

Transcript of the Interview with Steven Fischer by Wendy Revel January 2008

We are here today with Steven Fischer, whose film Freedom Dance just won a CINE Golden Eagle. Welcome, Steven. We are beginning a new feature on our CINE website, we are interviewing winners of the Golden Eagle and jury chairs and you are our inaugural Golden Eagle winner.

Thank you, it's an honor.

It's an honor to have you here. You're not yet 40, in fact you're 35 and you've already won a number of prestigious awards including two CINE Golden Eagles, you have an Emmy nomination, and you have fiscal sponsorship again from the international documentary association and that's for your next film, Old School, New School. Which also provided support for Freedom Dance, I understand.

Yeah, they were a big support.

You began as a cartoonist.

I did, while I was still in high school.

That's pretty amazing. What inspired your interest in animation?

What inspired my interest in animation...in cartoons in general, I think a lot of it had to do with the concept of escapism. Not that I had a childhood that required escaping, it was quite the contrary. It was an ideal childhood with lots of love and lots of acceptance, but within the confines of that, the social aspect of growing up, as they are for a lot of kids, getting picked on in school and all these things, and it was just a natural escape for me as it is for a lot of kids, I would imagine, to take comfort in a fantasy world, in a cartoon world, in a world where you find yourself more accepted, where you are the hero, where you can be the guy who wins the big game, or gets the girl, or whatever it is. So there was a lot of that that influenced me, that attracted me to that world. And just the whole concept of being a creator, you are the creator of this world. You get to decide whether people live or die, whether there is a happy ending or a sad ending, you know? How attractive is that?

Very attractive. So you would say that animation and cartooning segued into filmmaking, that one inspired the other?

Yeah, growing up my sister, Michele, and I were always creating stories and we were always expressing these stories in multiple ways; a lot of audio production, a lot of cartoons, written stories, photography, video, across the board. So when I made the transition to becoming a professional, that interest and that habit sort of carried over. I'm a firm believer that every story has its own medium that it's most effectively told through. Some stories work better...not work better, but some stories are more effectively told as a theater play, others as a movie, so for me my interest as a storyteller has been to tell a story, and find the best medium.

That's a very interesting approach. How do you know? Is there something that comes to you? I read somewhere that your character Bluey, from Steve and Bluey, came to you. How do you know?

It's an individual call. I mean, there are some things that are kind of logical. If the story you want to tell centers around two women getting together at a café everyday to talk about life and their problems and their relationships and that's the whole story, maybe that would work great as a theater play, it might make a boring 90 minute movie, just two women at a table. If the story you have to tell is basically just the one message – "I love my girlfriend" – maybe that's more effective as a two minute song, as opposed to a 90 minute movie, maybe not. If the story you have centers around a car chase, and that is my idea, I want nothing but a car chase, nothing else, well, that might make a boring theater play but might make a great movie. So sometimes it is kind of logical but probably it is mostly feeling, whatever the individual feels is right to them.

What can you tell us about your process of filmmaking? What is the literal way in which you take a film from beginning, from concept to end? Obviously not in great detail, but an overview.

Right, right. I wish there was a process. Well, there's the logical process of first having your script and then figuring out whether or not you're going to finance this thing yourself or if you're going to search for a financier, and then if you are, what's going to be the process for that: getting your treatment, your proposal, your budget, and making out a list of where you are going to go sometimes, or if you're just going to pick up your camera, start going for it. Again, every story for me is very individual. Sometimes, as with *Freedom Dance*, it is more appropriate to pick up your camera and start doing it. *Old School*, *New School*, it's more appropriate to go for the money first.

Okay, when you write, do you write everyday at a set time? Do you have a disciplined approach to writing or do you wait for the muse to arrive? How do you do that?

Well, you know Shelby Foote has a great line about that. He talks about how everybody thinks writing is this burst of inspiration; an artist wakes up in the middle of the night with this inspiration and writes and that's all, and he doesn't do anything else for the rest of the day. He's arguing that no, that's not true, it's very hard work and you better be prepared to screw your butt to a chair for 8, 9, 10 hours a day. Generally, I find for me the morning hours I have a more clear connection to that other level of consciousness that generally fills me with a perspective that I don't have as the day goes on, and the later part of the day too. But no; overall, no. And when you're on commission you don't have the luxury, you know? You've got a deadline and people are expecting things and there's a lot of money involved so you don't have a choice but to sit down and write and go for it for 8 or 10 hours straight.

When you're coming up with project ideas or filling out nascent project ideas do you find yourself taking actual or mental notes when you're watching people to come up with story ideas?

