

STUDIOCANAL



playmobil THE MOVIE

PRODUCTION NOTES

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BUILDING AN INSTANT CLASSIC

For more than 45 years, children around the world have been delighted by the 7.5 cm-tall (three-inches) plastic figure toys known as Playmobil®. This year, the popular toys come to animated life in ON Animation Studio's beautifully crafted and imagined new movie.

Directed by Disney veteran Lino DiSalvo, *Playmobil: The Movie* features the voices of Anya Taylor-Joy, Gabriel Bateman, Daniel Radcliffe, Jim Gaffigan, Meghan Trainor and Adam Lambert. It is produced by Aton Soumache, Dimitri Rassam, Alexis Vonarb, Axel Von Maydell and Moritz Borman. The screenplay is by Blaise Hemingway and Greg Erb & Jason Oremland. *Playmobil: The Movie* will be released in over 60 territories starting summer 2019.

Featuring a live-action prologue and epilogue, *Playmobil: The Movie* is centered on an imaginative young girl named Marla (Anya Taylor-Joy) who embarks on an epic journey after her younger brother Charlie (Gabriel Bateman) disappears into the vast and wondrous animated world of Playmobil. As Marla tries to find her brother in this magical realm, she encounters a memorable cast of Playmobil characters including a friendly food truck driver Del (Jim Gaffigan), dashing secret agent Rex Dasher (Daniel Radcliffe), a modern fairy godmother (Meghan Trainor) and the power-hungry Emperor Maximus (Adam Lambert). After being reunited with her brother, her sweeping adventures teach Marla to break free from her structured adult life, reconnect to her childhood dreams and enjoy the endless possibilities of her imagination.

DIRECTOR'S VISION: CHAMPIONING IMAGINATION

For the film's director Lino DiSalvo, *Playmobil: The Movie* provided the opportunity to remember how as a child he used to play with his favorite toys. "Toys like Playmobil are a gateway to your earlier memories," he notes. "They can be like time machines as they take you back and immediately give that spark. I first got the inspiration for the movie when I visited my childhood home and found some of the toys I used to play with. I recalled how I was so happy just to play with a toy and be lost and create my own narratives."

DiSalvo, who was Head of Animation on Disney's *Frozen* and Supervising Animator on *Bolt* and *Tangled*, says it has been a thrilling experience to bring everything that he had learned at Disney to the magical world of Playmobil. Looking back at the past four years, he says, "The creative process has been absolutely incredible. I got to collaborate with this incredible team that truly believes in these characters and the story, and to have these wonderful songs that forward the plot and the story. To finally be at a moment

where you're wrapping the film up and hear an orchestra play the songs that you crafted for the characters that were bubbling up in your head just a few years ago is amazing and incredible."

The director points out that most fairy tales use a visual device that bookends the story. "We explored opening up a storybook or having a narrated opening, but none of it felt organic to the story we were trying to tell," DiSalvo explains. "Then we realized that to have a dynamic contrast and stimulating visual from animation it was best to have a live-action opening and ending. Our protagonist Marla has lost touch with the child's point of view that she used to have. It felt right to show her in a live-action world where there is no magic. When she finds herself in a very magical situation — which is the entrance to the world of Playmobil, it becomes the catalyst for the whole movie."

DiSalvo says that his many years of experience at Disney taught him the value of extensive research. "I have two kids, a 2 ½ -year-old girl and a 5 ½ year-old boy," he says. "We have a lot of toys at home including both LEGO and Playmobil! We love them both, but my kids play with those toys very differently. I would say what LEGO is to construction, Playmobil is to role playing. I wanted to make sure I reflected that idea in the movie since Marla literally gets turned into a toy and ends up in a magical world."

Looking back at the experience, DiSalvo is pleased that the movie has both an honest, emotional core it, while being funny and entertaining at the same time. "It was really important to make something that would take audiences through an emotional journey," he adds. "It's something I think Disney films do really well. Simple plots with complex characters. That was my goal for this film, to take everything I learned over the years at Disney Animation and apply it here."

One of the special devices that sets the movie apart is that the characters get to travel to different realms, which allowed DiSalvo and his team to have fun with various cinematic genres. "We were able to do something that we're calling 'genre jumping' in the second act of the movie," he explains. "If you think of your favorite genre films like Westerns, Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Musicals... there are tropes that are familiar in all those movies. We used those tropes as our comedic framing device. As the characters travel through the different lands, we would adopt the cinematic language, acting and dialogue from the different genre's... and just have fun with it."

