

Steve E. Gordon

Animator, Director, and Storyboard artist for 30 years at various studios including: Disney Feature Animation, DreamWorks Animation and TV. His credits include *The Condor*, *Over the Hedge*, *Shrek2*, *Moby Dick*, *Madagascar*, *Tarzan II*, *Mulan II*, *X-Men: Evolution*, *Lady and the Tramp II*, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Batman*, *Asylum*, *Titan A.E.*, *Batman: SubZero*, *Anastasia*, *The Swan Princess*, *Cool World*, *The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse*, *Oliver & Company*, and *The Great Mouse Detective*. He is currently a professional artist and illustrator working in California. <http://www.stevenegordon.com>

Q: What background skills do Storyboard artists need to be successful? What would you tell a student to do to prepare themselves for this profession (or just to be good at storyboarding for their own films)? Training? Books? Lectures? Websites? Other Sources or kinds of experiences?

Steve Gordon: The most important skills necessary are the most obvious: good drawing skills. That means not just the ability to draw characters well, but also to be able to draw layouts with good solid perspective – or, at least, the ability to fake these skills reasonably well. It's important to understand that in animation you're also the cinematographer as well as the director, the actor, and the editor. These are just the skills necessary in TV or Direct-to-Video. If you're working in feature then it's also very important to have a good understanding of story as well as having a good sense of humor and drama. Some of these things can't necessarily be learned, but many of them can. I would suggest studying lots of film. Good and bad films. It's always a good test of your skills to watch a bad film and try to understand why certain cuts or angles weren't

successful. Sometimes even good films have mistakes in them that once you learn what you're doing are hard to ignore. A good source for storyboarding is the "Five C's of Cinematography" by Joseph V. Mascelli and Wally Wood's "22 panels that always work" comic staging guidelines - these can be found all around the internet

<http://homepage.mac.com/georgepratt/iblog/B44581127/C1898775419/E347695153/>

Q: Are there special characteristics that you find professional story artists have in common. What makes the successful ones successful? Is great story telling ability or humor something one can learn or is it an innate skill that some people have and others do not?

Steve Gordon: I don't know that there are specific characteristics that all good story artists have. I've seen some that are good because they have a strong grasp of story and could step into the role of director if necessary. I've seen some that have really funny ideas and can come up with great gags or funny dialogue. I've seen some that are really good draftsman and can stage something so it really reads whether it's humor or emotion. Many of the best story artists have a combination of these abilities. Some of these things could possibly be learned – it depends on the person, I guess, but it helps if there's some innate talent to start with. It's usually pretty easy to see if someone getting into story will have the chops to grow or not

Q: What is your top ten list of “must see movies” to help a person understand good film/animation-film construction and story telling? (to make one a better storyboard artist).

Steve Gordon: I don't know that I have a 'top 10', but I think the first **Star Wars** (and I mean the first – the 1977 movie) was brilliantly edited and was able to overcome bad direction and acting. Also most of *Steven Spielberg's* movies are perfect examples of good film structure even if some of them aren't perfect films. It's also worth studying some Anime - and I don't just mean *Miyazaki's* films. **Akira** and **Grave of the Fireflies** are good films worth studying as well as the recently released **Paprika**. **Shrek** is also a near perfect film as far as storytelling goes. Any film or TV show is worth studying for cutting techniques and cinematography – even the bad ones. If you can recognize when something doesn't work and figure out why that means you're learning.

Q: Do you have any favorite sequences – what are they?

Steve Gordon: My favorite sequences are ones that grab me (and I assume others too) and make me fahklemp. For example in **Excalibur** where Arthur has just jumped into the moat of Leondegrance's castle and the knight he is fighting refuses to honor Arthur as king because Arthur hasn't been knighted – Arthur agrees with him and hands him Excalibur and the knight looks around unsure at first of what to do and finally does knight Arthur. Between the cutting, cinematography and the perfect music this sequence is near perfect. That is powerful!

Q: Have you looked at any student story boards? What do you think is most often lacking in them? What were some of the big “lessons” you learned when you first began as a “new hire” story artist?

Steve Gordon: I’ve seen some student storyboards and some test storyboards from non-students. What seems to be most lacking is the understanding of basic cinematography, screen direction and why a scene *should* cut. Don’t get me wrong, I also see some of these things in professional boards as well. The most important thing to learn is the 180 degree rule and how to work around it. Pacing also seems to be lacking in many newbie boards.

Q: How much freedom do you have to interpret how a scene is to be presented? Are you encouraged to explore unique and adventurous solutions to story telling problems or are you given very specific guidelines and expectations.

Steve Gordon: How much freedom you’re afforded often changes from project to project and from sequence to sequence even within a project. In the early stages of a feature film there’s usually a tremendous amount of leeway to explore and come up with ideas and to help establish characters. TV boards trend to be the complete opposite. Usually with a TV board you’re handed an approved script and a layout designs. Even TV it’s up to you to find an exciting way to stage and make the script work. A good director will usually talk a handout through with you and will often brainstorm ideas with you as well as possibly giving examples of other films that he would like you to reference.

Q: Can you describe your process? Do you thumbnails, what drawing materials do you use? Do you do key shots first and then work in between or do you work “straight ahead”.

Steve Gordon: I do *all of the above* - it depends on the handout and the situation. I’ve even developed a process for TV boarding where I’ll write all the directions and dialogue down and figure out where my cuts are before I do any drawing. I don’t necessarily recommend this, but it kind of helps me get moving and thinking about the whole assignment before I have to start erasing too much because I didn’t think it all through.

Q: How do you research or find ideas when fresh ideas are not coming easily? How do you wake up your brain, get inspired, and solve that “artist’s block” problem?

Steve Gordon: To avoid staleness I flip through comics, watch a lot of film and surf the net for inspiration. It’s also helpful to talk with others and brainstorm.

Q: How much do you do by yourself and how much do you work in a team? Do you think about story structure a lot or do you just work intuitively and refine things later?

Steve Gordon: I’m cursed with always thinking about story structure. I envy those that just worry about their immediate problems at hand. It’s always better to work in a team if for no other reason just to brainstorm and bounce ideas off one another.

Q: What would you say about staging? Are there any basic principles that you apply to your work?

Steve Gordon: When in doubt about staging go with a low angle and avoid down-shots like the plague

Q: How many times are you likely to re-draw your original drawings – in other words, approximately how many drawings do you actually make before you complete one 100 panel story sequence?

Steve Gordon: It depends on what stage I'm at. If it's a first pass usually one quick drawings does it, but if I'm getting ready for camera I might re-draw several times until I get it right.

Q: Do you think of yourself as actor, cameraman, editor, designer and/or all of these things in your job? Have I left anything out?

Steve Gordon: All of these things including the director and writer.

Q: How much do you think about the “emotional content” of your story as well as the specific action or event?

Steve Gordon: I always think about the emotion and aim for that moment that will connect the audience to the experience. It's not always possible to achieve, but has to be the goal.

Below are Steve Gordon Storyboards:





































