AN INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN E. GORDON, DESIGNER OF THE SWAN PRINCESS, ON THE 25ᵗʰ ANNIVERSARY OF THE MOVIE!



Steven E. Gordon is a decades-long veteran of the animation industry. His talents have helped bring to life characters for renown studios of the medium as those of Disney, Ralph Bakshi, and Don Bluth.

But Steven's most enduring, iconic, and beloved work was for a small independent studio. There he designed Odette, the titular heroine of *The Swan Princess*.

*The Swan Princess* was, dare I say it, the *real* Cinderella story of animated movies. Released at the height of the Disney Renaissance of the '90s, this competing film failed at the box office. However, Disney suspiciously re-released their mega-hit *The Lion King* the same opening weekend which could not help but account for much of the financial losses.

Like *It's A Wonderful Life* and *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Swan Princess* has proven to be another cinematic fantasy whose initial disappointing reception has been replaced over the years by popularity and appreciation. Indeed, there are elements of *The Swan Princess* that, if they were done today, and by Disney, would have Odette being praised by the media as the premiere of progressive princesses.

Twenty-five years and a ninth (!) direct to video sequel later, the rest of the world has finally caught up with what *The Swan Princess* achieved in 1994.

I want to thank Steven for the time and effort he put into the thoughtful and detailed responses to my questions. It has been a pleasure to become acquainted with him via social media. There just aren't that many other men my age who share both my appreciation of animated princesses *and* the all-boy appeal of the adventure fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs!

Q.  Both you and Swan Princess director Richard Rich worked at Disney on *The Black Cauldron*. Was this connection why Rich asked you to do character designs for *The Swan Princess* when he started his own animation company?

A. In part, yes. I met Rick while working at Disney on *The Black Cauldron* (I also suspected he might've also been instrumental in me getting the job at Disney though I've never asked him). After Rick left Disney he started a company of his own that was subcontracted to do several series of home videos. He asked if I'd freelance on them doing character design, and I agreed.
    After I left Disney and a few jobs later I worked fulltime for him on these videos and in development for a couple of features including one based on *Swan Lake*. Besides doing character design on these videos I was also doing storyboards, character layouts and animation directing/sheet timing.

    So, in a way, I wasn't really "asked" to do character design since I was his studio character designer already. It was just a natural progression of my job at the studio. If he considered anyone else, I wasn't aware of it.

Q. You designed a character who has become the most beloved animated fairy tale princess outside of Disney. For example, I recently spoke with a young woman at a convention in Durham N.C. who is very much into cosplay. She was dressed as Aurora at the time, but she excitedly told me how much she wanted to dress up as Odette.
    She was far too young to have remembered *The Swan Princess* during its original release. How does it feel to have created an iconic character whose popularity among fans has continued to grow for 25 years?

A. It's very flattering and extremely gratifying. I had no idea until several years ago that Odette (and the film itself) was that popular. Social media has helped bring this to my attention and it's been a very wonderful surprise.

Q. You've said you normally base characters on a real-life model, like a celebrity, but Odette was created out of your imagination. On the *Swan Princess* Blu-ray, you said there was a practical consideration in her design, since her face and figure would have to be redrawn repeatedly in the animation.

I'm very interested in knowing the aesthetic side of her design for you: what your thought process was in designing a heroine who was your idea of what a beautiful animated fairy tale princess should be:

Let's start with your thoughts on designing her face and hair.

A. I wish I had a thought process. I just usually start drawing and trying out different looks making sure that it's a design that I feel comfortable drawing over and over. I wanted her to be a mature young lady more in the vein of Aurora and not a young cute girl like Ariel.

I also had in my mind that I wanted to give her a very long graceful neck once she was in her mature design to somehow subtly implant the swan idea into her design. Rick was a big part of the process since he was the director. I would present him with suggestions (that I felt comfortable with, of course) and then he would decide which one(s) worked for him until I got it worked out and both of us were satisfied. I was easy to satisfy since, as I mentioned.

I didn't show him anything that I wasn't confident that could be redrawn over and over. It's been a long time, but I seem to recall landing on her basic face pretty early and then trying out a variety of hairstyles on the one face.

I've lived so long with this particular design that I couldn't even tell you what some of the other hairstyles looked like. I suspect that they leaned more towards traditional historical hairstyles than the one we settled on. If it had been a bigger budget film, I probably would've spent some time and created some test animation to prove whether the hairstyle worked or not.

Unfortunately, I had to discover that it wasn't completely practical while animating her for production. In many ways it worked like Mickey Mouse's ears and had to be somewhat of a graphic cheat as she turned her head as opposed to working completely in 3 dimensions. Something they had to deal with now that she's become a CG model.

Oddly enough, it's been recently pointed out to me that my design of Jean Grey for *X-Men: Evolution* (which I did somewhat later) bears a strong resemblance to Odette even though I based Jean on a real actress. So, I guess, I have a fallback female design after all…?

As a side note regarding costume design, I leaned heavily on Hollywood style of medieval costuming (Edith Head) as opposed to realistic historical looks. I referenced films like Robin Hood and The Court jester quite a bit

Q. How did you think up her figure and its proportions? How tall was she in your mind? Odette, by the way, boasts the longest legs of any animated princess – good job! A runway or *Sports Illustrated* swim suit issue model would be envious!

A. LOL…I'm not sure I was consciously looking to make her a swimsuit model, but was looking for ways to exaggerate proportions that were complimentary with Derek's design. If you'll notice he was an upside-down triangle (large /wide chest and shoulders) and so I wanted her to have also echo that look so I came up with the costume of puffy shoulders to help that work.

They both have narrow hips and see to have a "lollipop" look in a way- though her hips a little bigger proportionally than his. Overall, I was looking for a style that wasn't terribly realistic, but still felt realistic in a way.