PRODUCERS' MAJOR UNDERTAKING

Several of the film's producers are the same forces behind previous acclaimed animated movies such as *The Little Prince* and *Mune: Guardian of the Moon*. Producer Aton Soumache, whose numerous animation credits include acclaimed features such as *The Little Prince* and *Mune: Guardian of the Moon* and TV series such as *Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug and Cat Noir* and *Iron Man: Armored Adventures*, says he realized that creating a movie based on the hugely popular toys was a major undertaking. "I knew that we had a

big responsibility to deliver a great comedy adventure with memorable characters,” he says. “It was very important for us to convey the true emotions that we all experience in childhood. The central part of the movie is the ability to bring back the feelings and spirit of childhood that come with playing with the Playmobil toys.”

Soumache says he knew that DiSalvo would be the person to bring the energy and spirit of childhood to the project. “When I look at the movie today, I am very proud of the visuals, the adventure, the great action, the comedy and the songs. But the most important thing is that the movie makes you feel very strong emotions. With Playmobil, you get the feeling that anything is possible. You create the rules, and you become a character in this movie. You can go through a lot of different experiences, but just like the main character in our movie, you should never forget about your dreams and your childhood. Know that anything is possible if you trust yourself and stay optimistic.”

For producer Axel Von Maydell, PLAYMOBIL was a brand that offered enormous possibilities. “In the past we produced interactive games for PLAYMOBIL, so my professional connection with the brand began more than 15 years ago,” he says. “I knew that these iconic little figurines had huge potential! So - we took cut scenes from our games and mixed them together. When I saw the results on screen it was the moment that I realized that you can do everything with PLAYMOBIL. Kids create their own stories by playing with the figurines. By using their imagination they dive into the world of PLAYMOBIL. They can be knights, Vikings, princesses or cowboys. They are quite serious about their game, but they have great fun! So it’s about “serious fun” as well as creating own stories. This is so important for a creative education - PLAYMOBIL is just an awesome piece of our culture.”

Von Maydell points out that PLAYMOBIL stands out among other toys as it appeals equally to boys and girls. “It’s not a girl- nor boy-driven toy. We often see boys and girls playing together in the world of PLAYMOBIL,” he explains. “You have pirates, knights, police officers, firemen, brides, princesses, and children connect to these characters all over the world! You can mix the characters, the figurines and the worlds, and the only limitation is your imagination. You can travel through time, fly to the moon and be a pirate at the same time.”

The creative team also wanted to make sure the movie appeals to everyone, both younger audiences and their parents. “PLAYMOBIL has been in the market since 1974, so a lot of parents around the world grew up with the toys,” says Von Maydell. “The movie is true family entertainment, and if you consider the story: we have a complex, entertaining story that draws an older audiences, and it also includes these very funny, smaller story details that very much appeal to kids.”

“The world of Playmobil offered us endless story possibilities. The essence of the brand centers on imagination, and that goes hand in hand with great filmmaking and engaging

stories,” says producer Tito Ortiz. “Our challenge was to look at the broad landscape of the Playmobil universe and identify the kinds of characters and story we wanted to develop. We felt dynamic and relatable characters had to be at the heart of our film. It’s about forgiveness and understanding — a fractured family finds a way to come back together. This felt like a worthy and meaningful story to tell. Our characters are emotionally upended and turned (literally) into something else, and that transformation challenges them in remarkable ways. Their journey inspires them to act courageously and offers hope that the best version of their life together is yet to come.”

Ortiz says classic storytelling and universally relatable characters help strengthen the film’s broad appeal. “We’re striving to present characters that feel relevant and appealing to a global audience,” he explains. “We had a lot of fun playing with different film genres and locations around the world. Many of us grew up with James Bond movies, Clint Eastwood’s spaghetti westerns, and movies about knights and magical kingdoms. When we got together and started talking about genre jumping, we were like kids again, playing with toys in the living room. We want to bring that same level of playfulness and joy to audiences around the world and remind them that with imagination, anything is possible.”

A REMARKABLE CAST OF CHARACTERS

MARLA BRENNER (ANYA TAYLOR JOY)

The heroine of *Playmobil: The Movie* is Marla Brenner, a spirited young woman who is thrust into the magical world of Playmobil when her young brother Charlie disappears into a fantastic toy universe. Actress Anya Taylor-Joy (*The Witch*, *Split*, *Emma*) says she jumped at the opportunity to play the lead in the movie when she first learned about the project.

“When I first met our director Lino he played me a couple of the songs and I just burst into tears,” she recalls. “What attracted me to Marla was her heroic character. When I was young, I would always play princesses and knights, but I was never the princess. I always wanted to be the knight! In the beginning of the movie, Marla is really excited about going out into the world and she has such a zest for life. When her little brother goes missing, they both end up on this mad adventure when they get sucked into Playmobil-land, and she has to find him. So, the movie is a really lovely story of courage and family love, but it’s also very funny and entertaining.”