Always. Not even written notes but sketching too. People fascinate me and they always have. Society – why people do what they do, how people become who they are – that has always intrigued me. It's nothing for me to sit in a café for a couple of hours and sketch surreptitiously people across the room. And it's a great study of anatomy and

behavior, these bits of conversation you overhear, lines you could never make up any other way. You know, the things you hear from people.

It's obvious you have a real interest in what motivates people and what people's character is and how they get through difficult situations from your films, Freedom Dance and Silence of Falling Leaves, but let's talk about Freedom Dance.

And actually if we can interject, it's not really my movie because Craig Herron and I made it together so it's really...

Absolutely, and that's a very good sign that you like to give credit where credit's due with other people. Freedom Dance tells the story of a harrowing escape of a young couple from Hungary during the revolution in 1956 and it's based on the journals that one of those people, Edward Hilbert, kept.

He started it in Austria. The journey began in Budapest and the second spot...the third spot was in Vienna, where probably most of the 200,000 refugees found comfort, found their haven, and that is where he started the journal. And there actually was a newspaper that published one or two...

Wow, interesting! Were you able to access any of those?

No. We searched.

Well, let's talk about that film from beginning to end. I thought that was an incredible amount of serendipity the way, I think it was Craig Herron who met Edward Hilbert at an art exhibit. Tell me how that happened.

The two of them, Edward and Craig, were teaching at the JCC in Baltimore. They were teaching art classes and they met at a faculty exhibition sometime in early 2004. Craig called me up one day and said, "I met this guy Edward, he's a cartoonist like us. He's an interesting guy, you should meet him." Nothing unusual about this, this is one of the great things about the Baltimore and Washington film and video community, people share this kind of information; locations, opportunities, people, we do it for each other. So, he gives me his name and number. I call up Edward. I say "My friend Craig tells me you're an interesting guy and that I should meet you." I invite myself over to his house. I bring my portfolio with the intention of looking at Edward's portfolio because who knows, maybe I can hire him on a job or more importantly maybe he can hire me on something, you never know. So, we spent some time together. And it was during that meeting that I saw a copy of Edward's journal from '56 and was completely captivated by the story. And later that day or the next day I called Craig and asked if he had known about this and he said he did not. So I arranged for the three of us to get together again at Edward's house and we looked at the journal again and it was at that meeting that the light bulb went off. And it just seemed so obvious that this story, first of all, needs to be told, it needs to be told as an animated documentary, and it needs to be told right away. Because we figured, the mathematical wizards we were, that two years from that point in October of '06 there would be the 50th anniversary and if we could get this movie done we would have a chance to throw it into the fanfare that we were hoping the world would be experiencing, celebrating the anniversary and it would be a great opportunity to promote such a movie. So we jumped into it almost right away. That was May, around May of 2004. In June I left for Ireland to shoot a documentary, and when I got back we

just jumped right into this movie, and the first interview with Edward was shot in August of 2004. We just jumped in with both feet and went for it.

Give us just a quick overview of the story itself, if you would, of Edward and Judy Hilbert.

Freedom Dance is the story of an escape of an artist, Edward Hilbert, and his wife, his newly married wife, from communist Hungary to America during the Hungarian revolution of 1956. And that's it, literally. It's a story about these four months being homeless on the road, being a refugee and specifically the fact that this artist was keeping a cartoon journal of his adventure during such a tumultuous time.

I think you called the technique you used there two and a half D animation, explain what you mean by that.

Two and a half D...the animation that Craig did in *Freedom Dance* is essentially a computerized version of paper cut outs. The *Steve and Bluey* cartoon show was a series of cutouts, the old fashioned way, literally with scissors cutting out the characters and layering these paper cutouts and that's where you get the half. If you can picture yourself drawing a figure on a piece of paper and cutting it out, you have this figure who, when you turn it on its side, disappears. This is a thin line; there is no dimension to it. So, you have a series now of three of these paper cut outs and you layer them, and by layering it, layering these cartoons and lighting each layer, it creates a depth. It creates the illusion of a 3rd dimension that's not technically there but yet it is. It's sort of halfway between 2 and 3 dimensions. Now you have your two and a half.

There you go. And in this case you also, it seemed to me, had more realistic depiction of the buildings, the tanks, and so forth and then the characters themselves were these innocent cartoonish sorts of characters, which I found to be very effective because they seemed so innocent and here they are against this hard, cold reality.

And you noticed everyone smiles?

They do, everyone including the Soviet soldiers. Why did you make that decision?

