

Who Framed Roger Rabbit

by Alexis Ainsworth



(Image courtesy Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division)

Roger Ebert described “Who Framed Roger Rabbit” as a film in the same cinematic league as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *E.T.* – it was “that rare film that was both a technical breakthrough and a lot of fun at the same time.” “Roger Rabbit” provides an enjoyable ride through the history of animation packaged in an intriguing comedy film noir. In the 1988 film, director Robert Zemeckis attempted to mix live action and animation in new and inventive ways that had never been seen in motion pictures. With high caliber actors like Bob Hoskins and Christopher Lloyd, and iconic voice actors returning to voice their famous characters, it’s no surprise that “Who Framed Roger Rabbit” was added to the National Film Registry in 2016.

Based on Gary K. Wolf’s novel *Who Censored Roger Rabbit?*, screenwriters Jeffrey Price and Peter S. Seaman crafted a world where almost anything is possible. Set in a 1940s Hollywood where cartoon characters are real, private investigator Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) is hired to prove the innocence in a murder investigation of the over-the-top ‘toon’ Roger

Rabbit (voiced by Charles Fleischer). With Christopher Lloyd appearing as the expertly disturbing Judge Doom and Kathleen Turner voicing the femme fatale Jessica Rabbit, the talented cast almost convinces us that cartoons are truly real. The characters ultimately uncovered a plot to destroy Toontown to make way for a freeway, creating a transportation monopoly after the buyout of the local railway. The film references the actual history of Los Angeles and the destruction of their streetcar line for the now famously problematic freeway system. This connection helps the film remain rooted in just enough reality to make the world feel genuine.

“Roger Rabbit” also serves as a love letter to the golden age of animation, through cameos and stylistic choices that harken back to a celebrated time in animation history. In the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Zemeckis described their animation style goals as “we always wanted the Disney technique, the beautiful Disney animation, the great Warner Brothers characterization and Tex Avery humor, you know, dynamite down your pants

type of stuff.” Worried that Disney’s animators couldn’t achieve those goals on their own, Zemeckis recruited Richard Williams in London to serve as animation director. This separation allowed the animators the freedom to create a truly unique film. In his role as executive producer, Steven Spielberg used his success and industry clout to convince studios and rights holders to allow their characters to appear in the film. A deal was struck with Disney and Warner Bros. where in order to ensure their characters received equal screen time, they would only appear on screen together. This resulted in two delightful scenes; first we see Donald Duck and Daffy Duck share the stage in an explosive piano duet, and later Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse fail to help Eddie Valiant during a freefall in Toontown. In addition, Spielberg was able to successfully negotiate for the use of characters from King Features Syndicate, Felix the Cat Productions, Turner Entertainment, Fleischer Studios, and Walter Lantz Productions (Universal Pictures) to make sure this cartoon world was inhabited with recognizable faces. These efforts led to delightful moments like Betty Boop appearing as a cocktail waitress at the Ink and Paint Club, Droopy working as an elevator attendant who lacks enthusiasm, and Tweety practicing his counting on Eddie’s fingers while he dangles off the side of a building.

In addition to acquiring the rights to all these beloved characters, efforts were made to recruit the original voice actors whenever possible. Highlights include Mae Questel voicing Betty Boop and, in what would be one of his last performances before his death, Mel Blanc voicing Bugs and Daffy. In some cases, archival recordings of the original voice actors were used alongside modern actors filling in when needed. For example, in the Daffy and Donald piano duet, Donald is voiced by both Clarence Nash (who voiced Daffy for over 51 years) and Tony Anselmo (who has been the voice of Donald since 1985). Through this love and respect for the genre’s history, “Roger Rabbit” reinvigorated modern animation and helped

Disney transition into its own renaissance that included modern classics like *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Lion King*.

This film expertly married a love for the past with groundbreaking techniques and technology. Zemeckis was determined to have the animated characters interact with their environment in realistic ways, while also challenging the animators by allowing the camera to move as it would in a regular live action film. In previous live action animated scenes from films like *Anchors Away* or *Mary Poppins*, the camera remained static, making it easier to add the animation to the live action shot. Similarly, interactions between the cartoons and the actors were always careful and limited. However, Zemeckis was known for trying new things with special effects to enhance the story being told, as later seen in his use of motion capture technology in *The Polar Express*. In “Roger Rabbit,” not only do the toons grab, push, and pull people and things in the real world, but the light and shadow changes within the room is reflected in the toons themselves. For example, in a scene where Roger and Eddie enter the back room of a bar, Eddie bumps a lamp, causing it to swing for most of the scene. As the lamp moves, the light and shadow changes can be seen on “Roger Rabbit” as if he were truly in the room with Hoskins. Elsewhere in the film, a mix of puppetry and special effects were used to make it seem like toons were moving objects, with animators later making sure any visible wires or contraptions were painted over. For Jessica Rabbit’s performance at the Ink and Paint Club, her routine was performed by actress Betsy Brantley and later animated over to help create realistic movements and interactions.

This ambitious film created a believable world through masterful acting, innovative special effects, and general fearlessness. It feels tangible, making the viewer care about and understand the toons who, due to cartoon logic and physics, generally face no real-life

consequences. Whether it is the heartbreaking destruction of a toon shoe via a bath in the turpentine based “dip” or the steadfast love between the seemingly mismatched Roger and Jessica Rabbit, we can relate to these characters. They became real to the audience, encouraging us to look beyond the stereotypes with the unforgettable line from Jessica Rabbit – “I’m not bad, I’m just drawn that way.”

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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