For Taylor-Joy, the whole experience of being part of Playmobil has been a wonderful journey. She says working with Lino DiSalvo was an especially rewarding process. “Working with Lino is just incredible because you can’t meet him and not be passionate about whatever it is that he’s talking about,” she notes. “He has this life force, and he’s so

funny, but also so committed and convinced about what he wants. He just sweeps you up in the story and you get carried along on this ride with him.”

The actress, who does her own singing in the movie, says she used to be a big fan of Playmobil toys when she was a young girl. “I used to have them around the bath and loved to play with these little miniature toys and create my own worlds with them,” she says. “Back then, there were no female knights, but now little girls can play with a mini-Marla figure! It’s always nice to go back to something that you loved from your childhood as it triggers an honest emotional response. This movie will make audiences remember the young person inside of them. That is why I believe this is truly a family movie that everyone will enjoy.”

CHARLIE BRENNER (GABRIEL BATEMAN)

Charlie Brenner, Marla’s younger brother, whose imagination and sense of wonder, draws him to the amazing realm of Playmobil, is played by Gabriel Bateman. The young actor says the first time he met Lino DiSalvo, the director’s passion for the movie made him want to be part of the project immediately. “I just knew that the movie was going to turn out great,” says Bateman. “I had a few Playmobil toys myself. They are quite sophisticated and really colorful, and come in different shapes and sizes. They are more realistic than some of the other toys, so that’s why it was really fun to see them .

Bateman’s character has a lot of adventures in the movie. “In the beginning of the movie, Charlie doesn’t see Marla’s point of view. She’s too strict with him,” says the actor. “When he has to take responsibility, he really starts to understand that she was just doing her best to take care of them. As a result of their time in Playmobil-land, their relationship changes. They get closer and they feel more like a family again.”

Playmobil: The Movie was the first time Bateman had lent his voice to an animated feature. “It was actually a lot faster than I expected it to be,” he recalls. “Lino was guiding me through the voice-over parts because I wasn’t used to having to enunciate more. I mostly just focus on my facial expressions, so it was fun to go through those parts with Lino. He helped a lot with it. This was the first time I was singing as well, so I learned to enjoy that as well. The song actually helps move the plot along.”

Bateman says he had a great time playing Anya Taylor-Joy’s brother. “We worked very well together because we bonded really quickly,” he explains. “She comes from family of six, and I come from a family of nine, so we clicked very fast. Acting is a great bonding experience, because you have to be so vulnerable with each other immediately. That actually helps build real relationship, which I think shows up on camera.”

He also points out that almost all of the movies that have moved him to tears have been animated. “There’s a certain chord that animated movies strike inside you. I think maybe it’s because you don’t expect them to affect you so deeply or have such a powerful meaning. But when you have an amazing creator like Lino, these animated movies have this emotional impact more than regular live-action movies do.”

DEL (JIM GAFFIGAN)

One of the first characters Marla meets in the Playmobil world is Del, a happy-go-lucky food truck driver (his truck’s name is Del’s Bell) who decides to help her along the way. “He’s kind of a guy who gets by thanks to a lot of side jobs,” says actor and comic Jim Gaffigan who voices the character. “My interaction with Marla changes my life in some ways. Del is certainly someone who is able to move between the different worlds of Playmobil and as we get to find out, he also has a heart of gold.”

Gaffigan says that he’s quite amazed at how seamlessly director Lino DiSalvo and the animation team have created the different worlds of Playmobil. “There’s a future world, a western world, a fantasy world, a dinosaur land, a spy caper world, Vikings, Roman gladiators...it’s so much fun to introduce all these different environments and characters to young viewers.”

Initially, Del has selfish motives for helping Marla, but he soon reveals that he does have a big heart as the adventure unfolds. “You don’t see his humanity in the beginning of the movie, but he and Marla navigate these worlds together to track down Marla’s brother,” says Gaffigan. “He has a lot of interactions with lots of people, so he’s a very useful person for Marla to accidentally come across!”

Having done voice work for series and movies such as *Bob’s Burgers*, *WordGirl*, *Duck, Duck Goose* and *Hotel Transylvania 3*, Gaffigan is no stranger to the world of animation. “I’ve had the opportunity to do several animated projects, and each one of them is different,” he says. “Our director Lino knew exactly what he wanted. The process was we captured the line that he’d written and then I add some elements and do it many more times. As a creative person, I’m so grateful to be working with someone who cares so much because if you want something good, you have to go the extra mile.”

