve the story or provide a funny moment. I also had to plan it out so that each object could also double as a facial feature or accessory.

**Why did you choose the sad ending?**

Kirsten: I actually never viewed the ending as sad. I think it's up to personal interpretation and I was a bit surprised when most audiences viewed it that way. However, I'm of the school of thought that supports and encourages the viewer to pull his/her own meanings from a work. Personally, I've always interpreted the ending as a union between the two characters. They could not have existed together in either one of their own climates, so in the ending they are finally together as part of a bigger whole.

**How did you produce the underwater scene?**

Kirsten: I shot it in a four-foot-long fish tank filled with water with the characters in miniature.

Did you really animate all that snow?

Kirsten: Yes, it was all real snow, moved frame by frame. Every time I got out there to shoot, I had to rebuild the character (which was about three feet tall). It was also pretty physically grueling pushing around massive snowballs (that probably weighed more than me) running back and forth between the camera and the character every frame, and dealing with wet gloves, boots, and pants.

Did you do this all by yourself, or did you have a crew?

Kirsten: It probably would have been much easier with a crew, but I'm stubborn so I did the whole thing entirely by myself. I also would have felt pretty guilty making someone else stand out in the snow for eight hours a day.

What were your biggest challenges (besides the cold) to making your piece?

Kirsten: The cold temperatures were probably the least of my worries, as I was running around in snow clothes, sweating most of the time anyway. The list of challenges for shooting in an outdoor situation is too long to keep track of—though some of the highlights included seagulls and incoming tides stealing my props and equipment, inconsistent lighting, battling ice while animating, unpackable snow, etc. Every time I went on location to shoot, not only did I have to lug a trunk full of equipment out to the site by myself, but I also couldn't take any breaks (bathroom, food, or otherwise) since I couldn't leave my equipment unattended. The whole process was tremendously difficult.

How long did it take you?

Kirsten: From conception of the idea to the final edit, it took about nine months.

What qualities do you think you need to be a stop motion animator?

Kirsten: To do stop motion, you must have patience, tenacity, and be willing to dedicate a lot of time to projects. I think it also helps to have an eye for detail and ability to multitask.

What do you need to consider if you are going to create a stop motion project (as opposed to traditional or CG?). What are the things you should think about if you want to design for a stop motion project?

- **Build your puppets according to what actions they will perform in the shot.** If a character will be sitting at any time, you'll probably want to build a tie-down into his backside so he can be secured at that point, rather than with feet tie-downs alone. Consider whether the puppet will hold any objects. This will dictate how you should construct the hands. Additionally, if the puppet needs to be suspended in the air at any point (even for a run-cycle), think about what types of rigs you will need to use/build to keep it in place.
- **Scale of puppet to set.** Puppets are often built before sets. When constructing your puppet, make sure you consider its scale in relation to its surroundings. This will prevent you from having to build your sets way larger than originally intended, as large shooting spaces and material costs are usually limited.
- **Consider what materials to use.** Will your objects/character need to morph or change shape multiple times? If so consider using a flexible/moldable material like clay. If not, consider something more rigid that will not change shape when you touch it. Also, consider the cost of materials when designing sets, characters, and props. Try to keep puppets and props as lightweight as possible. Wood and foam heads are good options for making heads. When building traditional puppets, remember that a single ankle joint must be able to support the weight of the entire puppet. It's generally better to err on the stiffer side when it comes to building leg joints.
- **Wire or ball and socket?** If using armatures, think about how much the puppet will be used during the course of production. Ball and socket armatures are a luxury, and usually more durable than wire if you can afford them, although they still aren't perfect for every project. Wire armatures are very cheap and easy to make; however, almost all armatures (wire or ball and socket) require some sort of repair with enough use. Consider using replaceable hands, head, etc., if possible for easier repair.
- **3D sets or downshooter?** Sometimes it isn't necessary to build freestanding 3D puppets and sets. Although all forms of stop motion carry their own inherent challenges, downshooter and multiplane setups remove the element of gravity and can make shooting easier.
- **Spend time lighting your shot.** In my opinion, properly lighting a shot can be more important than the animation, design, and fabrication of the elements in the scene. What's the use of spending hours, days, or weeks on an object if the lighting makes it look terrible? Stop motion objects are primarily made to be photographed, not to be seen in real life. Put yourself in the role of a photographer or cinematographer for live action: lighting is critical to the look and emotional tone of a shot.
- **Rehearse your shot.** Especially if you're working with puppets, it's always a good idea to "rehearse" your shot by doing a "pop-through" (moving your puppet into key poses in sequence). This will give you a better idea of how to best animate your shot as well as alerting you to any physical limitations of the puppet (for example, arms can't be moved into a certain pose) *before* you're in the middle of shooting.
- **Think about composition/framing.** One of the best pieces of advice I've ever received from a professor was to think about every frame of animation as a separate photograph. More specifically, he always said you should be able to pull any given still from the film and it should function as a work of art—with thought given to composition, lighting, and silhouette.
- **Make guides for yourself during complex shots.** Since stop-motion animation is all in the "straight-ahead" style of animation and photographed from one specific angle, you usually

only have one chance to get the animation to where you want it. To take some of the pressure off of myself and ensure that I get the motion right for difficult shots, I will sometimes make a very detailed animatic first in Flash or After Effects. I can then use this as a guide by overlaying it in Dragonframe (stop-motion frame grabbing software) and animating along to it frame by frame. Simpler guides, like arcs and lines, can be drawn on the shot digitally within Dragonframe and toggled on and off.

- **Experiment!** The best part of stop-motion animation is that you can use any object from the real world—so get creative and don't be afraid to try new things!

What advice would you give to new animators?

Kirsten: Concentrate on story and concept above anything technical. Your audience will connect with the message; the visuals are secondary. Also, don't finish a film and then just let it sit on a hard drive. Get it out there! Post it up on all the video networking sites and send it to as many festivals as you can. Also, be true to yourself and your own style.

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