I didn't; Edward did. It was his. We tried to remain as true to the journal as possible. And in the journal Edward depicted all of this. His big line is that he didn't want to depict any horror or any tragedy or anything negative, which is classic Edward. His whole life, as far as I could tell, was seeing the silver lining in the cloud, seeing everything from a positive perspective, finding the good in the worst of situations and Edward is an absolute model for that. So with his characters and his journal, he's always...well, he's not always smiling but for the most part he's smiling because that's his perspective. The communists, the Russians, the Soviets, the secret police are smiling not because they are happy but because Edward wanted them to appear grotesque. He wanted to show that these people, from his perspective, got some sort of pleasure from shooting down students in front of parliament or in front of the radio station in Budapest, and that was purely his interpretation and we stayed true to it because the movie is completely from his perspective.

One of the things that I found very effective and packed an emotional wallop for me is the juxtaposition of the innocent cartoonish characters with the hauntingly beautiful

music, which is in no way lighthearted. How did you decide to do that and what can you tell me about your composer?

Phil Rosensteel and Kevin Hill, the sound designer, worked a lot with Phil creating this music, though Phil composed the pieces. I think it works because with cartoons when you reduce reality to it's most simple lines you leave so many blanks for the audience to fill in with their own interpretation. So I think people like yourself aren't reacting so much to the movie as you are reacting to something in you and whatever you're filling that blank with. I don't know why it works. I personally have always enjoyed the dichotomy of taking the extremes and putting them together and seeing what kind of alchemy you can come up with. A lot of times it doesn't work and it's too weird and it's too avant-garde and it's too out there, but every now and again it does work. And maybe because it's so unexpected and it's so different or maybe because there are so many blanks that the audience fills in with their own emotional input.

Well, that's a wonderful way of approaching it, I think. When you write do you listen to music? A playwright once told me that he never listens to music when he writes because it would influence what he writes way too much. But do you have it in your head?

Interesting. I go back and forth. Sometimes I do. If I do, it's always classical or it's something orchestral. It's hard for me to listen to anything with lyrics, with singing, because that distracts me. I end up focusing on the voice and the words but for some reason an instrumental piece can be comforting. You know I do a lot of writing in cafés and so you have the noise around you constantly there. I don't know...sometimes I prefer solitude. There really isn't a formula. You know, it's kind of whatever I am in the mood for. It's like: What are you in the mood for, Chinese or Italian? Do you want music or do you want silence?

You do seem drawn to stories that involve sort of the strong evil presence against a less strong but sometimes – sometimes – victorious lesser presence. Your story about the murder of the Polish POWs at, can you pronounce that for us correctly?

Katyn. Katyn Forest.

Yes, thank you. What do you think accounts for that?

Well, I don't think that's me – that's human nature. I think seeing the underdog victorious over the big bad wolf is something that most people, probably since the beginning of time, have been interested in. There is that element of being the Rocky Balboa and being the guy who struggles and who you want to see and who is so good natured. Who wants to see the evil bad guy with all the power get all the glory?

And yet that is – well it wasn't glory – but that is what happened in Silence of Falling Leaves. How did you find that story?

Well that was a job. That was an assignment from TCI Communications. It was a very strange experience. I was making promotional videos for TCI at the time, this was late '90s, early '00s in Baltimore, and TCI communications had given money to the promotion of a monument that was erected in Fells Point in 2000. So they wanted a PSA that promoted their involvement giving money to this event. They give me the number of Alan Christian, the great journalist who had become this promoter, who used to be in radio.

He's a very fascinating guy. He told me all kinds of stories about his work in radio journalism, but now he had this sort of PR company and he had this responsibility of promoting the unveiling of the Katyn monument in Baltimore. He was the go-to guy. He had all the information about what this thing was and all my information was to come from him. So I go to his office in Baltimore and we meet for the first time. He tells me the story of these Polish POWs, these reservists who weren't soldiers, they were doctors and lawyers and they had a life outside the army and were just serving their country during World War II. They were captured; they were prisoners. Everybody thought it was the Germans, it was actually the Russians who took them out to the Katyn Forest, all alone, secluded, and executed every one of them. And nobody knew about it, it was a big cover-up for years, for decades. I think it wasn't until the '80s or '90s that the secret was revealed – that it wasn't the Germans, and the Russians fessed up to it. So, that's what intrigued me about it, not the monument. The PSA was supposed to be about the monument. After hearing a story like this, I can't possibly, in good conscience, make a story about a statue. The story to me was what the statue represented. The whole murder took place in a forest, so I thought it would be great to go into a forest and shoot leaves in the autumn falling from the trees, euphemistically representing the soldiers who fell in a forest. So that's what I did. The whole piece is nothing but leaves blowing in the wind and falling to the ground. And it's cut to a narration read in Polish. I found a woman, Bozena Jedrzejczak, direct from Poland, who is a musician by trade but she had such a beautiful and wonderful voice, and she was nice enough to translate the script, and she read the narration in Polish and I thought it was a wonderful tribute to the people who rightly deserve tribute, these fallen soldiers.