Gaffigan praises the movie for the way it celebrates the power of imagination. “What is so appealing about the movie is that it pays tribute to the joys of playing and pretending,” he concludes. “It’s also the magic of imagination that you see in all of these distinct Playmobil worlds. Everything feels familiar, because for some of us, it’s not that distant memory. And for children, it’s a world that they know very well. That’s what’s so fun about the whole adventure.”

REX DASHER (DANIEL RADCLIFFE)

The role of smooth and savvy secret agent Rex Dasher is played by none other than Daniel Radcliffe, who is known all over the world as the star of the beloved Harry Potter movie series. The British actor says he was quick to accept the role as it was completely different from anything else he had done before. “I am not a person who thinks of myself as much as Rex Dasher clearly does, so it was just quite fun to inhabit the mind of a person with way too much confidence, far more than is actually earned,” says Radcliffe. “He is sort of Playmobil world’s version of James Bond. He exists to be a toy parody of James Bond, but it’s all sorts of the silliest bits of Bond—more of the Roger Moore-era Bond than the Daniel Craig persona,” he notes.

Radcliffe says he has always been fascinated by the world of animation. “Frankly, I am much more likely to spend my time watching an animated film or TV show than I am to be watching live-action actors,” he admits. “When I spoke to our director Lino and he pitched me his entire vision for the film, his enthusiasm and joy were infectious. There was something about playing Playmobil James Bond and I found the script to be really funny and sweet. It’s nice to be involved in something that my godchildren can watch now.”

Like many of the stars and creative team behind the movie, Radcliffe has fond memories of playing with Playmobil toys when he was a kid. “I had a Playmobil island with a palm tree on it as well as a Playmobil pirate ship,” he recalls. “I think it’s a strange, cool thing to suddenly be part of a Playmobil movie. There is some part of you—the seven-, eight-year-old child still residing inside of you just goes, ‘Yeah, that’s the coolest thing in the world, do that right now!’ So, I am so grateful for Playmobil for all those happy hours of my childhood, and thank you also from my parents because the toys took me off their hands for a few hours!”

Radcliffe also praises DiSalvo for his uncynical, passionate approach to the material as well. “It’s a very ambitious movie, because it’s part live-action and part animated, and it’s a musical, comedy and adventure,” he adds. “Lino is putting a huge amount of care and attention into it and coming up with something that pays a lovely homage to the world of imagination and how toys fire up the imagination and make you connect with others. So hopefully the film as a whole will be imbued with that same kind of joy of discovery and the sort of family relationship between Marla and her brother is very sweet, and I know it’s a film like all good kid’s films, it’s funny and it’s silly and it’s entertaining, but it’s ultimately got a really lovely message and hopefully one that kids will enjoy and take something from.”

FAIRY GODMOTHER (MEGHAN TRAINOR)

“The Fairy Godmother is everything!” says singer-actress Meghan Trainor who portrays the charming fairy-tale character in *Playmobil: The Movie*. “She is amazing, super cool and down to earth. If I ever had a fairy godmother, I would have wanted it to be her.”

Trainor was approached by DiSalvo to voice the part of the Playmobil character, who comes to the aid of Marla when she needs her the most. “Dreams do come true,” says Trainor, who is best known for her chart-topping hits “All About That Bass,” “Lips Are Movin’”, “Dear Future Husband” and “No.” “I always wanted to do voice overs for so long, so I’m going to go home and cry a lot about this, happy tears. The film’s director Lino came up to me, and said, ‘I have a role for you as the fairy godmother’ and I was just like, “No way, dude.” So, we were all really excited. Working with him was so intense and amazing and I tried to keep really cool, but inside I was dying because I was so happy.”

Trainor, who also wrote a special song for the movie title “Run Like the River,” says she was very pleased by the look of her character. “I love the fact that she has a tattoo, and is edgy. She kind of has fishnets on her arms, and has pink hair and flowers in her hair. It reminds me of the ‘All About the Bass’ video with a little more edge.”

In the movie, the Fairy Godmother helps revive Marla’s spirit. “I try to help her out and remind her that she can do it,” says Trainor. “I grant her a wish and help her get her life together. I tell her to get up, and she follows me and eventually learns to fly and save her brother. I remind her that she can get through anything... that the power is in her. I love that because it reminds me that I can do whatever I want as long as I work hard and put my mind to it!”

Trainor says being able to voice an animated character has been on a bucket list of hers. “I didn’t feel like it was work,” admits the singer/actress. “I felt like I was shining and having a birthday moment. The director kept saying more energy, and just kept getting louder, and I didn’t even know I could do that. I did things that I didn’t think were possible today. I felt like I accomplished so many goals and had so much fun doing it.”

