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BREAKING BOUNDARIES: THE SIXTH ANNUAL NEW YORK FILM CRITICS SERIES

January 8-February 13, 2005

Sunday, January 9

1:00 p.m. PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH BRAD BIRD

Best Animated Feature

THE INCREDIBLES

2004, 115 mins. Disney/Pixar. 35mm print source:

Directed and written by Brad Bird. Produced by John Walker. Photographed by Andrew Jimenez, Patrick Lin, and Janet Lucroy. Edited by Stephen Schaffer. Production design by Lou Romano. Art direction by Ralph Eggleston. Animation supervision by Alan Barillaro, Tony Fucile, and Steven Clay Hunter. Original music by Michael Giacchino. Principal cast: Craig T. Nelson (as voice of Bob Parr/Mr. Incredible), Holly Hunter (Helen Parr/Elastigirl), Samuel L. Jackson (Lucius Best/Frozone), Jason Lee (Syndrome), and Wallace Shawn (Gilbert Huph).

Screening followed by a Pinewood Dialogue with Brad Bird, moderated by David Schwartz, Chief Curator of Film.

Biography of Brad Bird

Brad Bird has long been regarded by his peers in the animation community as one of the most innovative, talented and passionate purveyors of his craft. He makes his Pixar debut with *The Incredibles* following a distinguished career in television (*The Simpsons*) and film (*The Iron Giant*).

Bird started his first animated film at age 11, finishing it two years later. The film brought him to the attention of The Walt Disney Studios where, at age 14, he was mentored by Milt Kahl, one of Disney's legendary animators known as 'the Nine Old Men.' Bird eventually worked as an animator at Disney and at other studios.

Bird's credits include a stint as executive consultant to the hit animated television series, *King of the Hill* and *The Simpsons*. For the latter, he directed several memorable episodes, including "Krusty Gets Busted," and "Like Father, Like Clown." He is also the creator (writer, director, and co-producer) of the "Family Dog" episode of Steven Spielberg's *Amazing Stories*. In addition, Bird co-wrote the screenplay for the live-action feature *batteries not included*.

For the big screen, Bird made an auspicious directing debut with the acclaimed 1999 animated feature, *The Iron Giant*. He also co-wrote the screenplay for that film, which was one of the best reviewed films of the year.

Best Animated Film: *The Incredibles*

"I've still got time." So says Mr. Incredible, superhero, in the opening act of *The Incredibles*, a cartoon adventure about ambition, social responsibility, identity, mortality and the need for myths and heroes, and a rare film that proves the term "blockbuster art" is not an oxymoron. Written and directed by Brad Bird (*The Iron Giant*), and executed by enough Pixar artists and technicians to re-build the hanging gardens of Babylon, it's a serious crowd-pleaser—and it's so good at the crowd-pleasing part (including deadpan verbal exchanges and brutal vaudeville slapstick) that one is tempted to overlook the serious part.

The main character is not just a goof on superhero conventions; he's a metaphoric stand-in for anyone who struggles to balance grand responsibilities (parenting, for instance, or being a public figure) against the mundane limitations of daily life (lawsuits, bureaucratic regulations, age, the impossibility of pleasing everyone). Mr. Incredible, a.k.a. Bob Parr, wears a strategically cape-less superhero outfit and tools around town in a high-octane thrill machine, but his days aren't endless and his powers aren't limitless. Unbeknownst to Bob, while he adds yet another a task to his queue and casually declares, "I've still got time," the clock is ticking on his strength, his waistline and his hairline, not to mention his financial solvency (soon enough, he'll be forced out of the hero business by namby-pamby lawsuits and made to eke out an uninspired living at—appropriately enough—an insurance company)

Bird and the Pixar gang could have teased out the superhero-in-witness-protection idea and called it a day, but instead they blew it up to epic size, filling out the Incredibles family unit (flexible wife Elastigirl, morose fringe-dweller Violet, hyperactive Dash and infant boy Jack-Jack), their circle of friends (including ice master Frozone) and the fantastic society that surrounds and crushes them. (The voice-over cast—which includes Craig T. Nelson, Holly Hunter, Samuel L. Jackson, Jason Lee, Wallace Shawn and Elizabeth Pena, is perfection.) Bird's motifs, sight gags and flights of character fancy are sweet and nutty, but always apropos of something; they tie back into his plot and themes. Costumer, gadfly and oracle Edna Mode is like a veteran agent or critic, dispassionately analyzing every do-gooder's triumphs and mistakes, while bad guy Syndrome, formerly the hero's unasked-for sidekick Incredi-Boy, could be any untalented sycophant who misunderstood a hero's career, misapplied its lessons, was wounded by rejection and reinvented himself as a schemer/destroyer.

