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Hannah JayantiThe Phantom Tollbooth, Turning 50, Becomes a Documentary

Daniel Rolnik · Wednesday, November 9th, 2011

Hannah Jayanti is the director of the upcoming documentary about the classic children's book The Phantom Tollbooth. Since Jayanti and her team have been funding the film themselves for almost a year now, they decided to start a kickstarter to help them cover the cost of post-production. Amazingly, the project was funded in only a couple of days. I remember listening to The Phantom Tollbooth on tape during all of my childhood road trips and loving it. And if the book meant anything to you as well, I think you're going to really enjoy this film.

Daniel Rolnik: Were you always planning the documentary to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the book?

Hannah Jayanti: Yeah, that's sort of how it all came about. Our producer, Janice Kaplan, met Norton Juster a few years ago and asked me if I had heard of his book *The Phantom Tollbooth.* I of course replied yes, I have loved the book ever since my mom would read it to me when I was a kid. Anyways, a couple years went by since that conversation when Janice called me and asked if I would like to interview Norton Juster and Jules Feiffer for a promo clip to spread the word about the 50th Anniversary of the book. But, when I interviewed Norton I realized how witty he was and how the book opened up so many other questions beyond what I could fit into a short clip. So I approached him and Jules about making a feature documentary about *The Phantom Tollbooth* and they were really into the idea – Norton thought it was a riot.

DR: So you didn't have to coerce them into it?

HJ: They've been great. I mean Norton is one of those people who is really amiable, excited, and approachable. And for how well he's done, he's one of the most humble people I know.

DR: This is the first full-length documentary you've done, right?

HJ: Yeah, I actually started out as a photographer, but I found that working with video is much more in tune with the way I think..

DR: Was it difficult to figure out how to do a full-length documentary, since you came from a fine arts background?

HJ: I've found it all to be amazingly intuitive. It's not easy, but you know when you're doing something and even though you're figuring it out as you go, you somehow just understand it – that's how I feel about this.

DR: What camera did you shoot the film on?

HJ: We filmed it on a Sony-EX 1

DR: Have you gotten to keep any of the drawings Jules Feiffer made during filming?

HJ: I have the one he drew in the beginning of the trailer at my house, which is really cool. He draws so quickly, it's crazy.

DR: Did he just use a regular pen to draw it?

HJ: We lent him a pen, he said it was terrible and politely asked us for another one – haha. It's funny because Norton has told me about how writing is a slightly tortuous experience for him, but for Jules it's all about the movement and getting his illustrations done really fast.

DR: Have you been shocked by anything Norman or Jules told you during one of your interviews with them?

HJ: I had no idea that Norton knew Jane Jacobs and was influenced by her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* That opened up a whole other conversation about dystopia and urban environments, because there are all these parts in *The Phantom Tollbooth* that have some very serious connotations of what it's like to be in a city. For example, there's a part in the book where the characters are walking in the city of Reality, but the whole city has disappeared because no one is paying attention to it anymore.

DR: Is *The Phantom Tollbooth* a lot deeper than most people think?

HJ: A lot of people tell me that they read the book first when they were 8, then 12, then 18, and then again when they were 30 – and each time they find different things that make them love it even more. The book has a playfulness to it, but since it also has substance it's accessible to people of any age.

DR: Did you have to read the book multiple times before you started the film?

HJ: I still read it often now in order to really understand all the characters and metaphors.

DR: Does Norton agree with most of the metaphors historians have written about his book?

HJ: It's funny because it's easy to read a lot of things into it, but it's a children's book – let's not think it's this philosophy text. What Norton will say is that he didn't think of any of these things while he was writing it, but I don't think it's a stretch to see the metaphors in his work because *The Phantom Tollbooth* was born from another children's book he was supposed to write about urban perception.

DR: Are there moments you wish you had caught on camera, but you missed?

HJ: We're still in production, so there's hope for us yet! To be honest, people have been so generous with their time, that I haven't felt like we've missed anything yet.

DR: When will you begin post-production on the film?

HJ: We are hoping to have all our shooting wrapped within the next two months. So, we should start post-production in December.

DR: Are some of the interviewees in the film just normal people?

HJ: I would hate it if the film was only intellectuals analyzing the book, because they would drain the life out of it. So in addition to interviews with the author Norton Juster, the illustrator Jules Feiffer, and the historian Leonard Marcus (who wrote the annotated version) we have conversations with fans young and old. And in the trailer, some of the clips were taken from an incredible independent bookstore in Washington DC named Politics and Prose, where we interviewed one of the people who runs the children's department.

DR: Have you ever felt silly reading *The Phantom Tollbooth* in public, since it's a children's book?

HJ: I haven't felt silly reading it at all. I have been having this really amazing experience where people find out about the film and email me letters expressing their love of the book.

DR: What have been some of the most interesting emails fans have sent you?

HJ: Someone sent me their college entrance essay, another person sent me a picture of their tattoo featuring one of Jules illustrations from the book, and I also received an email from someone who told me how when they were a kid they recreated the whole map in their bedroom.

Phantom Tollbooth Documentary Trailer from Phantom Tollbooth Documentary on Vimeo.

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