Regarding her inspirational song for the movie “Run Like the River,” Trainor says she wanted it to have a universal message and help everyone around the world. As she recalls, “I played it for the director when I first met him, and I said, ‘You should have songs like this in your movie.’ Then the next day they called and were like, ‘We want that song!’ It was just a magical moment. It worked with the movie and I rewrote some lines, so it really went along with Marla’s story, and it was just perfect for this! It’s the perfect song for a fairy godmother!”

Trainor also praises the movie for championing the power of positivity and imagination. “I remember when I was a kid and my grandmother used to babysit me, she used to have all the toys in the world and Playmobil was definitely a lot of them! Playmobil allows kids to really use their imagination. You can be a fairy princess or a Viking or policeman,” she

says. "I think audiences will really love this movie because it's entertaining, very creative, and it will make you laugh and cry at the same time . It really hits you in the heart right from the beginning and keeps you engaged all the way. It's a really epic movie and I'm so proud to have been a part of it."

EMPEROR MAXIMUS (ADAM LAMBERT)

Playmobil: The Movie also features the voice acting debut of singer Adam Lambert, who is best known for his rise to fame on *American Idol*, three best-selling albums and performing as the lead vocalist of the world-renowned band Queen. The talented singer/actor voices the eccentric villain Emperor Maximus and also contributes a stirring song to the film's soundtrack.

"Emperor Maximus is the villain of the movie, but he's also completely out of his mind," explains Lambert. "I think in a weird way, he's lovable. He's a childlike spoiled brat of a dictator. He decides that his way of keeping control over the people is by giving them a big fight to watch, a la Rome. He is completely obnoxious. He's the bad guy, but you kind of like him and hate him all at the same time."

Lambert says he always wanted to be part of an animated movie. "I wanted to do that with a character that wasn't the handsome leading man or the nice guy next door," he admits. "I wanted to be a character that was over the top. That really appealed to me!" He says one of the favorite aspects of the part was that he got to sing the song "Give the People What They Want." "That song required a lot of breath, lots of words, volume, intensity and energy," Lambert explains. "By the time I left the studio that day I needed a nap. I was worn out, but what a thrill to get in and to give everything I had to that song. I had a great time with it."

The popular performer also praises the abilities of the film's director DiSalvo. "Lino was such a doll," Lambert says. "He was so helpful in creating the character. When I got into the studio the first day, we both had some ideas. It was truly a collaboration. We got together and tried a couple things and then tried it a couple of other ways. I think that's the best kind of director who lets you explore. We were laughing the whole time, so it was a really, really positive experience."

He says the movie really boils down to following one's dreams and defying the odds to achieve your goals. "This movie is important because I think it reminds audiences that everyone is bound to grow up and take on responsibility of adulthood, but at the end of the day, you can't lose the child inside of you. I think this movie really reminds people to always be a little bit of a kid inside and to honor that, to honor the part of you that wants to play, create, and have an imagination."

BLOODBONES (KENAN THOMPSON)

Actor Kenan Thompson voices the Pirate Blood Bones in the movie. The famous *Saturday Night Live* comic says he found the whole premise of Playmobil toys and movie quite intriguing and exciting. “I think it’s always fun to throw out an interesting type of voice with an accent,” he says. “I had my fingers crossed that they would let me do my typical pirate voice, which is kind of Irish-y and *Pirates of Caribbean*-y as opposed to a Somali pirate. So, this was a great opportunity for me to do any voice I wanted. Anytime they give you that kind of freedom, you flock towards that as a performer.”

Thompson says his character acts like a coach towards the other Playmobil characters. “He often gives pep talks to the rest of the bunch. He’s always like, ‘Come on, guys! We can do whatever we want!’ So, it was also exciting for me to do that kind of voice and not have to worry about if people are taking it seriously or not, just because they know that it’s me doing the voice. Hopefully, they just enjoy the voice because it sounds authentic-ish!”

Thompson also gives a lot of credit to the director for his approach to the material. “It’s always a lot of fun when you have a great director. He had such a clear vision and helped guide me through where my performances should be targeted. Sometimes, you’re just kind of shooting off the cuff to do ten different readings of the same line, hoping that it will fit the overall picture and what everyone else is doing. Lino really tried to dig in and find something a little better each time. He’s really good about digging for gold.”

Looking at overall picture, Thompson says the movie is bound to win lots of fans all over the world because it’s funny, has a lot of heart and offers a lot of fun all throughout. “There’s a lot of heart and pep coming from the characters,” he adds. “There’s a lot at stake, but there’s also a lot of honest emotion and heart and we infuse the comedy all throughout the movie as well.”