The film's expertly timed sight gags, straight-outta-storyboards CinemaScope compositions and one-thing-after-another pacing invites inattentive critics (even some who enjoyed the movie) to conclude that it's just a pop thing. Steven Spielberg was once dismissed with similarly backhanded compliments. As problems go, it's not a bad one to have.

-Matt Zoller-Seitz, *New York Press/The Star*

Ledger

From a review by Lisa Schwarzbaum in *Entertainment Weekly*, December 30, 2004:

The onrushing convergence of pop-cultural trends and technological progress has resulted in a lot of dubious achievements lately—cell phones with built-in cameras, low-carb bread, *The Swan*—but there's one place, at least, where phenomenal gains in mechanical sophistication have been applied in the service of profound artistic creativity with the power to change the entire movie medium. Yes, I'm talking about the world of Bob and Helen Parr and their kids Violet, Dash, and Jack-Jack—the off-duty identities of the family of incognito superheroes at the center of the dazzlingly beautiful, funny, and meaningful (yes!) new Pixar production *The Incredibles*.

Forced out of business by a resentful, litigious citizenry who look upon outstanding accomplishment as a threat and standardized mediocrity as a defense (yea, as an American birthright), the Incredible clan is settled, as we meet them, into a retro-futuristic, Suburban Anywhere ranch house by the same federal superhero relocation program that has supplied the family with new identities—as Averages. (With esteem inflation being what it is, of course,

Average is the new Super; and everyone's super!) Having hung up his Mr. Incredible costume, Bob (voiced with gruff warmth by Craig T. Nelson, the invaluable lessons of TV's *Coach* behind him) now pushes papers at a cold, Brazil-like insurance company; sometimes he chews over the good old days with his fellow hero in hiding, Frozone (ice-cool Samuel L. Jackson). Helen (an alloy of love and steeliness in the voice of Holly Hunter) is now a restless housewife and mother, her days as the infinitely flexible Elastigirl behind her. Veiling her ability to become invisible or to create impenetrable force fields, petulant teenage Violet (a sweet-tart feature debut for radio personality Sarah Vowell) mopes behind her glossy curtain of long hair. And prohibited from discharging the superboy energy that makes him run faster than a speeding bullet, Dash (Spencer Fox) squanders regular-boy energy annoying his teacher and his sister. (Only baby Jack-Jack appears "normal.")

Eventually, the Parr elders are lured back into superherodom—with Violet and Dash pitching in as full partners—and into a ripping, high-stakes action-adventure the keepers of the James Bond franchise only wish they had thought of first. The foursome are united against a peevish nemesis, Syndrome (Jason Lee), whose evil is the result of Super-envy. "You can't count on anyone—especially your heroes!" Syndrome whines, a guy who has attended too many fan conventions. The family's escapades in the field are indeed stupendous, an homage to the exploits of classic comic-book masters of the universe. But the true heroism in this spectacular movie—as worthy of a Best Picture nomination as any made with fleshly stars—shines brightest in that suburban house, where Bob, with his midlife bulge and his thinning hair, pines nostalgically for the old days, and Helen marches anxiously forward, bending to her family's needs. (This devotee of mid-century design and graphics must pause mid-review to admire the Parrs' housewares, their furniture, their interior decor worthy of a layout in *Dwell*.)

Having previously explored the bonds of loyalty in his outstanding 1999 animated feature *The Iron Giant*, as well as in work on that perennial TV masterpiece *The Simpsons*, writer-director Brad Bird wants most of all to tell these truths: that being super is a right and a responsibility. That mutual trust and respect are not sitcom punchlines. And that family survival necessitates risk-taking valor, too. And so, with not a talking toy or animal in sight, *The Incredibles* makes adult philosophical points; the movie tosses off state-of-the-culture zingers ("He's moving from 4th grade to 5th grade!" an exasperated Bob clarifies when Helen chides him about missing Dash's "graduation"); the plot detours into hilarious story-line extras (none more divine than the Diana Vreelandish pronouncements of superhero couturier Edna Mode, voiced by the director himself, with a show-stopping soliloquy on the hazards of wearing a cape); and younger viewers are entertained by the same popping Pixarian blend of movement and color that blessed *Finding Nemo*. The music by Michael Giacchino, who also composes scores for *Alias* and *Lost*, contributes a crucial element of bold, '60s-style adventure sound.