It was a very emotional piece, a very nice piece. You do seem to have an interest or an affinity for historical things and I wonder if that's partially what led you to your latest project, Old School, New School. What can you tell us about that?

Well, these days everybody has access to cameras and computer-based editing software, and it's so easy to obtain. So now you have all these people coming out of the woodwork, picking up a camera and telling stories. And that's great and I recognize the value of that, and I'm certainly in no position to make any negative comment about it because you're finding stories that you would never find any other way. But at the same time, there's just so much junk that comes as a result. People have no concept of what storytelling really is, or people have not studied the art, the craft of what it means to construct a plot or to develop a character. So, *Old School, New School* is essentially a tribute to the older generation of storytellers, the master storytellers, people who sincerely and truly have mastered the art of storytelling through everything: music, filmmaking, theater, spoken word, anything. I'm just interested in the art of storytelling – how you engage an audience, how you communicate effectively – and paying tribute, the younger generation paying tribute to the older generation. They are the people with the wisdom and the knowledge through sixty, seventy, eighty years of experience. Share it with us! We want to know. So that's what it is; it's a journey picture. A younger generation storyteller going out into the world and saying, "teach me, I want to learn. I want to learn from the masters."

You're going around actually interviewing the older generation in these various disciplines?

That's the concept, that's the basic idea. There are three interviews that are already done but this approach is – let's get money first and do it right, as opposed to just hitting the road with a camera, which would certainly bring a wonderful story itself, I'm sure.

I'm sure it would. Do you have a favorite book or short story?

No, no favorite short story, probably something from Hemingway, I guess. What am I reading now? I just got a book on Keaton interviews. Buster Keaton. Somebody, I forget the author, collected interviews with Buster Keaton which apparently are very rare; he didn't give that many. There are a couple from the twenties and most from the '50s and '60s. What else? Sun Tzu. I'm reading Sun Tzu again, *The Art of War*. It's a cliché and people have attributed his philosophies of war tactics to business and to life in general but it is very true. The battle really is won before it's ever fought. It's all about your perspective, your mind. If you're going into an office to get money to make your movie, you have to mentally psyche yourself and know that you are victorious before you go in. And it's great to have all the information, your own intelligence. Send out your spies, learn about the organization and get all the information that you need to go into it. It makes perfect sense.

I'll say, that's a pretty impressive approach to fundraising. That's good. What about a favorite play, or film, or favorite piece of music? I'm interested in what inspires you and what you have found.

Everything inspires me it seems like. Strangely enough, growing up I found a lot of inspiration from Twisted Sister. You laugh but it worked for me. They have a song, and we're going back to what, late '70s, early '80s I guess, they have an album *Stay Hungry* and the song "Stay Hungry." "Stay hungry, feel the fire/Stay hungry, don't explode." In my mind I kept interpreting that as being driven, being passionate, having the fire within you but don't explode, don't go crazy, keep perspective of everything and keep driving and keep going. There was such a tremendous driving spirit in those songs. It's very strange to say but it works and it still works. I still go back to that. I also go back to Charlie Chaplin. *City Lights* is probably...I hate to pigeon hole my favorite book, my favorite movie, because there isn't, there are so many things. But *City Lights*, the best last line in any movie, silent or sound; it's an incredible, wonderfully well-told story. There's so much any storyteller can learn from Chaplin. You don't even have to think about comedy. His whole use of pathos and his whole use of building a character and getting inside the character's emotional makeup, and the whole dichotomy of all the characters and how extreme they could be. There were some that were archetypal but his perspective on character is absolutely wonderful. I go back to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the movie version. Although you can't say anything bad about the book, but the movie version works for me even more. A beautifully told, beautifully photographed movie.

Do you find that you – it sounds as if you do – that you go back over and over again periodically to things that you found beautiful in one way or another, whether it's books or movies to get inspiration?

Well, because of what it represents. When you go back you go back to a time, at least me, I am unlocking the moment itself and the emotional place I was at. I think that's important to remember, and to reference where you've come from, not only physically and literally, but emotionally where you've come from. To be able to judge where you are now and how you've grown and how you've developed and more importantly, maybe, how

you haven't developed, those old habits you keep tripping yourself up on. I think it's very important, it's every bit as important as staying focused on the future and in the moment. Everybody says "Oh it's in the past, stop living in the past," as though it is a negative thing. There is too much we can learn from the past.