WRITING A MULTI-LEVELED ADVENTURE

“What drew me to Playmobil was this opportunity to really lock into the importance of what you gain from childhood,” says writer Blaise Hemingway. “We are able to contrast a young character that really has that sort of superpower to create worlds and have this expansive imagination contrasted against somebody that never really had that, and you see that missing component from their life and how essential it is. We had this opportunity to have Playmobil’s really fun and silly multi-world, which also allows you go to a deeper place and talk about character and what it means to graduate from childhood into adulthood.”

Hemingway, who is a big fan of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and other acclaimed family films of Steven Spielberg from the 1980s, says he knew the time was right for the adaptation when the producers brought on Lino DiSalvo to helm the material. “I think those movies had this amazing ability to find magic in the mundane. When you think about the world of toys, especially Playmobil, they are sort of sitting there just waiting for a child to activate it and unlock its magic. Playmobil is so expansive that it was just the ideal project to be developed into a family movie,” he notes. “I had worked with Lino at Disney, so I knew that he was going to be the perfect person to lead the movie.”

DiSalvo and Hemingway share the same fondness for popular movies from the 1980s. “Lino and I are friends, and we’re both east coasters,” says Hemingway. “We speak the same language and are sort of sentimental about the same movies. When we were going through the storytelling process, we riffed about our favorite movies and favorite moments from those films. We tried hard to figure out how to make *Playmobil* as good if not better than the movies that we grew up loving.”

The writer points out that the film begins with a character (Marla) who has a very grown-up sensibility and throws her into this eclectic wildness that is the world of Playmobil. “Something that’s really fun about this world is that we adopt the genre of that world and the film language of that world,” says Hemingway. “She’s really going to be a fish out of water as she’s bounced from a world of kung fu to a world of sci-fi. All of a sudden, she’s riding on the back of a dinosaur. Playmobil lets you do that, because all of these worlds are so wildly diverse.”

This mixing and matching of different worlds allowed the creative team to have a lot of fun with movie genres. Some of the obstacles that Marla faces in the Playmobil world echo epic traditional film moments, allows the filmmakers to wink at the audience with clever homages to films as diverse as the Indiana Jones movies, martial arts classics such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, gladiator films and James Bond-type spy capers.

Hemingway mentions that giving life to the plastic Playmobil characters became a liberating experience for both him and the animation team. “Some of the limitations of these figures is exactly what makes them fun. The fact that they have a circular cupped hand and they don't have individual digits makes it fun to watch a character thrown into this world. She has to face problems that she's not used to solving without the benefit of her digits, or a stiffness in her arms, or all those sorts of things. I think there were animation challenges that I think kind of fed into story and made it all kind of inherently funnier.”

DESIGNING A PLAYMOBIL UNIVERSE

“When I first began work on the movie in 2017, Lino (the director) and I talked about colors, shapes, scales, how close we were staying to the toys, and what makes Playmobil Playmobil?” says Remi Salmon, the film’s production designer who also worked on ON Animation’s *Mune: Guardian of the Moon*. “We gathered references brainstormed and painted images to create a solid base which we then evolved from.”

Salmon says from those early stages; the idea was to give this world some scale. “We see those toys from a kid's eyes, not what he has in front of him but what he imagines: the pirate in his hand has a stiff plastic cape, but when he plays he sees it, the cape floating in the wind. That’s what the movies does, which explores this idea of a wish fulfilment visually.”

One important decision was to determine what the Playmobil world would be made of. “We wanted to stay as close and as true to the toys as possible regarding the shapes and proportions : even from a distance this is what your eye will always identify as Playmobil,” says the production designer. “When you look at a character, you think, Yes, of course, it's a Playmobil toy.’ But as you get closer you see there is just a little more. We thought we could use the textures and the look to give a touch of richness and life to our world.”

This approach matched the director’s vision regarding characters’ animation. Of course, they wouldn’t move as fleshy characters, but they wouldn't be completely stiff either. “Starting from the stiff toy side, Lino would add a 20% freedom to bend and stretch the characters to give them more life,” says Salmon. “We applied the same principle to the visuals. We could keep some plastic elements such as the hair and skin but add more materials like cloths, enough to give some life and interest in close-up shots, but subtle enough so that we lose it pretty far in the distance. The look and feel are much more realistic and tangible, so that you feel like you could touch those characters! The lighting was pushed pretty far in a very cinematographic way which is something I really enjoy. Finally, I guess I could say also that in this one the characters have no noses and no ears! I'm glad we could really use the limitations of the toys to our advantage, and see it not as a constrain but as a frame in which work and to play with.”

Another aspect of the movie that stands out for Salmon is the different adjustments they had to make for each part of the Playmobil world. “Because during the journey, our main characters visit different worlds, the idea was to change the look and feel using the codes and cinematography of the genre each sequence refers to,” he explains. “The Viking sequence is our entry in this world. It was meant to contrast strongly with the ‘real world’ we have left behind. It is vibrant, colorful, and the kind of messy battle you would find in *Braveheart* or *Gladiator*.”