Amid such splendors—groundbreaking technology harnessed above all in the service of a great story, a rich micro-universe of pixel-driven cartoon characters with more depth, complexity, and emotional maturity than those in most live-action dramas, perfectly pitched voice performers (including Wallace Shawn as Bob's Scrooge-like boss and Elizabeth Peña as Syndrome's sultry lieutenant)—the command and ingenuity with which Pixar has, once again, raised the level of excellence to which animated movies (and, why stop there, all movies) can aspire is easy to take for granted. Which may be this movie's greatest feat. All we need to know is that the family headed by Mr. Incredible proves they really are, in tights and out, indeed incredible. And that *The Incredibles* really is too.

Excerpts of Production Notes for *The Incredibles*, Pixar/Disney

The Incredibles was born in the imagination of director Brad Bird, a filmmaker who wanted to make a motion picture that would capture everything he'd always loved about the movies: grand adventure, unconventional families, inventive thrills, cutting-edge imagery, sharp humor and characters so compelling and true-to-life you can't help but become involved

in their emotional and moral dilemmas. The hitch was that Bird wanted to do all this in an animated feature that would raise the art form to the next level of dramatic achievement. Could it be done? Bird believed passionately that it was possible.

At the time that Bird came up with the story of *The Incredibles* he was also a brand new father—with dizzying thoughts about how a person integrates their family life with their personal dreams. This led to the creation in Bird's mind of a father—indeed, a superhero father—who is forced to give up his passion—in this case saving the world—for the good of his family, much to his chagrin.

As Bird began to write the story of *The Incredibles*, he realized that two very different ideas were coming together as one: he was writing the wildly imaginative spy adventure he'd always wanted to see; but, he was also writing a drama about the ties that bind us and how the greatest superpower of all might simply be the power of a family. Ultimately, Bird began to view the Parrs as being pretty much like the rest of us—facing the daily grind of bosses, traffic and minor misunderstandings that get blown out of proportion—but just a little more incredible.

“At its heart, I saw *The Incredibles* as a story about a family learning to balance their individual lives with their love for one another,” says Bird. “It’s also a comedy about superheroes discovering their more ordinary human side. As I wrote, I wanted to create a world filled with pop culture references—with spy movie gadgets and comic book super powers and outrageous evil villains using ingenious devices—but at the same time, to create a story within that world that is very much about family. I really poured everything in my heart into the story. All these personal things—about being a husband, being a father, the idea of getting older, the importance of family, what work means and what it feels like to think you’re losing the things that you love—all of these are tucked into this one big story.”

At the same time that Bird hoped to push the technical limits of animation, he also hoped to push the form's storytelling potential to a new edge. “To a certain degree, I was inspired most by the classic Disney animated films like *Lady and the Tramp* which have such indelible characters that they've stood the test of time,” he says. “The question was how to do that with the very best tools the art form has to offer today.”

When Bird finished an early draft of the script, he brought the story to the only people he was convinced would understand his vision for an animated film that he hoped would look, feel and be produced unlike any other: Pixar Animation Studios.

The Incredibles would be an unmatched challenge for Pixar—not only would it be the first time the studio had tackled wholly human characters, it would be the most technically innovative, logistically complex and overall most monumental production the studio had ever undertaken. The story unfolds on nearly 100 different sets—ranging from a whimsical, modernesque suburbia to the lush and untamed jungles of Nomanisan Island. Furthermore, because the film emphasizes the characters' humanity, Bird was asking the Pixar team to create the most believable human animated forms in history—with palpably kinetic skin, hair and clothing. Enthusiasm spread like wildfire through the studio to meet the challenge of *The Incredibles*.

With *The Incredibles*, Brad Bird asked his team at Pixar to innovate, expand upon and find new ways to push this process to its farthest creative extremes. Recalls Bird: “As director, I became well acquainted with what I called the ‘Pixar Glaze,’ where these complete technical geniuses would just grow pale and start looking at each other like ‘Does he know what he’s asking?’ But no one ever gave up—every problem found a solution that kept pushing the film’s creativity. It’s a real testament to Pixar that they kept coming up with magic from thin air.”

In the end, says John Lasseter, *The Incredibles* took everyone involved on an imaginative ride. “The creation of *The Incredibles* required a tour de force,” he says. “Fortunately, our guys at Pixar keep getting better and better. With this film, they’ve really outdone themselves. When you see the characters in this movie act—and you look into the pools of their eyes—you can feel what’s going on inside their soul. The subtleties of their facial

animation and their body gestures are remarkable. You get so caught up with the characters and the story, you don't think about what genre of movie it is. You simply know you are watching a remarkable story.”

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