Height-wise I would think she'd be a pretty tall lady – maybe 5'7" or so and Derek would be easily 6' or slightly over.

Q. How did you seek to convey personality in her design as well as beauty?

A. I was trying to come up with a way of acting for her that not only served the story, but also conveyed that she was still that young tom-boyish girl from the beginning of the film.

I would've gone farther with that idea if possible, but the story didn't necessarily allow for it too much. She needed to be spunky and strong-willed to make it clear she'd rather be cursed than submit to Rothbart's advances.

I never went with the "sexy" relaxed poses for her, but had her plant both feet especially when confronting Rothbart. The design helped soften this look with all the long flowing lines of her dress.

Q. At the time of *The Swan Princess*, the Disney renaissance was at its height, a reawakening stirred by the revival of their own princess line. Was there conscious thought on how to make Odette distinct from the Disney brand, particularly those princesses prevalent at the time…Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine? Especially considering you and Richard Rich both had worked for Disney.

A. I'm not sure we actually discussed it too much, but as I mentioned earlier, I think we all had in mind someone that wasn't just a damsel in distress. But someone that was actually part of the film and working at saving herself.

I never thought about it, but it's possible this stemmed from the time Rick and I worked together on *The Black Cauldron* and the female lead, Eilonwy, was also a very strong-willed character and not the typical Disney princess. Which is something Eilonwy doesn't get enough credit for and has all been shoved aside by Disney.

Q. On *The Swan Princess* Blu-ray, you said you conferred with director Richard Rich while designing Odette. Do you recall his input? I can't help but note that on *The Black Cauldron*, he was reportedly wanting a look recalling *Sleeping Beauty*, and in *The Swan Princess*, we have what appears to be a homage to Aurora and Philip's dance at the end of the Disney film. Did Mr. Rich find inspiration in Princess Aurora for Odette?

A. In the design process we worked back and forth quite a bit, but as to discussion I don't recall much. It was more of a matter of my showing him multiple roughs and him pointing out which ones he liked and which he'd like to see combined, etc.

As for the overall art direction I think he was leaning towards less stylized Disney films like *Cinderella* and *Pinocchio*, but that wasn't my focus. I had my hands full just dealing with the characters and the animators.

The dance in the end was an intentional homage to *Sleeping Beauty* and I assume it was done mainly because Rick felt it conveyed everlasting love pretty well.

Q. In the "This Is My Idea" musical montage, you had the unique assignment of showing us a princess as she grows up – we never saw a Disney princess in her childhood, her "awkward years," early adolescence, and her blossoming into a beautiful young woman.

You might see a Disney girl as a baby for three seconds, and then you meet her as a teenager (though they look like they're in their mid-20s!).

Since we all change physically as we mature, this would mean you had to design the same character several times over! I think this is an unparalleled achievement for a designer of a princess in an animated film, at least until the "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" montage in *Frozen* twenty years later (you did a much better job, by the way!).

What were your thoughts in keeping Odette a consistent character throughout her maturing?

A. It was a unique challenge and one that I enjoyed quite a bit. I knew I could get in some fun designs and not worry too much since many of them were only onscreen for a short time.

The overall idea was that she needed to be less than a "swan" during her younger years, but someone that could eventually mature into one. In a way we were doing a slight take on the Ugly Duckling story – though I certainly didn't want her to be "ugly", but just perceived that way as young boys would.

I was aware of several anecdotes by beautiful models and how they felt they were ugly and awkward in their younger days and I wanted to get that across. As a designer I tried to keep certain things consistent throughout her aging process most notably the shape of her face and as she slowly started to age that hair swoop.

I also tried to show overlapping consistencies like how she went for braided pig-tails in her second design to a long single braid in her next two versions. Derek was a lot easier to keep consistent since he never seemed to change his hairstyle.

Q. Would you share with us the story of how your wife came up with the title for The Swan Princess?


A. There's not much of a story really, but I'm proud of her it. Ever since the film was developed it had been called "Swan Lake,"  just as every other version of it had been referred whether play, film or ballet, but it had been worried about for some time that the name was "too high-brow" and possibly off-putting to the audience we wanted to reach. And possibly confusing since we weren't using the Tchaikovsky music.

So there was a search for something to call it instead of Swan Lake – and for a while it looked like we would have to just suck it up and go with the traditional name - and there was some thinking that felt it would possibly actually help identify it to the audience.

I mentioned it to my wife at one point that we were looking for a new name and how frustrating to was and she quickly suggested calling it "The Swan Princess."  It stopped me in my tracks – mostly because it was so obvious and no one had thought of it.

I immediately called Rick Rich and if I recall right, he reacted the same way. He passed the name along to the producers and though I'm not aware of what discussion was had in regards to the name it obviously worked for everyone and the title stuck.

In fact, it has stuck so well that now I see it pop up all the time in regards to a lot of productions that have nothing to do with our film. I've seen ballets and all types of *Swan Lake* related productions use our title as if it was the traditional one. Yes, my wife is that smart.

The one drawback the title has had *in theory* is that the title may have hampered ticket sales to families with young boys due to using the word "princess" in the title.

It's even rumored that Disney's film *The Princess and the Frog* was originally titled *The Frog Princess* but changed it due to it sounding too much like the title of our film and thinking it might make audiences relate the two films – which might be considered bad luck (though our bad luck of a poor box office had more to do with Disney's calculated re-release of the

Lion King on the same weekend as our film was released than the name not working with audiences).

As it turns out I've met a lot of men that tell me they loved Swan Princess when they were young and never considered the name an issue and *The Princess and the Frog* could have actually benefitted by being perceived by audiences relating the two films.

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