When Marla ends up in the Wild West world, audiences are taken to the dry, empty plains. “We have this super strong light that’s used to emphasize her effort to get to the town, and the images are almost overexposed because of the sun being so strong,” recalls Salmon. “The pace changes too, using the classic western codes, slower camera moves, close up shots on the staring bad guys, etc. Then she and Del escape to the Spy Sequence, which is treated like a retro futuristic James Bond classic with surprising gadgets, an atmospheric night and villains with a dark plan. The lighting and mood of the exterior sequence could be compared to a film noir, the saturation is toned down to let more space to the shadows and lights, and there’s fog as well. This also contrasts with the bright lab-like villain facility and their super cool retro computers!”

Then there are wide open spaces of the drive on the highway, followed by the mix-and-match world of Constantinopolis and the power-hungry Emperor. “Maximus has access to modern technology, so we can turn the games into a giant light show to really captivate the audience,” notes Salmon. “We also move on to the busy, futuristic city of Glinara. For this sequence we wanted something that was reminiscent of *The Fifth Element* or a J.J. Abrams movie-- funny creatures, robots, infinite glass buildings and lens flares! In this Asian-inspired city, the best place for a smuggler to hide would be a huge karaoke machine.”

Salmon mentions that the fairy tale sequence takes place in two different environments. “First, there is the scary gray forest from which Marla is unable to escape, with all the many twisted trees, which are a metaphor for her tangled mind. Then, we move on to the shiny, colorful fairytale city which restores hope and send her back on her way to her brother,” he notes. “As you can see, we all had a lot of fun playing with the many backdrops and genres as we put this colorful Playmobil adventure together.”

AUTHENTIC ANIMATION

Leading *Playmobil: The Movie*’s animation team at ON Animation’s Montreal studio was Julien Bocabeille, who was nominated for an Academy Award for his 2008 short *Oktapodi* and whose animation credits include numerous acclaimed DreamWorks features such as *How to Train Your Dragon 1 and 2*, *Puss in Boots*, *Rise of the Guardians*, *The Croods*, *Mr. Peabody and Sherman*, *Kung Fu Panda 2 and 3*, *Penguins of Madagascar* and *The Boss*

Baby. He says he was instantly drawn to the project when DiSalvo pitched the story to him. “It reminded me of all the movies that I loved,” he recalls. “Some of my favorites of all time are road movies, and stories in which one person searches for another. Lino’s story really touched me, and when I saw the first concept images, it looked like nothing that I had seen before. I was sold.”

Bocabeille also loved the way the project mixed 2D animation in the faces of the Playmobil characters with the CG animation around them. “We used a CG rig to project 2D lines on CG surfaces,” notes the animation director. “Our character effects department also had to respect the facts that these toys are made of hard plastics. The capes and the beards all had to move in the way that looked right for the toys. The beards, for example, couldn’t bend too much, because that’s how they work in the real world.”

Key to the film’s authenticity was the animation team’s ability to duplicate the way the toy figures move as kids play with them. “The animation is based on how a kid would see the toys through his/her imagination. You see the arms and legs bending at 90 degrees, but we still maintain some of the iconic constraints of the toys. Their necks don’t bend. They have no fingers and noses, and surprisingly, we discovered that we didn’t need them. We can tell everything we want without fingers or noses. From time to time, the visuals remind audiences that we are still playing with Playmobil toys. You see the skin change from something fleshy and organic to a texture that has little sparkles of plastic in it.”

Bocabeille and his team of 56 animators worked hard to bring 2D quality to the poses and facial animation. “Some of the CG animators had to learn how to play with 2D,” he recalls. “They had to deal with overlapping lines to create the illusion of volume and how to make something alive on a 3D sphere. They had to work without the traditional anchors of the face like cheekbones, nose or jaws and figure out how to make the head turn in 2D on a flat surface. The other challenge was making sure everyone was on the same page in terms of the style and visual aesthetic of the plastic toy from one shot to the next.”

One of the remarkable aspects of the film’s animation is how the animated Playmobil characters each display their complex and special personalities with such elementary visual cues. “I was so pleased with all the different personalities we have been able to create in this movie,” says Bocabeille. “We have a laid-back character like Del (Jim Gaffigan), who is very different from the villain Emperor Maximus (Adam Lambert). But when you put them side by side, they are the same toys. They both have beards and literally come from the same mold! The production design and cinematography are also incredible because they had to be different for each world, but all had to be coherent within the Playmobil universe. All the different genre-jumping had to play out in terms of design and cinematography.”