Right, the past definitely informs the present and future. You said, along these lines, that your artistic motivation usually comes from the connection you keep with "your own private Idaho." That is a very interesting concept, I would like to know what you mean by that.

Not necessarily original. Well for me, it's different for everybody, for me it's cartoons. Growing up, this whole concept of escaping reality into this more idyllic cartoon world where life is bright and colorful, and it's happy chocolate and you are accepted – that's the private Idaho, the world where you have control over what's happening to you. In reality, depending on who you talk to, you could have control over what is happening to you, but so many times it seems like we have no control over what's happening, and it's really easy to come to that conclusion. With storytelling, and cartoons specifically, it's too tempting to go back to that idyllic, sentimentalized world and just lose yourself in the mystery of it.

One of our goals here at CINE is to help young filmmakers along with their careers and enhance the careers of established filmmakers. When we interviewed Ken Burns recently he talked about the validation that winning the Golden Eagle had provided for him early in his career. You've won two Golden Eagles now.

Ken Burns has won like nine hundred of them.

Yes he has. You're a little younger than Ken Burns right now.

But you'd never know it to look at the guy. He still looks like he's thirty. What's his secret?

Filmmaking. Stay young, stay hungry. He found the award helpful early in his career. Have you also found that this award has helped you along?

I agree with the idea that there is a justification. You are no longer a guy working out of your garage. You're no longer somebody who claims to be a filmmaker, or a producer, or a video maker, or whatever you're claiming to be. You've got some sort of justification from an award that has meaning to it. It's not just any award, it's the CINE Golden Eagle. It has a fifty year track record. It's got some weight and power to it, literally and figuratively. It's got recognition to it. So when you're writing your proposal for a movie and you're including in your bio that you've got a CINE Golden Eagle, there is no way to prove this, but I tend to think that it at least moves your proposal to the top of the pile. That the person reading that proposal is going to take you a little more seriously than somebody that, first of all is writing the proposal in a totally improper format to totally spotlight their amateur status. Just recognizing that this person has done something, that there is an impartial third party who is saying they are good at what they do, so maybe they have something I should look at. It doesn't guarantee anything but at least it gets you into the door and it gives you the chance to do what you are constantly having to do: give your song and dance.

What advice would you have, not just for new filmmakers but for people who are thinking, "wow, wouldn't that be a cool career, but it seems so unattainable." What is your advice for them?

Wow, I hate these questions, because who am I to give advice? I think ultimately for me it's all about storytellers staying true to themselves and being very honest in their expression. It's a line from Shakespeare, "To thine own self be true," and it's very true. There's a couple of ways I want to go with this. First of all, if you can honestly tell the story that you have in your head regardless of what kind of convention it follows or doesn't follow in terms of what's selling in the market, if nothing else you are encouraging your own originality and developing your individuality. I think more importantly it's also about building a catalogue of work as a storyteller. A friend of mine, a musician, Jim Camacho, he's in Miami, we talk about this all the time. I've made a couple of music videos for him and we're always talking about the body of work, it's all about the body of work, the catalogue of work. Always being productive, always being active, always challenging yourself with a story if you're a storyteller. To be able to honestly and truthfully tell a story I think is the greatest gift a storyteller can give to society. Not to get really heavy about it but that's how the artist contributes to society, by making a story that means something to them personally. Even if it is commissioned work, it's a job, find something in that story to love. Not to the point where you're getting so attached to it that you can't give it back to the client, who owns it, just enough so that you can be passionate about it.

Where would you like to see yourself in twenty years? If you're sitting here with us again in twenty years, what would you like to look back on and be happy that you had the opportunity to do?

I've always thought that if I can emerge from a project a stronger storyteller, a better person than I was before I began that project, then I can consider myself and the project a success. I think that is the ultimate for the twenty year question. If with every project I become stronger and stronger and better and better as a storyteller, then I think I can look back on my life twenty years from now and be justified in saying, "Ok, there is some success, there is some validation." That's what it's about. You asked about what advice to give, that's what it's about, going through the process of telling a story. If you can emerge from a production stronger and wiser about your craft and about yourself as a person, about yourself as a leader, leading a crew through a project, then you can justify in saying it's a success. Everything that comes after that, every accolade, every dollar that you make is gravy, that's all it is.

Well thank you Steven, and we'll see you in twenty years.

Thank you.