More important, all the film’s great visuals are in service of a storyline that is both entertaining and deeply moving. “I really like that the story is simple and touching and

taps into the primal fear of losing a sibling or someone who is very dear to you and how you'll do everything in your power to find them and save them from unknown dangers."

SONGS IN THE KEY OF PLAYMOBIL

Like many animated family classics, *Playmobil: The Movie* is also a musical. The film features a stirring score by veteran Brazilian-born musician Heitor Pereira (*Despicable Me* trilogy, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, *The Smurfs* movies, *Minions*, *Smallfoot*, *Angry Birds Movie 2*) and four highly original and memorable songs, co-written by renowned producer, musician and songwriter Anne Preven.

Pereira says he was thrilled to work with a movie that took such a hugely popular global phenomenon like Playmobil and built a whole magical world around it. "Our job is to add sound and music to the director's vision, and it was such a pleasure to spread the message of the movie, which is all about positivity, exploring the world and family togetherness," says the composer. "The movie begins with a song in the live-action world, where the main character Marla is aspiring to her future. It was wonderful to have the actress Anya Taylor-Joy express her feelings about the world, and it sets up the whole journey. It encourages young people to go out there and conquer the world out there. Get wet in the rain and enjoy the ride."

Preven who skyrocketed to fame thanks to the international hit song "Torn" sung by Natalie Imbruglia (1998), has written songs for many of the heavyweights working in the music industry today, including Beyonce, Demi Lovato, Mandy Moore, Adam Lambert, Miley Cyrus, Katy Perry, Sinead O'Connor, and Madonna to name a few. She says she was thrilled when Lino DiSalvo approached her to write the songs for the movie. "Heitor and I got to actually collaborate because part of the idea was to let the score come out of the songs and vice versa, and not have it be score, song, score, song, which never really feels right," says Preven. "I think if a character has a song, you want to hear bits of that song later in the movie to remind you of their want or their need ... whatever it is."

Preven says she loved working with Pereira on the project. "He sort of breathes music," she recalls. "The first time I met him, I think he had a guitar in his hand within four seconds of meeting me, and he was playing, and I was singing. I thought, 'Yes! This is the best!'"

Preven says just like any good musical, the action doesn't stop for a song. "The story continues through the song, but the character's at an emotional peak or valley and having such intense emotions that they have to sing. I feel like the songs in this movie do that. They move the story forward, as opposed to you kind of just stop, nice pop song, and then you go on. And I think that was really our goal.

Working on an animated project has been an invigorating experience for Preven. “I loved the way they did the animation,” she says. “That is the great fun of animation that you write a song and then they put it in these little cartoon's mouths, and then animate it and each step of the way it just comes to life. It's so much fun for a songwriter to see your words visualized like that.”

Pereira echoes Preven’s thoughts. “We have about 78 minutes of score and four songs (about 12 minutes) showcased in the movie. It is so wonderful to record the music with a big orchestra in London, and to work with such amazingly talented musical stars like Adam Lambert and Meghan Trainor. The songs serve as the musical peaks in the movie. We wanted to approximate life in a sense. We like to sing when we’re feeling very good or sad. So, our characters also sing to celebrate a moment or when they feel the blues!”

Preven brings up the fact that her daughter, who was eight years old when she was writing the songs for the movie, made her realize how big a role Playmobil toys can play in a child’s life. “We had the Playmobil castle and she has this little hockey thing, and she was so excited. It made me really get how impactful this movie could be for kids, to see the characters come to life. I would show her little bits or play her the songs. You get to play the characters, and really get involved with the pretend aspect of it, which is awesome.”

Preven also adds that she, Pereira and the movie’s performers strove to make all the songs funny while also trying to tell the story in an emotional way. “Music is the ultimate emotional storyteller,” she explains. “I think the movie has a wonderful message ... for anybody with a sibling or anyone who's had something that they've had to overcome. It's a very universal idea, the fact that we tell the story of this character — Marla who's zooming out on her life, and then she has this adventure and comes back to it with a newly found perspective and a lot of gratitude. That is a very important, healing message.”

Pereira says he was thrilled to compose the music for a movie that celebrates a child’s direct relationship with toys. “It’s a beautiful thing that the movie is inspired by the world of these tactile toys. We are giving visual life to these toys that kids have been playing with and creating these movies in their heads for a long time. I am very fortunate because I have been able to work on family movies such as *Curious George* and *Despicable Me* in the past and collaborate with great musicians before. With this movie, I got to work with Anne Preven who is a wonderful talent. I come from a big family in Brazil, so to be part of this amazing team that have created his material means a lot to me. Playmobil is a great vehicle for positivity, and I know parents and children will leave the theater feeling upbeat and optimistic about the future.”

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